

THE UNLIKE LIGHT

By **Sharkchild**

From the very day we first breathed the dusty air of the keep, I knew doom would plague the innocence of our souls. The sweet, effervescent smell that spread amongst us gave the horrid sensation of life when despair was its true insinuation. Hard floor beneath my feet and cool steel walls beneath my touch told me of the thousand escapes never to succeed. The imprisonment was disenchanting, but we were given everything we needed for survival: food, water, clothing, and showers. These were, of course, the commodities blessed by death and used only by the wishful.

The dwellings of our strange cage consisted of rooms spanning the dimensions of about 3,000 square feet. More than enough bunks filled the very vacant rooms for sleep and even pillows lined them, giving their attempts at luring us from the cold, cruel reality of fear. A kitchen took up a large portion of the space, particularly with its oversized pantry holding food to last us for years. The stove worked wonderfully and chopped wood spoiled us with a laziness no one had. We could not have asked for more, but we certainly could have used less. This was the joyless place we tried to make home, but home, peace, was something that would never be known again, not with these memories.

Considering the level of the keep where we lived as the first floor, numerous other floors descended below us. We knew of five of those floors, though we knew several more existed. A stairway alternated its location upon each floor, making a difficult descent and a unique, indirect path. Each subsequent floor was also larger than its predecessor, having higher ceilings, larger rooms, and longer staircases. The most haunting attribute of this abominable structure was that the further you went down, the brighter it got, and this light was no cause of electricity or fire; this light was the evil of dawn spawned into its most sinister, incarnate form.

We much preferred the first floor, the pure, thick blackness of the first floor. Nothing but the blindness of pitch darkness could lull my worries away. Sight was not meant for the keep and souls were not meant for the keep. Light should never have been the guardian of good. It made the hope of salvation a bleak afterthought tucked away in the pockets of my mind, only to surface accidentally in the curious dreams of my shallow sleep. Even the pale color of dreams caused me to tremble, their luminous qualities poisonous.

It was most assuredly not fate which brought the group of us to the keep. There was some unknown hand that willed it upon us and blasphemed its course to match our own. I was but sleeping soundly in my own bed next to my wife when the thieves of witchery awoke me with their ugly force, driving me into a box like a cadaver and beating my head until I went limp. My wife did not even scream; she did not even wake. I was an ordinary man with a dearly loved family. They could not have taken me with crueler timing—my improperly healed fists prove it.

When we initially explored the floors below the first, we were ecstatic to find a growing light, and rooms filled with thousands and thousands of books, all of them ancient texts. Though we stopped periodically, nothing hindered the hunger we held towards the glow of golden light. Not even the clattering of claws

brought hesitation to our pace. It was only when we saw the first of the things that we stopped in our tracks, midway down the fifth staircase. The unlucky one of our group who tripped and fell down the stairs gave half of us the time we needed to escape. The rest were overtaken by the creatures in the light. I dare not describe them for even the words might beckon them to where sight meets imagination. The popping of lungs as those left behind screamed was enough to boil skin and send tongues to the back of throats.

We spent the next few weeks huddled tightly in our quarters while the disease of insanity spread amongst us. There were not many of us who could keep our heads straight when the visions of uncanny terrors overwhelmed our thoughts as the scraping from the creatures in the light echoed eternally beneath us, beating our hearts with the force of intrepid grotesqueness. Some of us moaned out into the dark, crying absurdities in behemoth fright. There was no interpersonal comfort left; each one of us was left to our own devices of coping.

I was one of the wishers, the optimists. I let the prayers of my wife and children stagger me against the temptation of death. There were only a few of us who held strong enough longings and it was us who lived on and on beneath the blanket of darkness, feeling our way to food and eating it without the commission of the stove for fear of unwanted attraction.

We knew ourselves to be safe in the dark since the creatures in the light never advanced upon the first floor. The closest they came was between the third and second floors, struggling to come upon us with all of their might. It was not bravery that hindered them from continuing, but sheer pain. When they encroached upon our darkness we heard their distinct, muffled squeals of unrest. It was a sound most similar to a wheeze as lungs made desperate gasps for air.

