

Short Story

CHAPTER I: DENIAL

The parallel of darkness and light. A story as old as time itself. The darkness representative of evil, depravity and suffering, while the light, morality, benevolence and joy. But what if that entire notion was wrong? That is not to say the darkness is 'good' but rather, **what if the light was just as bad as the darkness?**

A question that in all my years I never had a chance to truly ponder. I am devout to my lord, King Ariamys, I have to be, I am a holy man after all. But some nights I would sneak out of the town; evading the guardsmen and curfew, and I would sit atop the town wall and look out into the barren landscape. And in those moments I would consider the possibility.

Fitting that on one such night I was kidnapped.

It all happened in a flash, one moment I was gazing out into the ruins of the Old World and the next moment, I felt a musty sack cover my head and then-darkness. I awoke several days later, my head aching and my body more so. I would have fought but the moment I gained consciousness and tried to raise my fist, I felt it stay in place. These bastards had bound my arms and legs, fighting was futile and I realised I was being carried around by a knight. There were four of them, they all seemed to know each other well, might I add. They did not represent any mercenary companies, church missions, or even gangs I knew. No, these ones seemed to be nothing more than an unholy matrimony of misfits. There was a knight, a healer? And an old man.

"You're up?" croaked the rugged man who wore emblems of the Old Army.

While still being lugged around like a log, I mustered up all the courage I had and spoke. "You vile ruffians! Where are you taking me! I demand answers at once!"

"Lucretia, put him down." Said the old man.

I felt the sudden impact of the gravel grace my backside, sending a pain shooting up my back.

"Oh be gentle, will you? We need him alive if he is to carry out the rite..." gently uttered the healer of the group.

"Sorry about that, Lucretia isn't the most gentle. I guess introductions are in place, My name is Victor." The elder says while reaching his hand out, he must think my predicament is humorous.

"My hands are tied..." I say glaring at him and the knight.

"Right...well, I know this is rather strange, but we-we need help, and you may be the only one who can help us. We're desperate, so much so we had to abduct you."

"What are you talking about, and what is this talk of rites?" I say more as a courtesy than actual care.

"You are a cleric for the Church Of Light, yes?" The old man asks despite me wearing my robes.

"Proudly...and I will have you know; the Church's knights will seek you all out and execute you should any ill befall me."

"No, no, no we do not plan on harming you, please if you will allow me, I can explain everything. But I warn you, you may not like what you hear."

"I don't care for your pleas! Return me to my abode at once, lest the church seek you out! I am not helping you or your highwaymen with whatever stupid plan you have. Untie me Gods damn you! "

"Please, Manus, just hear me out. For Julian's sake?"

CHAPTER II: ANGER

“I, Grand Knight Lucretia of Lorden, pledge ultimate allegiance to King Ariamys and his teachings. For a brighter day, forever and always. The sun shines.”

I fought in the war for almost three years and yet, all I could remember was my pledge. I couldn't remember the battles, the soldiers I lost, the soldiers I had to kill. I couldn't even remember my own lover's face. The darkness does that to you. Fucks up everything. Weeks turn into days, years into months. Time means fuck all to you, and all you can feel is either pity or hate. I chose hatred. It was how I kept going all those years after the war, the drive for revenge, the chance at inflicting the same kind of pain I felt on the god that failed us.

“Lu” Victor croaks my nickname, that I hate so much.

“Victor.” I say slightly annoyed.

“Do you think I was a bit too harsh; he hasn't said anything since I told him.”

“Well Victor, ask yourself how you would feel if someone told you every aspect of your life is a lie?”

“Well to be fair, I didn't say *every*...”

Victor was never one to pussyfoot around, he said things as they were. That's the problem with the logical types, they never think with passion. Still, I owe him my life had he not found me when he did, the fire that burns in me today would have been put out by now. Victor and I both served in Ariamys' Legion, even before the bombs fell. It is difficult to think back to a time he believed in the age of light. I fell in love with his sister, and we did what lovers do, but the Church deemed our love 'unnatural'. The moment the ceasefire happened we eloped. We didn't care. We were in love. I was in love, for the first time ever. The ceasefire didn't last long and the Red Army attacked again, this time they made sure we would not be able to retaliate. Flames engulfed entire cities, evaporated people, levelled buildings and Sheylla was caught in the middle of it. And just as quickly as I felt love fill me, I felt a boundless gloom replace that. I have travelled with this group for a few years in search of a cleric, we had one prior but the weight of expectations drove him mad. I can't blame him I'd be scared shitless if I was kidnapped and coerced into killing my creator. Victor calls it a 'necessary evil'. He is right, the cleric we have with us now is a nobody who's lost everything, he couldn't say no, that's why he's perfect. With him we'll get our revenge, I will finally get the chance to strike down the god that sent me to war, and sent hundreds to death.

