

Shadows Without, Light Within

By JessicaRae



The doors to the Great Hall had been carefully closed, marking the end of another beautiful Winterfest. The wild winds blew around the tunnel folk and the helpers as they carefully made their way toward the higher network of chambers and tunnels where the kind people Below made their home. These lower tunnels, so devoid of light or beauty, currently rang with the contented laughter of the partygoers. The flicker of the many golden candles held aloft danced on the stone walls around them, giving it a gentle, inviting glow – if one stayed in the boundary of their light.

One helper walked a bit behind the group, who were now singing some cheerful tunes on their trek up the passageway. It had been hard to hide the pain that the helper felt inside during all the Fest's grand speeches. Father had spoken of the bygone era of the tunnels. "This was a land of lost hope, of twisted dreams, a land of despair, where the sounds of footsteps coming down a tunnel were the sounds of

terror.” His poetic words ran through the helper’s thoughts over and over, despair and lost hope becoming a mantra of darkness, as each step carried them up the tunnel. Times had changed quite a bit since those early, dark days. Now, the light held in some hands of the group cast its glow across them all. Although it was a lovely, hopeful sight, the shimmering warmth could not touch the heavy, aching darkness, that still lay at the helper’s heart like a stone.

“No one will notice if you step out of the light.”

The helper nearly froze mid-step in alarm at the sudden voice. Tunnel folk kindly stepped around the helper, some accidentally colliding at the sudden block in the moving line, and continued upward, their chatter fading into the background as the helper looked for the sound of the unfamiliar voice. Glittering eyes blinked on the dark wall opposite the small caravan.

What on earth?

The slim outline of a long black dragon peeled itself from the craggy surface and slipped into the throng of laughing folk. Close enough to reach out and touch, it chuckled, the dragon’s lips curled upwards in what could have been called a smile, had the curve completely reached its eyes. “I have been here for quite a while, and would you believe no one noticed me either. See, they think their candlelight brings them this great light, but in truth it brings a distinct boundary to the edge of the darkness, gives me plenty places to hide. It's fun, you know, this darkness. Makes you blend in with the shadows and no one sees. They think their lights dispel it, but no. It merely shoved the dark aside for a moment, but it always comes back when the light is gone. So, what are you? You have darkness, I can see it around you. But the source is kept in here.” The creature’s long, thin tongue flicked toward the helper’s chest.

Startled, the helper stepped sideways to avoid the apparition touching them, resulting in colliding again with a tall figure. Looking up, they found themselves next to the friendly pipe master of the tunnels, Pascal. He had nearly dropped the basket of silverware he was carrying on his shoulder at the sudden jostling, but quickly recovered and cast a shy, gentle smile in the direction of the helper.

“Easy there, topsider. Bit narrow here for you, is it? No worries. Here, take a firm hold of my arm, there, that’ll keep you steady.”

The helper frowned, not used to this continual show of kindness, and feeling a bit overwhelmed, reached and let their fingers barely grasp the rough cloth of his sleeve.

“Look at you, a *topsider*, heh?” The noisy black dragon flitted in and out of the shadows on the wall, disappearing and reappearing with each flicker of the candlelight. The helper shut their eyes for a moment, the sight of the quickly moving creature making them feel dizzy and disoriented.

“I say!” The dragon was suddenly at their side again, its black eyes glimmering with the reflected light of the multitude of candles. “Aren’t you a bit weak, there! Really! Need physical support to just stay with the crowd? Hey, you don’t need that, a mere helper like you. You are simply slowing the good fellow down. Just hang onto me, and I will guide you in the shadows. More room to walk there and think your own thoughts. The light is so crowded, look how you are being jostled around.”

The helper dodged another helper carrying a bundle of tablecloths on their shoulder and glanced ahead at the merry group, most of them tunnel folk, climbing toward the upper network of tunnels, and then turned their focus to the eager dragon beside them. In that moment, it felt as if the scaly creature was the only one that had noticed the helper’s weariness and emotional fragility. This was not true, but the helper had already forgotten the offering of Pascal’s arm. It had vanished with one glimpse of the dragon’s eye.

Reaching toward the specter, the helper laid a hand on the mane of the creature. Immediately, a dark strength filled the thoughts of the helper, and they put one foot in front of the other, following the light but falling further into the darkness.

They had almost reached the main tunnels again. All around the scaly dragon and his helper swirled the cheering and happy voices of those saying farewell to the helpers and those that had needed their help.

“Come this way,” spoke the creature, tugging the helper away from the cheerful mob.

