

ewa anderson

Sābanto
*The
Crimson
River*

Published in 2022 by Ewa Anderson

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*The world is glowing
There's beauty in fire my love
Creator of ash*

PROLOGUE

“WE HAVE FAILED,” THE man said, propping himself against the head of a long table as he stood in front of a seated audience. He paused lengthily, waiting for his words to sink into the minds of the listeners. “Countries failed to maintain order. Politicians failed to maintain peace.”

The lights in the room were dimmed except for the faintly glowing strips illuminating the floor for the safety of the occupants. It was hard to see the speaker’s face, but all present knew who he was.

“Many years back, natural disasters crumbled and devastated our cities. Multitudes died or were displaced. It created global unrest which led to an increased conflict of interest between the most powerful countries—who wanted, at all costs, to expand their worldwide influence. That’s how the fifty-year war started.” He let that sink in before continuing, “Now, two years after we signed the peace treaty, the world is still in ruins.”

The man took a slow stroll to the side of the room, making some people swivel in their chairs or turn their bodies around so that they could keep him in sight. He appeared to be weighing and reflecting on his words, and he expected the others to do the same.

“We fought for our freedom, poured our hard-earned money into weapons and ammunition. We sent our best to the front to die as heroes, but we failed to save what we had at home. Local governments and structures fell. Social order was destroyed. Gangs and mafias took over our streets. Neighbor turned on neighbor. Families turned against each other.”

The man looked at the people in the room. They were listening, but the information wasn’t new to them. The presentation was just a formality; a way to remind them of what they already knew and expected.

Each person in the room was dressed for the occasion in high-end tailored suits and pencil dresses. Their well-pressed attire was a statement

on the importance of the moment, and on them as individuals. A symbol of status they showed with pride.

“Fifty years of war brought destruction, death, and famine to every corner of the world. Poor living conditions, malnutrition, and non-existent health care continue to bring illness and death to many. Our land is bare and no longer fruitful. Prosperous cities have turned into slums where only the fittest and most quick-witted can survive. Pain and suffering is all around us. But!” The speaker lowered his voice and said, with conviction, “We will rebuild.”

The room was silent, except for the faint hum of the ventilation system pumping cool air into the room. They were contemplating the words just spoken, and some lowered their heads as they felt the pain and suffering in their own lives.

The speaker lowered his head as well, looking down at the table in front of him. Then he said, his voice growing louder with each word, “It’s an opportunity. An opportunity to start anew. Like a phoenix from the ashes, we will rise!”

He circled the table and stopped at a chair where an attractive woman sat. Her amber hair fell on her shoulders in perfect curls, styled that morning by an attentive servant or personal stylist. He looked her in the eye. They were green, and she looked embarrassed, nervously toying with her diamond necklace. It wasn’t clear if she was just shy or if it was the speaker who made her uncomfortable by fixing his eyes on her.

“We,” he said, “we will be better than our ancestors.” He broke eye contact with the woman and strolled back to the head of the table, stopping by an empty chair without sitting down.

“We have knowledge and tools that we didn’t have before. We will use them, and we will use them well.”

The listeners nodded and looked at each other in agreement.

“Think of your kids.” The man looked at everyone in the room as he continued, “Think of the generations ahead.” He adjusted his white shirt cuffs decorated with gold cufflinks.

“Do you really want them to face this again? Do you want to go through all this again? Is that what you want?” he shouted. The echo of his words lingered for a moment.

“I can see it on your faces. Each one of you wants what’s best. You’re eager to make a change. To make a difference. To stand up for what’s right!” His voice was strong and passionate; his words heartfelt.

“Now, and for all. Together,” the man said, leaning forward on the table, “we can end this. Together, we can ensure no homelessness. A world with no hunger, no crime. A life without fear.”

The men and women in the room listened, anticipating what would come next. The speaker looked at everyone and punctuated each sentence by tapping the table with his index finger as he continued.

“We owe it to our people. We owe it to our children. We can—and we will—rebuild the world. We will unite for what’s right. We will stand together! That’s why I gathered you here today. To bring the means to make a difference. To bring you . . . ” he straightened and said, “Sābanto.”

1

STEVEN WHITE GOT UP early in the morning, when the horizon to the east was still just a shade of dark red. The house was quiet, so he tried not to make much noise as he got dressed. He didn't bother to alert the staff—it would only cause unnecessary hustle, and he wanted some time alone.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror, at his short salt-and-pepper hair and long face. He was already in his late fifties, but he didn't feel his age. He was still fit and full of energy. He picked a nice, dark suit from a hanger and paired it with a blue shirt and a set of cufflinks he'd bought a long time ago. The design of them pleased him. He liked the way the gold shone, and they'd only cost him a thousand tickets.

