

Across the River

She waited near the shoreline, and watched the Boatman pilot the small skiff toward her. He poled the craft through the black water with practiced ease. The river seemed to move faster than the dark figure should be able to counter, but the break in the reeds in front of her where the water met the land lined up perfectly with the nose of the small boat. It would arrive, and the rest of her journey would begin soon.

Waiting was difficult. She could see the other side, and it called. It was why she was here. Across the water, trees and a small figure stood. This last was the thing she wanted more than anything. The horizon was tinged with an orange glow, as though fires burned far beyond it, but that was something she could put away. It was indistinct, a warning that may not even be that.

As the small craft drifted into shore, the Boatman stopped it with a quick touch of his pole, and she thought to board as quickly as she could. This was why she was here.

But then she heard the Complication crashing through the under-growth behind her, his voice hoarse and out-of-breath.

“No! Wait. Please wait.”

Much of her wanted to ignore the plea and get on the boat. She had made up her mind, after all. The Complication would survive after she was gone, and the thing she wanted was bigger than his short time in her story.

But she turned around anyway.

Time-stamp: 21:43 GMT

System alert: Server Farm 31-b, message as follows:

Consciousness in bin 412-41 shows increased synaptic activity.

Consciousness in bin 412-42 shows increased synaptic activity.

Alert level: Low

Activity still within standard metric. Request admin eval.

End alert.

The Desired turned to face him as he came to a stop before her. Behind her, the Boatman waited, impassive and stationary. The river flowed behind the craft, and small ripples traveled along its length to the shore, but it did not move either.

That didn't matter to him. He looked into her eyes and could see her desperation, but didn't understand it. Behind her, the other side of the river burned, except for the black tower at the edge with the stone landing jutting out into the current.

“Why would you go? It's on fire! Stay with me. We *just* found each other.”

“What are you talking about? She's right there! She *needs* me!” The Desired pointed across the river, and he looked again, and saw only trees where the fire had been and the diminutive shape of a person waiting on the other shore. The tower was gone.

He blinked, and then looked back at her. She was beautiful, even in her obvious distress. He'd been alone for so long, and the idea that she was going away made him frantic. The change in landscape across the water meant nothing against it. He didn't care.

Time-stamp: 21:48 GMT

System alert: Server Farm 31-b, message as follows:

Consciousness in bin 412-41 shows increased synaptic activity.

Consciousness in bin 412-42 shows dramatic increase in synaptic activity.

Alert level: High

Activity in bin 412-42 well beyond standard metric. Request admin eval. Pinging admin address to notify.

End alert.

The Complication walked towards her, hands out and open. She could see that he wouldn't let it go, or easily let *her* go. Part of her welcomed it, and the other lit in anger that he would stand in the way of her journey, and what waited at the end of it. There were tears on his cheeks, though.

“Then let me come along, ok? I can go with you to the other side. Whatever you have to do there, we can do it together, maybe?”

She saw him look across the river again, and for a moment orange flames were reflected in his eyes. Turning back to look for herself, it was still a forest and the small person waiting at the water's edge. The warm color behind it could easily be the signal of sunrise, or sunset. She'd lost track of time long ago.

She asked him the only pertinent question.

“Why? Why do you want to go?”

He responded, and she felt the truth of it, even as the weight of her departure dragged her in the other direction.

“You may have someone else. I don't. If you leave, then I'll be alone again. I'd rather burn with you than go back.”

There was something in her that began to understand, but it was still a thing that could not compete with what waited for her on the other side. At least, she thought so.

But maybe....

Time-stamp: 21:57 GMT

System alert: Server Farm 31-b, message as follows:

Consciousness in bin 412-41 shows dramatic increase in synaptic activity.

Consciousness in bin 412-42 shows extreme levels of synaptic activity.

Alert level: Priority

Activity in bin 412-42 exceeding end metric. Initiating diagnostic, per protocol 4-a.

Diagnostic completed.

Diagnostic info: Containment breach detected in bin bank 412. Bins 41 and 42 affected. Cross-contamination of occupants likely. Re-pinging admin address.

Recommend immediate mitigation.

End alert.

The Desired looked back one more time across the river. The trees were gone, and she saw the tower, the flames, and the stone quay. Her heart sank, because her desire had been proven false. She could see that, now. That which she thought was the end of her journey was not the truth, and all that remained was before her right now. There was much sorrow in that, but in the same way as time had been lost to her, regret had become a shadow as well.

She met the gaze of the Complication.

“What else here is a lie?”

He made an expansive gesture with one hand, encompassing it all, and then shrugged.

“I think, everything.”

But then he put a finger to his forehead and pointed another at her, and said,

“Except me. And you.”

There was something in that assertion that made sense, even if it was like the shallow corner of a good dream. It was where you could almost surface out of the joy of it, and carry it into real life.

But not quite.

The Desired decided to ask the next question, somehow knowing this was the last step. The Complication faced her, and she could see the want in his eyes. It wasn’t anything that she needed to combat anymore, though. With the truth revealed, she had no absolute destination. It was true what he said. They could stay here, or go. She looked back across the water.

The Boatman stood, as still as a statue in his skiff. The fires burned, and the dark tower waited. It didn’t scare her, somehow. She didn’t have to imagine the trees, or the girl waiting there anymore. That had been just another way to make being alone more significant.

“Do we stay?”

The Complication thought for a moment, then shook his head.

“We know what’s here. We don’t know what’s over there. That could all be lies, too, though.”

She nodded, and then held out her hand.

They met in front of the boat, grasped hands, and stepped over the bow into the craft.

They began their journey together by sitting on the plank seats. Then, the Boatman poled them out into the current.

The Desired leaned against the Complication, and wondered what was to come.

Time-stamp: 22:09 GMT

System alert: Server Farm 31-b, message as follows:

Consciousness in bin 412-41 is absent.

Consciousness in bin 412-42 is absent.

Alert level: Admin to assess.

Initiating diagnostic, per protocol 4-a, v2.

Diagnostic completed.

Diagnostic info: No readings in bin 412-41, 412-42. Containment breach confirmed, bins empty.

Re-pinging admin address.

End alert.

