

Once upon a time, in the land of twilight just beyond the realm of the living, there was a man who existed for a single function. Spawn of the primordial Night and Darkness, his destiny preordained to row the fortunate souls across the river to their hereafter. He would greet his passengers with his left hand held out while the right displayed his gilded oar. So withered and fowl was he that despite his unobtrusive demeanor, no fortunate soul had ever bothered to speak to him and would toss their coins to the deck of the boat in fear of touching him. Knowing of no other life, this man, the Oarsman of Chance's End, remained faithful to his solitary purpose.

So it was, until a stand-alone moment within eternity, that he felt someone touch his hand. He did not understand the sensation at first, nor had he an immediate comprehension of what he heard and saw. A crone, outclassed by her fellow passengers, smiled and greeted him as she placed the coin into his palm. He returned her smile and gave her a nod, neither of which had he done before. She moved past him to allow the line to continue moving. The Oarsman smiled and nodded as the last few passengers boarded; however, they did not repeat her kindness but repeated the indifference of legions before them. The Oarsman realized that it bothered him.

As he untethered his line from the dock, he looked at the riverbank and noticed the unfortunate souls, those stranded without fare, stare across Chance's End. He knew that they were deciding their fate, and that some would try to swim, others would wait, and some would return to where they came. For the first time, he wished he could give them all passage, but he knew that was not the order of things. There was nothing to be done about it. He set aside this interruption and returned to doing what he had always done.

After shoving off, the Oarsman took a seat on his bench and began to row. Murmurs from passengers brought his attention back to the crone. He watched as she was denied a seat by the other passengers. Rebuffing the underclass was not an unusual occurrence on voyages, but again,

she was the first to approach him and ask if she could sit with him. He felt grateful for her company and made room for her to sit behind him. He felt her touch again as her back leaned against his. He felt something radiate from her and realized that it was warmth. He became aware of the cold dampness he was composed of and hoped he was not diffusing it to her.

Soon she began to speak to him. She asked him questions about himself, but he did not have the answers. If he had been given a name, no one had ever spoken it to him. He had no memory of life before this, nor did he believe he had one. He explained that the only knowledge of his life was this task, aided with the gifts of oar and boat from his father Darkness and mother Night, respectively. She then inquired what he did with the coins and was surprised when he explained that he kept them in the boat's hatch. When she asked him to explain the point of it, if the coins were not given to someone or spent on anything, the Oarsman was stupefied. Knowing that each coin represented a soul, he still could not explain a purpose for it. He looked around at his passengers. Each was as unremarkable as the countless before them. He remembered their occasional murmurs to each other, sharing moments of their lives before, but their coin held no attachment to their stories. He could not pull one from the hatch and tell from who it belonged.

When he admitted that he did not know, she began to laugh. He did not understand the humor of it, but he found the sound she made delightful. They continued to talk for the rest of the voyage. He learned her name was Cynthia and that she feared what was waiting for her on the other side of Chance's End, for none of her loved ones had ever had the coin to cross before. She explained that she only had the fare because of another's kindness. Not feeling shy to share his thoughts, he confided that he too was afraid, but not of her fate, but of knowing that he would never see her again. She agreed that thinking about it made her sad. He did not want her to feel sad and asked her about her life before. He was fascinated with her description of trees and blue

skies, and the way she spoke of something called music. He had never seen anything beyond the baron riverbanks bathed in perpetual darkness and shadow, nor had he ever heard anything beyond the mutterings of his passengers and the water against his oar and boat.

When they reached the dock on the opposite bank, the other passengers filed off with haste, as they always did, but she lingered. They both looked different in the glow of the dock lantern light, the hard lines of time now appeared soft. They stood on the boat talking and she asked if she could ride back with him. Not to leave the boat, but to ride back and forth again. The Oarsman looked to the gatekeeper of the bank who stood waiting for this last passenger. They had never spoken before nor had a reason to. He shook his head at the gatekeeper who returned the gesture with a concerned look. The Oarsman ignored it, dipped his oar into the water, and shoved the boat away from the dock. She took a seat across from him so they could look at each other.

She inquired what was downriver, and he admitted that he did not know. She asked him why he had never rowed down to see. He admitted that the thought had not once occurred to him, but he was now curious too. Downriver was the dawn light and the water seemed calm enough and the current weak enough for him to row back upstream to the dock. In these moments of firsts within forever, the man pushed his paddle and steered the bow to point downriver. Gliding gently in the current, he pulled the oar from the water and let it rest on his lap. The baron shoreline began to spot with tufts of grass in the sand. Seeing something new excited him and he dismissed the idea of turning the boat around before reaching the river bend.

Around the bend, the greenery along the banks thickened and the golden glow of dawn intensified, illuminating little white blossoms. She commented on the beauty but before he could utter his own words of happiness, a gust of wind hit the river, pushing a wall of water towards

them. The bow shot upwards, flinging Cynthia from her seat. Trying to row over the wave, the man missed reaching her hand before she was swept overboard. The wave settled but the gust of wind held him in place as he watched her float past him in the river's current.