War caused hyperinflation. Governments, already with one foot out the door, continued to spend more and more, fueling the conflict, trying to hold on to the influence they still had. Prices started to rise at an astronomical speed. When people were no longer able to afford food, a decision was made to start selling meal tickets to feed the hungry. He was just a child when people had stormed the banks, trampling each other to get rid of their worthless money in exchange for a few days of lousy meals. Now, decades later, tickets were their own currency.

He walked up to the window and looked through the glass at the dawn breaking. He could make out the rooftops of the town in the distance. "My Covedale," he murmured to himself and smiled. The city was his life, the purpose of his existence, his pride and joy. He'd spent the last thirty years protecting it, building it, and making it better. "What would you do without me?"

One day there would be lights shining at night. Electric lights. The power plant was his longtime dream. What a luxury it would be for everyone if he rebuilt the power lines that had been downed during the war. Bringing light to the townsfolk could be his life accomplishment, something that

people would forever remember him for. His legacy. A legend of Covedale. He smiled.

He walked away from the window and through the door to the dark corridor. He passed his daughter's chambers and stopped for a moment. She was still sleeping, he was sure of that, and he didn't want to disturb her. It didn't seem like that long ago he'd held her in his arms at night, singing her lullabies, or carried her on his shoulders through the woods that were part of his vast property. Her childish giggles still rang in his ears. How he'd love to have those moments back. She'd been so small back then, doing her homework or practicing her ballet poses under the eye of her governess.

His daughter was a woman now, however. He, a man of status and power, felt weak for a moment as he thought that soon enough his daughter would meet someone, fall in love, get married, and move out. She'd leave him here, alone, in this big house. He looked around the dark hallway. He'd tried to delay this as much as he could to have more time with her, but Covedale needed a male heir. It was time for him to help her choose a husband wisely. A beautiful woman like her could attract a man that could destroy what he'd worked so hard for. He couldn't allow that. An arranged marriage would be best for her. It wouldn't hurt if he took a look around for a potential candidate on his next business trip.

He walked again towards the curved, marble stairs. There was more light shining now through the floor-to-ceiling windows and he didn't light the big crystal chandelier hanging in the middle of the staircase.

He slowly descended. The kitchen staff were preparing breakfast already and the smell of freshly baked buns was coming up from the basement. His stomach rumbled, but he'd wait for the servants to bring his food when it was ready.

He turned right when he got to the main floor. He paused by the fountain covering the height of one wall. The water fell down the stone surface, quietly humming as it made the journey. The liquid was so clear that only the bending light gave it away. His daughter wasn't yet a teen when she'd noticed this art piece in a gallery. How could he have refused her? These sculptures had to be eighty or a hundred years old. After all industry switched to support war, nothing with the sole purpose of pleasing the eyes was made. The fountain hadn't been that expensive, which had surprised him. Less than five thousand, and it continuously brought his daughter joy to look at it.

He passed the dining room where an immense table stood that could sit at least twenty. He never had that many guests seated at once for dinner, but the size and style fit the room perfectly. He admired the carved table legs and the backs of the chairs—Neo-Renaissance, he was told—and he showed it off proudly to everyone who visited.

As he was walking past the servant's staircase towards the door to his study, a young girl emerged, hurrying up from the basement. She almost collided with him, barely managing not to drop the silver tray she was carrying.

"Watch where you're going!" his voice thundered, echoing in the spotless hallway.

He didn't care to remember the servants' names. There were so many girls working in his house, wearing the same white apron and bonnet, that it was impossible to remember them all.

"I'm sorry, sir." She curtsied in front of him, lowering her eyes.

"Coffee in the study," he ordered, opening the door in front of him.

"Right away, sir." The girl curtsied again and hurried away. Whatever she had on the tray made a clinking noise as she walked.

The room on the other side of the door was still dark, except for the glow from the low fire in the fireplace. He walked up to the window and pulled the heavy curtains aside. Faint silver sun rays were already illuminating the ocean in the distance, promising a lovely day. He opened the sliding door a notch to let the fresh, cool March air in. With the morning air came the sound of the power generators.

Turning, he walked to the large desk to sit in his leather chair. He turned on the lamp and the faint light reflected from the top of the table illuminated the bookshelves encircling the room, reflecting off the spines of the books.

