

The Poet King  
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There once lived a world, peaceful and content, that was yet untouched by shadow. Golden mist gleamed upon its surface, spreading over the wooded mountains. All was gentle: tranquil emerald valleys and rolling hills cloaked with content; soft flowers that sprung up through the soil, cushioning the fields; children's laughter echoing sweetly through the air. The inhabitants of the world were content to lead quiet lives, and when it was their time to depart, their souls passed on to a place Beyond. Those who were left to live did not fear nor sorrow, for they knew this to be the fate of all: that someday, they would join those they had cared for in death. All was well. Babes were born, harvests reaped, and the land filled with joy. For generations, it was so.

Evil struck, and fell, shattering upon the earth. Darkness swept the land, a great tide that swallowed all hope. Never again would it be clean, pure as it once was. Man had stolen what was never promised to him, and so a punishment was decreed upon the earth. Dark clouds sealed the skies as the gates to Beyond were shut; the spirits of the newly dead could never again enter, but rather were condemned to suffer on the earth in the form of shadows, tormented ceaselessly. Their anguished wails filled the air, haunting the nights of the living.

Madness slept in the minds of those not yet condemned, and so destruction came to rule the hardening world. Wars were fought, blood soon split, and above all a terror clotted their hearts: every soul would soon become like that of the suffering shades. They mourned the loss of the peace that had been taken from them – the loss of Beyond. Above all, that sorrow, deep and black as the sea, drowned their hearts.

And so fell the rain. A cold sheet of gray gushed down from the heavens, and with it, a heavy forgetfulness. It washed away all memory, all hope and knowledge of Beyond. From the rain, a mist was born, and so insidiously spread, lingering perpetually upon the earth. It seeped into the hearts of the grieving, devouring the memory of those whom they had lost to death. For if those who yet lived remembered the dead, the spirits were not chained to the blackened earth as shadows, but tethered to the light in loving memory, which was stronger. If the living remembered, the souls of the dead would be free.

For a time, the earth-walkers did not know their loss, as the mist's work was slow. They knew only sorrow, so deep it corroded their souls. Yet as time passed, and the memories of their dead faded to nothingness, so did they. Some faded unto death, yet most unto pain. The Lost, they became called, not more than a vapor, translucent and diminished. Those who had not yet known the death of their beloved remained whole, wondering grievously at the wraithlike men that surrounded them.

Beneath a hill crowned with a tangle of trees, there sat a house that had known little grief. Within its humble walls dwelled several children, all dearly loved by their father and mother. The eldest would smile as the little ones ran amok, eagerly begging for what he too longed. Music. He remembered... As frost gathered on the windowpanes and the heavens slowly dimmed, the family would cluster at the hearth, a slowly crackling fire spitting flickering streaks of gold. He held his breath as the deep, steady voice of their father filled the room, melding perfectly with the flowing strums of their mother's precious golden harp. The gorgeous song filled their hearts each night, warming them from within, though it did little to dissolve the chill of the lingering mist that had not yet touched the house. It was from his parents that the boy

learned to play – the passion of song, of poetry on strings. He kept these moments tucked deep within his heart, where they burned brightest.

But it was not to last. Sickness struck the valley, and his brothers fell deathly ill. One by one, they perished, slipping through his fingers like water. His father followed, and his mother mourned until she was naught but grief, descending into wisps of gray.

Mist seeped through the beams of the wooden house, dripping down the dusted panes. The boy too began to fade, alone in the house he had once loved. The richness of the memory seemed too full to take, but greater was the mist. It overwhelmed him, eating away at what he so desperately clung to.

Seasons passed, the barest spring bleeding quick to bitter autumn. A traveling minstrel passed through the countryside, weary and seeking shelter. He paused before a slope descending to a little house shrouded in curled vines. Cautiously he entered, compelled by a force he could not name. A young boy dwelt alone within, bone white and ghostly. The minstrel spoke to him, sharing what little food he carried, and soon learned that the child bore a talent such as he had not beheld for playing the harp. Hardly an hour passed in his company before the man decided: he offered the young lad a gift of friendship, shelter, and care, if he would so choose to partake in his travels. It was agreed, and they departed at dawn.

Over the years spent together, the two formed a bond like that of blood. At dusk they would sit, fingers running gently over the strings of their instruments, speaking softly as the curtain of night fell upon the hills. They found a companionship together deeper than words – as if both found in each other something they had long since forgotten, but longed for.

When the boy played, it was as if the mist left him. He remembered everything. The clarity of the memories lit a joy within him, one that could not be smothered. When the music ceased, all was as before.

For nearly a decade, they roamed together, through woods and towns alike. Yet the day came when the boy had grown, and wished to seek his own path. With the sorrow of departing friends, they went their separate ways, the harpist bearing nothing but his instrument and a vague sense of purpose: to search for the threads of memory that evaded his grasp.

He wandered from town to town, restless. The taverns blurred together in his mind, filled with fading souls and the heavy scent of ale, ash, and charring wood. They were all the same. Food was like dust on his tongue, colors dulled. His joy was found in nothing. Nothing, except music. For years, he lived so, seeking what he could only obtain in song, though it eddied like smoke in his grasp, and he was left with the mere feeling of a memory that he could not keep.

