

City Of Darkness

By Lim Ming Brina

Cold. Hunger. Darkness. This is the world I live in now. Electricity is a rare commodity, so darkness reigns when night falls. I lurk in the dark, waiting for unsuspecting prey. Ah, here comes one. Potbellied with a saggy moustache and greying hair, a middle-aged man warily makes his way down the street. If he is fat, he must be rich, and in these dire times, I see few of his kind here. The corner of his brown wallet peeks out from his back pocket. Rich and naïve, if he leaves his belongings in such a vulnerable position. My feet move soundlessly across the granite floor, and I quietly relieve him of his wallet, and seek refuge amongst the shadows of the alleys. The fool continues on his way, oblivious. I empty the contents of his wallet into my hand. A couple of dollar bills, and a fistful of coins. It's not much, but it's enough to feed my family for this week. Satisfied, I toss the wallet into a ditch, and head home.

Home is a shoebox apartment in the city's poorest neighbourhood, located in the Lower Ring. There are three rings in the city-the Upper Ring where the rich and the corrupt government officers live in luxury, the Middle Ring where the middle-class citizens make their home, and the Lower Ring which is home to the dirt poor and is rife with criminals. The 'police' are there to maintain order, but they are just as corrupt as the government who employs them. Three mighty walls separate each district from each other. My sister Alexandra looks up when I enter, stirring a thin bowl of soup with some seasoning she's scrounged up somewhere. I dump the money I stole onto our chipped wooden table. Alexandra frowns disapprovingly at me. "You should go find a job and make an honest living. I heard the mayor is in need of a new secretary," she chides. Being two years older, Alexandra has made it her responsibility to guide me in life ever since those thugs crippled Father for not being able to pay the rent on time, and Mother died of infection three years ago since no hospital would take her in as we were unable to afford it. "I'd rather be a thief than work for those serpents." I retort, thinking of how five years ago Isao Tora, head of the 'Tigers' political party, took over as President. Ever since he's been in office, our city has fallen to ruin. Taxes keep being raised on the poor, and the corrupt government controls the military and hide behind the glided walls of their opulent homes in the Upper Ring hoarding their riches while people starve, roast during the unforgiving summers and froze through the harsh winters. I am broken from my reverie by Alexandra placing a container of soup in front of me to take to my friend.

My best friend Ryu lives two blocks down from where I live, and he has two young brothers to feed. He works as a construction worker, and often his pay doesn't arrive on time, if at all. Even so, what he earns in a day is a pittance compared to the amount I stole today. As I near Ryu's place, I see his brothers playing 'hockey' with sticks and pebbles. One of them hits a pebble too hard, and it hits a passing policeman. The policeman is enraged, and whips out his pistol, aiming it at the poor boy and spewing profanities. Suddenly Ryu is there, on his knees in front of the policeman, begging for mercy. The policeman says a few words that I do not catch, and Ryu disappears into his flat as fast as he had appeared, and reappears with a bundle

wrapped in cloth. I recognise it as Ryu's entire life's savings, and am about to run to his defence when Ryu catches my eye and subtly shakes his head. He's trying to protect me, as I would have gotten hurt if I had tried to defend him, and being hurt affects my performance at work, even if the 'work' I do is thievery. After the policeman leaves, I jog up to Ryu and hand him the soup. Our eyes meet, and an unspoken message passes between us. A citywide coup has been organised and will be executed tomorrow, and Ryu and I are a part of it. It is dangerous, but I am willing to risk everything for a shot at a brighter future for all of us. Tomorrow is coming, and as black as it is now, the sun will rise. No matter how faint the glow.

781 words