He couldn't imagine life without electricity. The diesel required cost him twenty tickets a day, but it was a small sacrifice for his daughter's well-being. He never dimmed the lights, even if it might save energy. He could afford the fuel, and he wouldn't have anyone coming to this house thinking less of him.

He picked up a paper that was on his desk and read it silently. It was a ledger showing the last month's income and expenditure for the city.

Fees from docks: 200,000 tickets.

That wasn't bad for a month's worth. He brought his head up from the document and looked ahead for a moment, thinking how these numbers could improve. He then lowered his head to read the next line.

“How many tons?” he asked out loud, frowning. “Fifteen *thousand* tons of food to be shipped to Riverlea?” He paused for a moment. “Okay,” he calmed down and his face relaxed again as he read further, “So we only sent ten, and we’re still to deliver five.” Weren’t there crates of onions that had been stuck at the docks for the last couple of weeks? The carrier still hadn’t paid the dues. He grabbed a pen that was lying on the desk. *Send them onions*, he wrote on the side of the ledger and smiled to himself. He’d turn these notes into an order later. Let them complain about how he ran the business, he dared them. He put the pen down.

His father had taken over Covedale when the government structures fell at the beginning of the war. He had been the only one who could pull it off. He’d moved his associates from Riverlea, the downtown district already trained and equipped with guns to protect Covedale on the mainland, in the old city suburbs.

Stock markets were over; the world was in a deep recession, and people had less and less to spend. He’d moved quickly to occupy the portion of the river where the banks were low and accessible, which promised some trade with cities upriver. When the bridges between Covedale and Riverlea went down during an air raid—some claimed that his father had helped make that happen—there was no longer easy access to the downtown core, which had trapped people on the island that was Riverlea. All food and medicine had to pass through Covedale to be loaded on boats and shipped to Riverlea. It had been convenient and profitable for him to instate a heavy toll on these goods. It still was.

A knock on the door made him look up before reaching the end of the document.

“Come!” he exclaimed.

A servant girl walked in. She brought in the coffee, and quickly, but carefully set it on the desk beside him. She then curtsied, turned around and left, closing the door behind her.

He picked up the porcelain coffee cup and took a sip of the bitter liquid, continuing to read the document in his other hand.

Only four locked up? That should increase. Having empty cages would just make the town think of him as weak. Leo would have to do a better job of this. He was the security officer and should know better than to leave the jail empty.

He put down the coffee; the cup clinked against the saucer. He picked up the pen again. A farmer on the outskirts of the town that refused to pay for his protection. *Let him go free*, he wrote. He had a good heart after all. He then added, *Have thugs steal his harvest*. If White didn't find a buyer, he could distribute the crops in town as a last resort. Townsfolk loved gifts, and it always increased their respect for him.

He moved to the next item on the list. *Any trespassers in Covedale are to be executed*, he wrote on the side. The tree by the river needed some fresh meat hanging off it. It had been a few days since the last execution, and whatever was still hanging would have been picked over by vultures.

There was something missing from the report. He stared at it for a moment, trying to recall what it was he was thinking about. "Right," he said. *Do something with Tom*, he wrote on the bottom before putting the pen down. Tom was his nephew, and he was sick of hearing of his debts to others. He didn't need that kind of trouble in his family or his city. There had to be a way to stop Tom from doing any more harm. Fixing his deals was probably no longer possible, but writing his name down would help him remember to give it more thought.

He finished reading the report and turned on the radio sitting on the desk. It was time for his morning routine of listening to the latest news. The radio was the best medium these days for information from afar. The only printed words were in books and magazines, but those had stopped production with the start of the war. Newspapers were a thing of the past, long gone even before then.

"People are out on the street everywhere," the anchor said cheerfully, live from a Chicago broadcast. "Some are planning to celebrate the end of the war for the entire week." The sounds of celebration could be heard in the background.

The phone on his desk rang. With towers down, only a few could afford the satellite phones for communication. This room held the only such device in the whole of Covedale. He picked it up without hesitation.

"Yes?" He knew who was calling.

"People are laughing and dancing all around me—" the anchor continued. White turned the radio down a bit.

"Yes, I just went through the ledger," he replied to the person on the other side of the phone. "What do you mean you need more tickets?" He began

to frown as he listened. "I can't pay much more than that." He was annoyed. His superiors always got most of the money from the docks, and the only other major source of income for Covedale was trade with the neighboring Riverlea. He couldn't agree to pay more. Running the city was expensive.

In the background, the radio continued faintly. "We've been waiting for this moment for fifty years!"