By the time I gathered all the courage I would ever have to find a way out of the keep, only three of us remained. The girl never spoke, but I could always hear her steady breathing coming from beneath her bunk. I brought food to her whenever I ate. And the Indian, the religious man, kept me company during the most troublesome of times. It was the three of us for many months. Everyone else had either succumbed to the creatures of the light or to kitchen knives, nooses, and suffocation. Those that perished within the first floor were buried beneath books on the second floor; it was not enough to keep away the scent of decay, but it was enough to pay them reverence.

I told the Indian my plan and he only thought of it as foolishness. He wished me luck, but could not muster the sanity to join me in my demented quest. I let him be and tried little more to dissuade him from his decision. It was for the better that he stayed I later decided; someone had to take care of the girl.

When I said my goodbyes and began my descent to the third floor, I heard the Indian mumbling chants of protection. His ways were not of my beliefs, but I felt better in knowing he cared about me, I even felt stronger and more confident. He was a good man and I know his soul will be saved.

My steps down the second staircase were cautious. I carried with me water, a knife, matches, and six smoke candles attached to my belt, crafted meticulously from weeks of work with wood ashes, excrement, sugar, and the knowledge of the Indian. I painfully used the stove for my purpose, beckoning

the creatures of the light to a horrible proximity, their wheezing disturbing every nerve end in my body.

When the final step of the staircase had been left behind, I took in a deep, incredible breath through the bandana tied over my nose and mouth; I was now in their territory.

I darted quickly through the level, finding no opposition. The creatures in the light were not expecting me and so were spread amongst the lower floors. Against the stealth of my movements my heart raced with a ferocity I had never known, each beat pulsating my eyes from their vigilant gaze. Sweat flowed gracefully from my pores and my clothes quickly became damp. I continued on in this manner through all of the third and fourth floors.

Dreadfully, and under admonitions of jagged internal sensations, I arrived at the furthest any of us had gone in the keep, alive. The golden light began to corrupt my flesh, tingeing it with the nasty filth of the nether. There were no shadows left now, so I quickly pressed myself against the nearest wall in reflex. Soft clanking from further ahead alerted me of the demon presences. I unlatched one of the smoke candles to ready myself in preparation for my scheme. The other five smoke candles hung accordingly.

I closed my eyes for a moment and prayed desperately to God, asking Him for all of His attention, all of His protection, and all of His love. This was the beginning of my exodus.

The strike of my match awoke the creatures of the light. At first I did not see them, but I could sense the pausing movements and the changes of direction. I lit the smoke candle and it erupted into a volcanic fountain of adrenaline. In an initial step of disbelief, I lunged with all of my might and speed onward into the light to frantically search for the next stairway, the fifth staircase. Smoke poured about me as I went, outwardly curling like blooming flowers at my feet.

It would have been suicide to attempt this without a trial of the smoke against the creatures, so weeks earlier, when the first of seven candles made had been completed, I used it against them. It was not easy to do and I lost many hours of sleep, but it worked more wonderfully than I ever could have imagined. When the smoke came to life, the creatures of the light avoided it as if it were creeping death.

With part of my plan confirmed, I ran like a madman through the corridors of the fifth floor, bringing with me the darkness that was my shield. The creatures of the light hissed in wheezes as I passed, following me closer than expected. They reached for me and chanted diabolical mumblings that wore at my strength and mind. Panic encroached upon me like the emphatic lightning of a storm, pinning me against the pinnacle of dread.

The fifth floor was much larger than I hoped, but I eventually found the staircase. Atop the stairs I stopped, placing the lit smoke candle on the ground before it exhausted, allowing me to unlatch another and light it. The creatures of the light circled around me, but angrily moved out of my way when I donned the next smoke candle and continued my descent.

Light poured about me as I entered the sixth floor, its source still an unfathomed mystery. What opened before me was remarkable, though I had no moment to stop and observe its masterfulness. What I did see was looming pillars supporting a great hall, balconies overlooking grand atriums, and even vegetation perfectly placed throughout. The creatures of the light swarmed

upon me from all directions, more than I could count. Still they wheezed and still they murmured their wicked incantations of hate towards me, a chorus of agonizing dementia.