They considered for a moment, but when no one seemed to be paying any attention to them, they accepted the companionship of darkness and moved down the side tunnel with the creature.

The voices faded into the distance with each step toward the darkness that the helper took. "Isn't this great?" the dragon exclaimed, swishing along beside the helper. "There is only darkness here. No fighting with the light."

"But I can't see," the helper replied, confused. "What good will being in the darkness do if I can't see anything?"

The glittery eyes, all they could see of the dragon, slowly turned their direction, blinking very slowly, ominously. "I thought you wanted darkness?" the creature hissed. "I brought you here because you couldn't stand the light."

"The light had nothing to do with it!" the helper explained, fear beginning to replace confusion. "I -I just wanted someone to listen, to notice that I was feeling so broken, and you listened, you noticed. But it hasn't made me feel any better. I want to go back, please take me back to the tunnels."

"I don't rescue," the dragon replied haughtily. "I devour."

The helper then realized that this darkness was not coming to aid their sorrow, but to feed from it, to grow stronger from someone else's weakness.

They took a step away from the glittering eyes, trying to control their breathing, and orient themselves to the direction that they had come from.

The dragon chuckled.

"Mere human, you really think that you can simply walk back into the light? Look around you. There is no light here except for my eyes. The darkness is your home now, you cannot escape it. You don't know which way to go to get back to the light."

The helper felt as if their entire world was crumbling around them. They were lost.

Forever. The scenes of yesterday still rolling over and over in their mind, the gaiety, the joy, the singing. It was all gone, the last moments of light they would ever experience. Sinking to the ground, the helper curled into the tightest ball possible, begging their mind to wake them up from such a horrible dream. In the darkness, all other senses awoke in the absence of sight and something in their pocket caught their attention. After a moment's hesitation, an idea dawned on the helper.

“I am not forgotten,” the helper said softly, drawing the newly discovered something from their pocket slowly, fingers grasping tight to the smooth surface with all their strength in case the dragon tried to take it away. “These people, I must mean something to them. I – I see it now. They made sure that I had the light. Before I ever saw the darkness, they gave me the light. I - I just chose not to use it.”

“What do you mean,” the dragon snarled, confusion in its tone. “There is nothing here but me – and my darkness.”

“Yes,” The helper replied, fishing in another pocket. “It is darkness. Truly, true darkness. And yes, you make it – very - dismal and enslaving. But only if one does not turn on the light they already have.”

There was a strike of a match, loud in the stillness, and the tiny flame leaped up, as if eager to dispel the darkness.

“No! No!” the creature growled, leaping toward the dimly flickering glow. “You don’t need that, you need me! You love the darkness; you love the shadows!”

“You are a long way from the path,” a gentle, familiar voice spoke behind them. With an angry hiss, the creature faded back into the shadows, eyes glittering in the candlelight.

Pascal stepped from the shadows, a kind smile on his face. “Lost you back there, topsider. There’s tea in the library and Mary made cake, don’t want you to miss it.”

Gladly, the helper reached out a hand for support and stood, dusting off the tunnel dust, candle still clutched in one hand.

“Handy things, candles, aren’t they,” Pascal asked softly, and the helper nodded, glancing back to see if the dragon still hovered beyond the edge of the light. Pascal reached out and turned their gaze back toward him with one finger, shaking his head.

“Let it go, topsider. Stay within the light, and the darkness can only threaten its presence. It can’t touch you inside the light.”

“But what if I am ever alone,” the helper asked, following him up the tunnel, concernedly glancing back every now and then.

Pascal smiled but kept walking.

“You are never alone.”

He turned and pointed toward the Helper’s chest. “The light is always in there. May be dim sometimes. May even go out. But it can be relit. Just hang around the people you love. Don’t ever listen to a voice that tells you that darkness is your only option. Follow the light. It will lead you back to what matters.”

“Thanks, Pascal. I truly appreciate you coming back to find me. You noticed I was gone?”

Pascal smiled kindly, moving along the tunnel again.

“When you spend as much time as I do listening to pipes by yourself, you know all about the darkness. It kind of just comes sometimes, you know, at night, when no one pops in to visit. But these people, these tunnel people, they all have stories. They all know darkness, but yet, they choose the light over and over again.”

The helper nodded thoughtfully, following the gentle pipe master toward the increasing sound of laughter and family.

Far away in the shadows, the dragon of darkness slipped away, looking for someone else to deceive.

Far away in the tunnels, a bitter heart dwelled, scheming, hating, seething.

“Hello, darkness.”

“Hello, Paracelsus.”