"Sure, I can do you a favor," he said calmly and sat up in his chair. He had little choice. Either he paid the extra fee or did what he was told. These were the usual terms, so he wasn't surprised.

He listened for a moment as the person on the other side explained, giving him directions. "Who is he?" he asked, then listened intently. "With all due respect, sir," he cut in, "I think it is my concern."

He felt his anger rising. He knew that there was no point in arguing with the man he was talking to, but he at least wanted to make a show of resistance. He didn't want it to seem like he would always just agree to everything.

"Yes," he finally said with disappointment in his voice. He hung up but kept looking at the phone.

The noise of a street party could be heard on the radio as the anchor continued, raising a toast. "A local syndicate has donated ale for everyone. To the new world!"

White felt defeated and his morning's energy had suddenly evaporated. Welcoming a stranger into Covedale was the last thing he needed right now.

He sighed and sat back in his chair to listen to the radio.

"Our ports have welcomed yet another ship coming from Europe. The veterans of war are coming back, and there are still many more waiting to make the trip. With the war over, families can finally be reunited!"

"Home!"

Oliver shook Eric who was lying on one of the bunk beds in a huge cabin that had been housing tens of men for the past week they'd been sailing from Europe. They were getting closer to the small port in Rockland. They were supposed to go to New York or Boston, but the ship had been diverted. They said it was because of poor weather.

Eric didn't move. His face was turned towards the wall, and Oliver knew it was pointless to press him. The man was constantly on edge, avoiding his presence at all costs since they'd boarded the ocean liner. At night, Eric

tossed and turned, having nightmares, and often woke everyone up with his screams. During the day, they'd find him sitting on the open deck alone and shivering from the cold, staring at the empty sea.

Oliver looked around the large room full of tall bunk beds and at the men sitting or lying on them. Most on this ship had been broken by the war and by what they'd seen. All hoped the return home would heal them. Death, torture, and mutilation were common at the front and the experience crushed many souls.

When he'd met Eric, they were still young, not knowing what the future would bring. They'd been on their way to the front, riding in the same truck, when they'd spoken for the first time. They'd shared a slug, a hand-rolled tobacco cigarette. Eric had been a fragile kid without adequate training who hadn't enlisted for war, Oliver recalled. He hadn't wanted to go, but he'd been drafted.

They'd stuck together through the twelve years they'd been away from home. They'd shared many experiences of the front and the POW camp. The worst they'd endured, however, was after they'd escaped from enemy hands. While they were trying to cut through the front lines to return to their fellow soldiers, they had been captured somewhere in the Ural Mountains by what looked like local militia and put to back-breaking work manufacturing ammunition. The ten years spent there as slaves had taken a toll on both of them, but they'd always helped each other when they could. The hardship of that place, however, had been too much for Eric. It made Oliver sorry that they were parting in such sad circumstances, but he didn't hold it against Eric that he couldn't deal with a goodbye. He hoped that Eric would make good use of the little token of appreciation Oliver had given him.

Oliver turned around and got his backpack from the locker beside the bed. It contained nothing of value: An old shaving kit, a piece of soap and a change of underwear. The only set of clothes he owned he was already wearing.

This was his chance to separate himself from the past and the years he'd spent at war. He loved the idea of starting his life anew. He smiled to himself at the thought. Finally he was free. Once off this ship, he'd be able to do whatever he pleased. No one was there to control him and tell him what to do.

He felt the need for some fresh air again. The emptiness of the open ocean was calling him and he needed to see it one more time. Oliver grabbed his belongings, not intending to return to the cabin ever again, and exited

through the metal door. They were deep in the belly of the giant machine. The rumble of the diesel engines was loud and sent vibrations through the walls that cracked and moaned metallically from the strain. He turned right and passed a few other cabin doors until he reached the steep stairs.

It took a while, but he got to the main deck and opened the heavy storm door to the outside. A cold March breeze blew across his face, but he walked to the railing and faced the wind, looking towards the land. The seagulls were already circling, hoping to find food in the currents made by the hull of the ship. He stared at the shore for a moment, then turned his back to the wind, took out a slug from his pocket, and lit it. Almost there. He puffed smoke.

It took the crew most of the day to finally get the ship doors open and start allowing people to disembark. Oliver was one of the first people to get off. The men working for the port directed him to the port registry office as soon as he stepped onto solid ground.

The room was a concrete box with no windows and peeling paint on the walls. There were two scratched up chairs and a desk made from a piece of wood set on a pair of sawhorses. A small radio was faintly recounting the recent news about the end of the war.