There were now staircases within the floor leading in all directions, leading down and up and around the keep's hall. I made quick decisions and ran where I felt down would be the overall victor. So many of the creatures of light had come upon me at this point that they squirmed and pushed themselves about in unsettling actions; they fell from balconies and jumped on top of each other, desiring viciously for the smoke to stop its flow. I dreamed for the keep to turn to ash and envelope them in the arms of black.

On my fourth smoke candle, I found the way out of the sixth floor, but at this rate I was soon to be horribly devoured. The sixth staircase was immensely long and frightfully steep, calling for a drastically slower pace than I would have liked. It was on this staircase that the creatures of the light began pushing those closest to me into the sanctity of the smoke and my precious space. Several of them fell down the stairs, rolling in howls of disgust, while others actually fell into me, lashing and writhing amongst the smoke and my flesh. I lost my focus along with my footing and fell myself, a small distance from the bottom of the stairs. It was, however, enough to bring about my death if I faltered my hold on the smoke candle. Under the duress of the fall, I stood with a dislocated shoulder and a hand of ghastly white wrapped so firmly around the smoke candle that the joints felt like they would snap under further stress.

I was on the keep's seventh floor down.

The unlike light was indescribable. It was brighter than any sun and thicker than air. When I came into it, I felt it rush through my clothes and against my skin; I felt it pierce through my eyes and run down my throat. It took hold of me in the way the mother's womb protects and encapsulates a growing embryo. But it was not warm, it was cool and empty and it probed me, searching for things not even the soul knows how to find. Wrongness swelled within me in contaminating gestures of violation.

The creatures of the light began to mold with the light, scrounging all around me, above and below as if in water, mumbling continuously with their awful words. They flowed in and out of the light like they were a part of it, like they were all one. I cannot recall the fear I felt then because I forced it from memory, but I do know it was more torrential than that of being sieged by the unruly tools of torture while helplessly screaming as pain told a story of hell and its legions.

Caught in frailty, I realized my smoke candle had run its course and was on its last breath. Without knowing what more to do and knowing I could not escape, I lit both my remaining candles. Their fresh smoke spewed out over me in thick, putrid beauty. In the scrap of what life I had left, I ran wildly into the heart of the light over a ground that was not solid, but a shifting tumult of sand. My feet sank with each step, draining what little energy I had left.

Now desperate, the creatures of the light were chaotic with their approaches, scratching at my hands in a merciless attempt to make me drop the darkness, but only catching my arms in heaps of cloth and flesh. I did not feel the pain; I only felt the light resting in my veins, scouring my body to its incorporeal depth.

The onslaught of the creatures of the light continued against me and a transparency within me began to flourish beneath the reaping grip of the light. I

closed my eyes and saw through my eyelids as if they were not there and my aching muscles began to melt away from the consistency of definition. I was fading into the light, becoming it. I wanted nothing more than to swallow the smoke in my hands and let it scrape the insides of my tissue, consuming the infectious illumination along its path. Instead, I was drowning as a primordial evil dragged me down into the pool of lurid nightmares.

From that point on, I only remember falling through the light and hearing the words spoken by the unholy creatures. Their syllables became a sadistic sludge of comprehension as my ears grew cruelly attuned to their speech.

“Inside is ours forever on, look not to free your presence. With ties of white we choke your life, tighter as the moon smiles your misery. Wider as the blood flows freely, we make anew in you what once was lost.”

I fell into unconsciousness, smiling as I drifted into blackness.

I was found covered in soot in a coffin resting among the basement of an estranged cult’s mansion, wrapped like a mummy in white linen. Through no means understandable, I had been preserved and kept alive through many months in what was recorded as a coma. Twenty-nine other coffins were found, but everyone else was dead. Two of those coffins were empty and among the dead they found no girl or Indian.

When I opened my eyes upon being rescued from the coffin, I saw nothing—sweet, empty, pitch black darkness. Although my fists were mangled and my shoulder dislocated, relief poured down my spine. Darkness is what should be expected when being a blind man. I much prefer the darkness.