“Knight Lucretia?”

“What do you want Admaius?”

“Why are you always so...quiet?”

“I don't have anything to say.”

“Oh come now dear, surely you have at least *one* thing to say, or are you that boring?”

“Admaius, I am growing weary of your antics.”

“No, no antics here dear, I just worry about you, you have a lot of pent up rage and aggression, I don't want to see you use it on one of us-“

I couldn't hold back any longer, I grabbed Admaius' throat with my hand and began to squeeze. It felt good seeing that porcelain white face turn red, it felt good seeing the light begin to fade from his eyes.

“LUCRETIA! PUT HIM DOWN!” Victor grabbed my pauldrons and shoved me aside causing me to drop Admaius. Watching Admaius cough out gobs of blood, it dawned on me that the darkness was beginning to take hold of me. I could feel its grasp. That boundless gloom I tried to escape was back.

CHAPTER III: BARGAINING

I have never fully trusted Lucretia, or rather, I have never fully trusted knights like her, those that rebelled against Ariamys. It made little sense that they fought and killed hundreds 'for their king', and then after the war they suddenly gained a conscience? Preposterous. Lucretia and Victor have history, and for that Victor kept her around despite how unhinged she was becoming. Her choking me was the last straw, I cannot trust her nor do I wish to. She is dangerous.

The only one in the group who may be able to keep things together at this point is that lowly cleric, who has been moping around for the past week. I can't say I blame him; Victor pulled a rather unscrupulous move by bringing up the cleric's son who was lost to the darkness. A means to an end I suppose. I am having doubts he won't go mad and give in to the darkness, but I also have faith. The knight wants to speak with me, hopefully she won't try kill me this time.

"Admaius...I-I-I would like to apologise for what happened yesterday; I was not in my right mind"

"You haven't been so for quite some time, I've been noticing you skip meals, you hardly sleep, you don't say anything sometimes for days on end."

"I...I'm just not...I think I have a flu."

"Mhm and I am president of the free world."

"Fine... In truth, I can feel it growing Admaius. I feel the cold embrace urging me on to the point of no return. I'm afraid and I fear-"

Lucretia began to sob. This tower actually had tears, she stopped in the middle of the ruins, despite our differences I placed my hand on her shoulder, I could feel her despair dragging her into the abyss. I could see a glimpse under her visor, her tears were a thick black, and poured down her scarred face.

"I know that...I am going to die. But if I promise to be better, will you give me a little more time?"

I couldn't bring myself to even speak, this giant, one of the strongest and fiercest opponents I had ever met was breaking down in front of me from an unseen enemy. I thought to myself, 'if only I had treated her better.' Now there wasn't even time to apologise. Lucretia dropped to her knees and held me while quietly sobbing, Victor placed his hand on her pauldron before nodding and walking away with the cleric. I remained. I held Lucretia back.

"Lucretia, I know that we haven't always seen eye-to-eye but I am so sor-"

"I forgive you Admaius, I know- I know you never meant any harm by your actions or words. Please, look after Victor he is an old man- I promised his sister I'd love him like my own."

I held Lucretia tightly.

"I forgive you too, and you have my word."

"You must go Admaius. The darkness travels swiftly in such hopeless places. It-it-it is time I see my lovers face again..."

I slowly let go of Lucretia, she did the same before removing her helmet, it was the first time I had seen her without it, her face was riddled with scars and burns, the darkness was seeping from her lips and her eyes. Although she was still crying she smiled and nodded her head, so as to usher me along, I nodded back in agreement. I turned around and began walking away. I heard the sound of steel rustling against the concrete and in the span of a few seconds I heard Lucretia's sobs come to an abrupt end, and the steel clang against the concrete.

CHAPTER IV: DEPRESSION

I couldn't believe it.

The certainty and reality of death was beginning to creep up to me, the feeling of emptiness rolling across like a dense fog crawling a lake. I was almost becoming frozen in my tracks. Up until now, sadness reigned, but I was still able to muster the energy to fight – to deny, to have anger, to bargain. Now, there appears to be nothing that can be done to alter this inevitable outcome.

I don't have the energy to fight anymore.