“Name?” barked the surly man behind the desk. He was wearing a military-style uniform with ‘Port Authority’ written on his breast tag. He had a piece of paper in front of him that he was filling out.

“Oliver Conway.” He spelled out his last name. He wished he could use a different name, but when he’d gotten on the ship the officials required his soldier ID number, and he didn’t want to risk being held back in Europe.

“Who are you traveling with?”

“No one,” he replied. There was no reason to tell him about Eric. It was time they went their own ways.

“Destination?”

Oliver wasn’t prepared for this question. Going back to his parents’ house was an option, but that would mean returning to a life he’d hated so much that he’d enlisted for war. Maybe having them think he died was better.

There wasn’t really any other place he really knew of, except maybe . . . “Riverlea,” he replied. Karl—the man he and Eric had worked under—had told him to visit Mark Rodden, an accountant friend of his in Riverlea, once he was back in North America.

“Where is that?” The man threw a map onto the table for Oliver to look at.

He didn’t know. He stared at the map for a long time, looking for the town by chasing the rivers with his index finger. Oliver knew it had to be there somewhere; he imagined a small town by the river with a meadow surrounding it. He started with the east coast, but the man behind the desk grew impatient.

“I can’t find it,” Oliver replied, annoyed. He was also getting frustrated not knowing where Riverlea was. He hadn’t had the opportunity to ask Karl about it when they’d last seen each other.

“What was the name?” The man was watching the digital clock on the wall. He probably didn’t want to wait the whole night for Oliver to find the place.

“Riverlea.” He spelled it out.

The man walked up to the ancient-looking computer in the corner of the room and typed the name into his system. He looked at the display for a moment.

The quiet sound of a radio broadcast was audible in the room. “Limited available housing and food forces the government to implement a new strategy. Any fresh settlers will require special permits in the most populated areas.”

The man got up and looked at the map. It didn’t take him long to find it.

“Here it is.” The man pointed at a location on the opposite side of the continent from where Oliver had been looking. “But I can’t put you there. It’s not in the list of authorized destinations. The best I can do is this adjacent city.” The man pointed at the map. “Covedale.”

“Covedale it is, then,” Oliver replied. That town was farther than he thought he’d need to travel. It was at least a week away, even if he was able to catch an unlikely car ride. He hoped he wouldn’t have to walk the whole way.

“You have no permit to settle here in Rockland,” the man added. “We require you to leave the city within twenty-four hours.” He took out a bundle of money and counted out one hundred tickets in blue bills of ten. “That’s the payment for your military service.” The man passed over the money and a copy of the completed arrival document. “You’re free to go.”

Oliver left the small office and stepped outside. He was finally free. He smiled to himself as he looked around. Behind him stood the rusting ocean liner, towering over ten stories above sea level. The other people still on the ship were lined up, leaning over the railings, ready to disembark. Oliver

smiled and blew them a goodbye kiss as he turned around and started walking towards downtown. It was March and the ground was still partially covered in snow, which crunched beneath his shoes.

The money they'd given him would last him for two, maybe three months. It wasn't much. His thoughts went to Riverlea, as his life depended on it. He hoped that he'd find what Karl had promised him.

He crossed the port gate into the town. There was no one waiting for the war veterans. The town was quiet. It felt deserted. The fear of newcomers kept people away.

He set off towards the red of the setting sun. He was a lone man walking down the street, holding on to his only coat, which barely kept him warm enough. He felt free.

Eric turned in bed and looked around the room. The ship bounced as it docked. There weren't too many people left inside as most were already up and ready to get out of this rusty metal contraption that had kept them jailed for about a week. All of them were tired of the war and the trip, ready to finally put their feet on solid ground.

He sat up in his bed for a better view. He looked at the lockers and noticed that Oliver's bag was missing. He sighed with relief. He'd anticipated Oliver would be one of the first to disembark, and Eric didn't mind being the last. He wanted to keep as much distance between himself and Oliver as he could.

He jumped off the bunk bed onto the metal floor of the room. He walked up to the lockers and grabbed his bag. He turned around and noticed one of his fellow travelers still packing his belongings. He gave him a firm handshake and a wide hug as a goodbye before leaving himself.

Once he reached the main deck, he looked out at the dark, frozen town of Rockland below. The sun was already setting, tracing the contours of the roofs of the buildings with its red rays. He looked down onto the shore and noticed Oliver crossing the port gates and sending a kiss back to him. There was no way he could've seen him from so far away and picked him from the crowd, but Eric thought the kiss was for him and his eyes became moist, but not because he was sad. They were tears of happiness.