

# Still

by Elowar Bo

She sat in the slow light of morning, her fingers tracing absent circles in the condensation on her glass. A flake of bark peeled from the back of her hand and drifted to the table like ash. The world outside was damp with the weight of another night. Her father spread marmalade onto toast, the edge of his knife scraping softly against the bread.

"I had a dream," she said.

He nodded, waiting.

"I was something else." She tilted her head, as though listening for the shape of it. A leaf slipped from her hair and landed silently on the floor. "I was old. I had been there forever. I had seen everything."

Her father took a sip of coffee. "Everything?"

She considered this. "Enough."

She had been tall, though she had not moved. The ground had held her, the air had dressed her, and time had passed through her as though she were no more than a thought in its current.

The soil was not beneath her; it was within her, threading through every inch of her being, gripping her as tightly as she gripped it. The wind folded itself around her, peeling at her skin in thin whispers but never taking anything that would not grow back. Light slid down her spine at the shifting angles of the seasons, pulling shadows into new shapes, marking the passage of days not with clocks, but with silence.

She had been there before the voices, before the hands, before the tools. She had been there when there was only breath, when creatures moved below her on the soft pads of their feet, knowing her without knowing her name. She had been there when the sky cracked open and poured its weight upon her, when the ground trembled with the slow language of deep things shifting beneath the surface.

There was no need to speak, not at first. She existed, and that had always been enough.

But then there was a shift, something tightening at the edges. A murmur where there should have been silence. It pressed against her, wrapped itself around her limbs, searching for a way in. They were small things, at first. Thin-limbed, wide-eyed. They huddled beneath her branches, watching the wind move through her leaves as though waiting for an answer. They traced symbols into the dirt, knotted string between their fingers, stacked stone upon stone, believing that patterns would make them safe. They looked to her, not as she was, but as they needed her to be. A guardian, a witness, a warning.

When the sky split open, they knelt at her roots. When their bodies failed them, they pressed their hands against her bark, waiting to be made whole again. They spoke to her in words that had not yet learned to doubt themselves, in whispers that clung to the dusk and the firelight. They feared her. They trusted her. They cut shallow wounds into her and wore the pieces as charms against the dark.

"So what did you do?"

"I answered," she said simply.

Not in words, but in something deeper, something folded into the grain of her being. A note so low it lived beneath sound, threading through the earth, humming in the bones of things. And then, slowly, very slowly, they forgot.

Her father wiped his knife clean against the rim of the jar. A small curl of lichen clung to the knuckle of her thumb. He didn't mention it. "And then?"

"They came again."

Not some, but many. Their hands pressed against her, their lips forming shapes she had no need for. Their patterns had grown larger, heavier. They no longer knotted string; they built walls. They no longer whispered; they wrote. They no longer knelt; they claimed. They whispered of sacrifice, of hunger and balance, of a debt that had to be paid. They did not see her. They saw what they had been taught to see. They had stepped into a world they had shaped and turned their backs to the one they had left behind.

"They wanted something from me," she said. "They thought they were owed it."

He glanced up from his plate. A faint, greenish vein ran beneath the skin at her temple, branching like ivy. "Were they?"

She gave the smallest shake of her head. "I showed them," she said.

But it was not with her hands, not with her voice. She let them see the gaps in their own knowledge, the places where their certainty had been built on empty beliefs. They did not understand it at first. The idea that a thing might not hold the meaning they had given it—that it could exist outside of their understanding—unsettled them. The marks they had traced, the rituals they had repeated, the stories they had recited in unbroken lines from one mouth to another—they were only echoes in an empty room.

"And did it work?"

She nodded. In time. The hands lifted. The voices faded. The weight of them dispersed.

Her father reached for his coffee. The cup left a ring on the table that looked, for a moment, like a growth ring in wood. "And then?"

A pause. A quiet breath.

"The worst of them."

These ones had built a world where the old rules did not apply, where there were no hidden meanings, no unseen forces, only the will to shape and to claim. They believed in their own voices, louder than the wind, louder than the earth, louder than the silence beneath it all.

They used not hands, not voices, not reverence or hate. Just machines. Just motion. The sound of industry without breath, of purpose without thought. This was different. There was no need to ask why, because they did not think in questions. They only moved forward.

"So how did you stop them?"

She traced a slow line through the condensation on her glass, watching it fade as the warmth of the kitchen swallowed the cold. Her fingernail left a trail that looked like a twig pressed into frost.

"I told them what would happen," she said. "Not to me. To everything else."

And this time, it was not silence that followed. It was stillness. A pause where there should have been momentum. The movement of their hands slowed. The rhythm of their work fractured. They looked, not just at her, but at the ground beneath them, at the air thick with breath that was not theirs alone. They listened, without knowing what they were listening for. And when they stepped back, when the machines powered down and the silence returned, they did not speak of what had changed.

But it had.

Something had slipped between them and their task. Something they could not name.

They left, uneasy, their certainty no longer quite whole.

"Will they come back?" he asked.

She paused in thought.

"Yes." she said.

Her father exhaled, tapping his fingers against the table.

Outside, the day had settled into itself. They left the house together, their footsteps falling into the rhythm of the morning. At the end of the street, the old oak stood. Its golden bough unmoving, its roots thick beneath the pavement, forcing its way through tarmac, through stone, through the shallow plans of men.

As she passed beneath it, the sunlight caught in her hair, flickering through green.

Her father glanced at the tree. Then at her.

For a moment, it seemed as if he might say something. But in the end, he only nodded.