

The Darkness Creeping

by

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The darkness hovered in the background as the sound of my footsteps echoed around the stone room. My family's eyes bore into my back. I gulped. I wasn't ready for this. This chair was not supposed to be mine. In my mind, it would always be my father's.

My father was never at home, too busy travelling with the army. But he was still the paterfamilias, the head of the family. I wasn't ready to step up into that role. I was just a child.

The chair screeched as I pulled it out from the table. The wood was smooth and cold under my trembling grip. The chair seemed more massive than ever. The responsibilities seemed to grow.

It was then that I noticed the swirling masses in the darkness. I peered closer. The darkness always lurked in the corner like a watchful guardian, but it seemed different now. Closer, more real. It started seeping into every aspect of my life. I tried to burn a candle against it once. But it penetrates deeper than the light. It reeks of death, of tombs.

I thought back to the funeral. The professional mourners wailed and sobbed, pulling at their hair. I wished they would go away.

I knew that the presence of the mourners was meant to show my father's wealth. But I didn't understand why they were necessary. They didn't know my father and didn't have to deal with their lives being uprooted.

My father was dead. He should be respected, not mocked. Everyone else had praised the running of the funeral. I had just wanted it to end.

The worst part of the funeral had been my sister's reaction. We both lost our father. Now, I controlled my own finances and life. For her, it is a new tutor that will control every aspect of her life until she is married.

She played her part at the funeral well. Almost too well. I can still see the scratches on her cheeks and the slight wince as she touches her chest. I wish she wasn't forced to engage in this self-mutilation.

She was only young. We barely even knew Father. She was being forced to grieve for someone she barely remembered.

I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream, to punch something. I had cried at the funeral and every night since. It wasn't because I missed my father, I barely knew him. I cried for what my family had lost, and what was now expected of us.

I wasn't a child anymore. I wasn't allowed to be. Now, I had to be everything that he was. A paterfamilias, a soldier, a citizen, a true Roman.

I wasn't allowed to cry anymore though. Outside the home, even in front of my own family, I had to be strong. Grief was nothing but another enemy to be defeated, that's what my father always said. I had to fight back. If I didn't, I was weak, unworthy of being his son.

He was proud of me when I was a boy.

I smiled softly as I remembered how easy everything had been when we were young. We had no responsibilities, we could go where we wanted. I could smell the sweetness of fruit at the market and hear the giggles in the air.

We ran through the market, giggling as the trader chased after us, screaming abuse. He would never catch us. We were the best thieves in the whole market. We had let him see us because we enjoyed the thrill of the chase. No one else dared to try and grab a few young boys. Particularly not when we were dressed in their formal tunics. We simply radiated power and youthful innocence. We were free.

I couldn't do that anymore. I was an adult now. I had to be the person that everyone else wanted me to be, someone they could rely on. And now that my father was dead, I was the man of the family. Any sense of freedom I had was now gone.

I took a deep breath and sunk into the cushion. The chair was hard and rough. The wood scratched my arms as they rested on the arms of the chair. The seat felt cold and unforgiving beneath me, the cushion worn and dry. The jewels glinted maliciously behind me.

I always thought Papa looked powerful when he sat here. But I didn't feel powerful then. My hands shook slightly as I started the meal. I tried to smile at my sister. But my face felt frozen. The darkness swirled.

I first noticed the darkness when I was very young. I only caught glimpses of it, flitting in the very corners of my vision. It represented everything I hated about life in Ancient Rome, the oppression, the expectations, the freedom that was stolen from us.

Back then, I was still safe from it. Yes, it lunged occasionally, causing me to flee in fear. But for the most part, it stayed put. It became a companion for me, the only constant, unchanging and ever-present part of my life.

But then Father died. Now, it wasn't my friend. Now, it was coming for me.

I shrunk back as it edged closer, waiting to snatch its prey. Vague shapes loomed from the shadows, forming horrible images. No one else seemed to see this. No one else shivered as the chills wept through the room. The darkness wasn't after them. It was after me.

It inched closer, Death's breath echoing in my ears. Time slowed down, though the black continue to stalk closer.

I never knew how much we needed the light, but here it was being sucked from the room. I tried to run, but my body wouldn't cooperate. The darkness had no such issues.

It stretched across the table.

Then, nothing.



Inspired by *Sahib Ki Kursi* (Alia Haider, 2021)