"You trespass, Oarsman. Go back," the wind spirit hissed at him.

"I must pass to get to her," the Oarsman shouted back.

"Your request demands a toll," the wind spirit bellowed.

The Oarsman understood. This guardian may have to face the gods for not stopping him from leaving his post. "What may I offer?"

"Your coins. All of them," the wind spirit breezed.

"Done!" The Oarsman said and flung open the hatch, revealing a belly full of gold. A cyclone appeared, swaying its way over the hatch and sucked up every last coin. Each coin, representing a fortunate soul departed, flickered in the morning light as it swirled upwards until they and the wind that carried them disappeared. The Oarsman felt no remorse for their loss, as he was overcome with panic for losing sight of her.

The boat felt lighter on the water as the Oarsman paddled with ferocity to catch up. The boat began to bounce and heave as the water became more turbulent. More rocks and boulders appeared as he entered the rapids. While using his oar to navigate through, his eyes scanned the rocks and bank for her, but he could not find her. The river's speed increased as the banks narrowed and steepened. The Oarsman heard the rumbling of earth over the roar of the rushing water. He watched a mountain grow from the water before him. The river rushed toward a narrow passage that was too narrow for the boat pass. The Oarsman began back paddling with all his strength to prevent crashing into the walls.

"Turn back, Oarsman," the mountain boomed.

The Oarsman could see that the mountain was the shape of a man, its face loomed over him from the blue sky above. He then looked down the ravine, knowing she was gone, but he could not let her go. "Let me pass, Mountain!"

"What do you offer as an incentive," the mountain asked.

The Oarsman was hopeful that the mountain would bargain, but he did not know what he had left to offer. "I have no coins left."

"Your boat, gift from Mother Night, that will be your toll," the mountain demanded.

The Oarsman knew that the coins could never be replaced but could be replenished. However, he could no longer perform his duties without his boat. There would be no going back. Then he thought of her laugh and without another hesitation, he jumped from his boat into the rushing water. "Take my boat, Mountain. Let me pass!"

The Oarsman, using his oar to keep himself steady floated feet first down the river and through the narrow ravine. The cliff walls on either side of him grew taller as the blue of the sky became brighter. The current slowed as the river widened, but the walls of the cliff began to connect and soon, he found himself floating in the Darkness through a cave. The Oarsman did not fear the Darkness, but he longed for the daylight for which he had only spent moments. Soon the river carried him into a large cavern, and he felt the water of the lake he was now in begin to bubble and steam.

The Oarsman found a boulder to climb onto and watched the molten creature rise from the center of the lake. With a mouthful of teeth made of glowing stalactites, the creature growled and flung a large, molten stone at him. The Oarsman swung his oar at the incoming projectile knocking it back to the beast. The beast groaned as it crashed against its head. Angered, the beast flung another, and another, and with each throw, the Oarsman knocked it back with an aimed

blow. After the seventh attempt to crush the Oarsman, the creature rested back, frustrated in defeat, the beast growled, "Seven missed... what do you seek?"

"I seek a woman that I lost. I seek passage to find her," the Oarsman replied.

"Safe passage for the oar of your father," the beast replied.

The Oarsman turned the oar in his hands, the glow of the beast illuminated the gilded scroll imbued into the wooden paddle, though he always knew it was there, he had never appreciated it in the constant Darkness of his mother. It was beautiful but felt meaningless to him without light. He held up his last possession to the beast. "The oar is yours in return for safe passage." Upon taking the paddle from the Oarsman's hands, the beast parted a trail in the lake water, revealing a tunnel. The Oarsman walked out, of the cavern feeling lighter on his feet but anxious in his heart.

After what seemed like a never-ending maze, light could be seen. The tunnel's abrupt end revealed a world bathed in sunlight. The Oarsman's eyes adjusted to a green horizon separating the brown earth of the mountain base from the blue sky. It was a great forest, and he could hear the soft hush of a breeze blowing through the leaves. Awestruck by what lay before him, the Oarsman's legs struggled to find pace between running towards it and meandering to take it all in.

As the tree line grew closer, he heard then saw the souls of the unfortunates. They laughed and they danced. Another noise he had never heard emanated from the tree line, and the Oarsman knew that it was the thing called music, and his heart began to sing along. As he drew closer, the Oarsman saw Cynthia leaning up against the trunk of the tallest tree. She had been waiting for him, and when she saw him, she smiled and ran to him. As the sunlight showed her youthful, welcoming eyes, the Oarsman knew he was home. He realized that all he had given up

was his toll for passage to the hereafter. Hand in hand, the Oarsman and Cynthia faced their new existences together, and the Gods smiled on them for eternity.