People would journey miles for a chance to hear the harpist's golden song. It earned him stay in whatever inn he passed through, though he never lingered long. It seemed as if his travel lessened the potency of his sorrow – as if he could run from it. Strolling alone along the rain-curtained hills, he appeared a ghost, so faded by his grief. Some say he walked with spirits, and the reason he never stayed was because he moved with them.

He would stay for no one. That was, until he met her. The night was dark, starless, and he played at the flickering hearth. He paid no attention to the awestruck crowd, as he was lost in the music. An ember popped, splitting through the air, and he glanced upwards to meet the eyes of a stranger. A young woman, clear-eyed and gentle, watched as he played. She had a sadness about her that drew his eye, though she was but little faded. He spoke to her, by the dying fire, the night growing cold beyond the feeble tavern walls. Her kindness brought him joy, a longing

beyond what he knew sorrow to be following her departure. The next night she returned, and again. Soon, he decided to stay.

Time passed too swiftly for him to catch. Strings broken, rusted, snapped by fault of fate. The young woman fell horribly ill, dying before help could be sought. Darkness shrouded the town. The harpist was sorely grieved, and began to fade, worse than before. For weeks, he did not touch his harp. Alone he sat, lost in the shadows of the tavern, cloaked in the folds of his grief.

The days drudged on, blurred together by countless deaths. He began to forget – her face, her smile, her name. In his heart, she was fading. A thick rain began to fall as he sat beneath a gnarled tree, harp tucked wearily beneath his arm. In silence he sat, until he could not bear it. He sought solace in the melody, so painful to begin, but which poured out of him once his fingers touched the strings. Words followed, which wove into a poem, and in it, he remembered. The warmth of her presence, the gentleness in her gaze – the details coalesced into something tangible. Something solid. When he had finished speaking, it did not leave him. The mist that obscured her memory was gone.

Her spirit was freed from its bonds, tethered instead to his memory, which lived eternally in the words he had sung. No longer was she condemned to walk upon the blood-soaked soil, nor made to suffer. She rose to Beyond, peace in her heart, and the poet wept, for he knew. She was free. He remembered, and she was free! The slow dissipation of his form ceased: he faded no further. The music had healed him – the music, the memory, and the words.

Others saw what had been done and marveled, pleading for him to do for them what they themselves could not. It was his gift, and his grief. He became sought after, the only healer of his kind. Strangers swarmed him endlessly: travelers and tavernkeepers, sorrowing mothers and

widows, old and young. All sought the poet's relief. Quietly, he worked, assuaging the grief of the masses, freeing the shades that were trapped, until his voice was hoarse and broken. It was a task unending.

The sky rumbled at what he'd done, but he faced it, remorseless. If the dead were not chained below in payment of the blood that had once been spilt, then their place must be taken. The price must be paid. Fire crackled fiercely in the grate, casting shadows upon the poet's haggard face as he struck an oath with the dark and the light. He, in place of the souls, would be bound to the earth, until there were none left to sing for.

For a thousand years, perhaps ten times less or a hundred more, he knew naught but the poems he sang. An endless skein of melody, the rhythm became his heartbeat, the words his lifeblood. He forgot himself, as time passed on. He knew not his name, nor his face, childhood, or dearest memories. He knew only his purpose, and what he, a nameless man, was called by the inhabitants of the earth. The Poet King.

Evil spread rapidly as the days increased, and death plagued the earth. He sat at the sides of the dying, toiling with a voice older than time to undo that curse that had been wrought. Their memories lived eternally on in melody, their souls released to Beyond, yet still the Poet King remained, chained to the doom of the earth. All perished, until only he was left to mourn their deaths.

A broken stream of notes drifted through the air, discordant and grating. The sounds reverberated, spiraling off into the empty night. He stopped, fingers halting as they dragged over the strings of the tarnished harp. Beauty was gone, he thought sadly. All was gone.

Alone, wrapped in the gray, the poet glanced down at his faded hands. Ghostly, translucent. He scooped a handful of earth, only for it to pass through his grasp as if he were

made of mist. He was naught but dust and shadow, the form of mourning itself. All those who had walked the earth had perished – he had lived to see their loss. An ache, older than himself, filled him. The music slowed, ceasing into nothing. Silence filled the air, a scentless wind fluttering the crumpled leaves of the graying trees, disintegrating like ash as he watched. The world seemed to sway beneath his feet. Spinning, swirling, the shriveled moss and blossoms dissolved into dust.

So was it done. The sky was gray, empty. Starless. The Poet King sank to his knees, golden harp falling forgotten beside him. The strings were broken, his fingertips raw. He had played, until the story was told. For years that spanned into decades, eons to be paid, he had sung, lost in the tale as he remembered. It was the last tale ever to be told. His tale, spun into memory, and bound in his place. At last, he was free.

The Poet King breathed in the blank night, the utter stillness that lay before him. A soft, faraway chord rang through the formless earth: *There once lived a world, peaceful and content...* With a faint smile, he lay to rest upon the earth, gazing up towards the crumbling heavens as all faded to black.