There wasn't even a catharsis in Lucretia's passing, there never is. The darkness just takes and leaves us behind to pick up the pieces. Is there even a point in going through life alone? Will I meet the same fate as those I lost? Why would a benevolent god torment us like this? Questions I wish I could have the answer to. But even if I could, I don't think I'd want them. My daughter, once said "sometimes things happen that have an answer but that answer isn't one we are ready to hear." I am yet to see why her, my son, my wife, even my own sister were ripped from me.

I don't want to do this anymore.

Maybe this is the great King Ariamys' way of punishing me, punishing me for sending countless troops to their death, for failing our legion, and even for abandoning my duties as a commander. Maybe in some sick sense this is divine retribution. My family paid for my debts. Or maybe, maybe I am the problem, everyone around me just seems to die. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if I did the same?

I can't go on.

But I have to, Admaius told me the tomb is close, that we are almost there after all these years of searching. The cleric's bet was right on the money. We may have found it. So why am I not excited, why can I not bring myself to celebrating this moment? I think it's because the losses to get here were far too extreme. My wife always said she wanted to travel to the Tomb Of Ancients before she grew old. She never even lived to do either. I have to fight, if not for myself, for her. So that no father needs to bury their wife, who after being consumed by the darkness took their two kids with. I am to be the example not the exception. Ariamys will pay, for every last soul him and his church have taken. All the wars he waged. All the children he left orphans. All the lovers he widowed. All the darkness he let into this world.

He lied to us all, even his own clerics, saying that the darkness was brought on by man, when in actuality Ariamys brought it to our world. He killed my children, and for that I am going to slay him.

"Cleric Manus, how far out are we?!" I yell out to the cleric who has taken recon.

He yells back , "Well, if this map is correct and my bearings are right, the tomb is that decaying rotunda with the fallen obelisks!"

"So then we are here..." I am nervous but ready for this confrontation.

"It would appear so." The cleric walks back to myself and Admaius.

I turn to Admaius, "Are you ready?"

Admaius nods, "Ready as I will ever be. For Lucretia."

"Alright cleric, when you're ready you read the rite, the door should open and I will end Ariamys."

"Victor, before you do anything, may I speak with him?" The cleric asks shyly.

"Very well Manus, and thank you for all this. For those we lost." I say as I unsheathe my sword

CHAPTER V:ACCEPTANCE

It has been nearly a lifetime since I heard footsteps and chatter echoing throughout the tunnels to my tomb, I don't get many guests these days. Not since I went into hiding. Three figures enter.

"ARIAMYS!"

One of them dares to raise his voice to me- a king?

His sword is drawn, and his two companions are carrying apocryphal items, do they wish to scare me or make me laugh?

"You there! Where is King Ariamys!?"

The old man approaches me, he is short, well-built and rugged. I scoff at him; he is obviously not the brightest of this group.

"You are beholding him."

"What?! Where is King Ariamys, Lord Of Light?!" I grow tired of this old man yapping away at my frail ears.

"You, cleric, dost thou not recognize your own god?" I ask the scrawny looking cleric whose robes are tattered and dirty.

"I do...and I have a question for my *god*, why? Why would you take away my only son, why would you take away my Julian from me, why doom this world to the darkness, and cower away for all these years?" The cleric wants to cry but he is holding himself together for the sake of the other two.

"Well, I, I am sorry. But it is the law of the universe, thesis and antithesis that leads to the synthesis; an enduring balance between the two. There cannot be light without darkness, and I had no choice." I try and assure him, it doesn't work.

"What do you mean, 'you had no choice'?! Because of you my entire family is dead." I see tears now. I forget that humans are such delicate beings.

"I made a deal with forces beyond your comprehension, in hopes of sparing my kin."

The old man, looks at me quizzically before asking: "You had children?"

"Yes, three, two girls and one boy..." I say with humility.

The old man slowly sheathes his sword, "Hmph, I was a father too. I don't blame you; I would've burned this world four times over if it meant saving my kids."

"I know you and many others will never forgive me for this, but I am sorry."

"You deserve to die..." The androgyne says sharply.

"You're right. I do, it's long past time I return to the Heavens. Before I go. I want you to remember this moment with kindness, I have lived a selfish life, I shall not die that way. It is beautiful on the other side, hopefully one day we will all meet under different circumstances. Forgive me."

I remove the rotting crown from my head. In a matter of seconds my skin tightens to my bones, it is almost as though the years of ageing catch up to me. In a moment it is over, everything goes dark. My crown drops to the floor and the dark tomb is instantly lit up, as the darkness quickly dissipates.

And for the first time in forever. Light shines through the clouds, illuminating the ruins and the lands. There is hope. No matter how dark the world is, the sun shines. I know this, and so do you.