

Ruth

I stepped onto the bright shower of grass that stretched across the forest floor, bedding roots in soft colors. We used to play here, Ruth and me. I half expected her to emerge from the thicket, with a glowing grin on her face, but I knew better. What waited between the trees was something much more dead.

At dusk, I reached the thin river. Muted conversations began to heighten with my arrival, and I pushed through the growing crowd in search of any known person. Recognizing a singular face, I strolled towards Ruth's mother, who caught my glance wearily. Her lips parted in a familiar way, revealing a set of teeth comparatively white against the golden sky and completing a numb expression I was sure she mastered over a lifetime.

"I'm here for Ruth," I said unnecessarily, everyone was here for Ruth. Her unresponsive eyes moved lazily away from mine and I followed, taking in the congregation. They were all here, the enemy, the victors, the Eleven Generals, and the commonfolk. The sight caught me confused; it seemed uncorrelated, like a random flower arrangement. But, as I looked longer, I saw my own eyes in theirs.

It's strange being friend to a symbol. I had known Ruth since birth; for so long that it felt my very existence depended on her own, and yet, our connection was so easily broken.

The Great War festered in our youth, like some ignored fatal wound, but the fighting started in our adult years. Ruth took on an active role and soon began proclaiming some greater purpose in her efforts, a purpose complete with the end of her own life. I remember, the night before I left, she came to me, asking me to stay beside her until the end. I didn't and I couldn't.

The image of her broken body raised above the smoke, lit by a dimmed sun, burned in my mind. My greatest friend, the limp object of some unimaginable peace, a flag claiming the Newer day of some, more courageous world.

The image burned brighter still as a young man and woman brought the blistered, war-worn boat into view. There she came, knotted hair spread lightly from a pale face; cold body framed with colorful wildflowers. Ruth's mother clutched my hand suddenly and swayed it lightly to her hum. Hands began to join on both sides of the river, between enemy and victor, commoner and general, person and person. The song morphed into something strange but beautiful.

I watched as the boat passed by. The words: "What was between us then is now nothing" had been etched in awkward letters on the side, and I came to realize the greater significance of Ruth's death. It was not just a friendship between two peoples, but two minds and two futures. Yes, we were all here to watch her lifeless body drift onto some better shore . . . and her heart beat stronger yet.