

The Darkness Abides

Volume 1

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Published February 2014
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*In the midway of this our mortal life,
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray*

Inferno, Canto I., Lines 1, 2
- Dante Alighieri

Two men were adrift. There was barely a sound to be heard beyond the slow pulsing of the surface surrounding them. The sea was all but silent as it nudged the aged, wooden dingy across the open water. Finn scratched at a short bit of stubble around his jaw. As the itch traveled upward he then clawed at his greasy scalp, and the task began to demand both hands. A flea decided swimming would be more preferable than the treatment it was receiving aboard the vessel and took a dive into the sea. Finn left his fingers tangled in his short brown hair long after finding relief from the itching, continuing to massage his tender scalp and shield his eyes from the sun.

Merrick squinted as he looked to sea out the leeward side, or at least, what would have been had they a sail and more of a breeze. Merrick wanted for a sail. He had given up rowing for the time being, not certain if it was of any use anymore. He felt at home on the water, having inadvertently spent so much time on it, but he was not looking for home. He was in search of a something dear and would have it at any cost. The thought of the price he had paid thus far to accomplish his quest is what kept his eyes leeward. His eyes studied the distance. Frustration overtook him and he realized it did him no benefit to dwell, so he decidedly reversed himself in his seat to face Finn, who sat on the bow. Merrick gave him a glance and then looked to the sunset off the larboard side.

Finn pulled his hand from the pocket of his brown wool trousers and opened it. On his flat palm he balanced a pistachio. He studied it from every side. Merrick chose to be ignorant of Finn's actions mostly, choosing only to look to to the distance, searching the horizon.

Finn, noticing for the first time that Merrick was facing him, but that he hadn't yet taken notice of his treasure, decided to take action. With a quick flip, Finn tossed the pistachio into his mouth, shell and all, and rolled it around his on pallet for a long moment. Moments more passed, and he realized that Merrick hadn't taken notice of Finn's prize after all, so he very covertly spit it back into his hand. His hand feigned scratching his back, while his mouth feigned a yawn, which transformed into a true yawn. After delicately wiping off the pistachio on the his muslin shirt, he slowly returned it to his pocket, and breathed a sigh of relief for his secret that remained hidden.

Finn looked to Merrick, "We were never truly friends, were we?"

Merrick looked briefly at Finn out of the corner of his eye before returning his attention to the sea. "No," he said after some time, "not in truth."

The moment lasted. Merrick cast his eyes downward to the depths and breathed in deep. He lay back and closed his eyes.

Finn gritted his teeth. He tensed momentarily and then went limp with apathy and a sense of emptiness. He breathed in slowly and filled the emptiness with sadness and self-pity. He was hot, and the sweat had stopped. He was thirsty and, in general, not a bit comfortable. He sobbed inaudibly for a moment and caught his breath. He gave a sideways glance at Merrick and saw that he was indeed asleep. He withdrew a fairly long dagger from his worn leather boot. The blade had an odd glow of warm light. He shoved it back in his boot and considered.

Merrick screamed. Not a cowardly scream, but the full-bellied howl of a man with a fight in him and in more than a bit of pain. He flung his curses wildly out to the open sea. Finn fell to what would be the deck of the small dingy and cowered in fear with the blade in-hand.

Finn muttered, "I'm... I'm sorry. It's merely, you see, It's just that I was so... thirsty."

Merrick took the dagger from Finn without any struggle and tossed it to sea as far as he could and gave Finn the devil of a stare. He sat down and inspected the source of his discomfort.

"My ankle?" was all he could direct toward Finn.

"Yes well, it's not as if..." He struggled to argue and then stopped abruptly. He looked to the last place he had seen Merrick throw the dagger, "Or rather, yes, I think I see what you mean. Clearly I was in the wrong."

By the time Merrick had fashioned a bandage from a ripped piece of shirt cloth and applied it, the sky was becoming dark. Merrick sighed with more than a little discontent, sat back and closed his eyes. He did all this with an appearance of calm, restrained violence.

When Finn was satisfied that Merrick had once again fallen to, he retrieved the pistachio from his pocket again. He inspected and poised to place it between his scaly, sun-dried lips, but then a glint caught his eye. He dropped the pistachio back into his pocket. With one more glance toward Merrick to be certain, he leaned over and quietly plunged his hand into the water. The dagger, its cool glow as subtle as ever it had been, managed to stay afloat in the water.

Finn quickly shoved it back in his boot and almost screamed. Not a full-bodied scream, but more akin to a childish, embarrassed shriek. He had missed the hidden scabbard and caught his own ankle with the blade. "Yes, well, clearly I was in the wrong," he breathed to himself. He returned the dagger to its rightful home and became still.

He looked to the sea, not quite understanding what it was that Merrick had been searching for on the surface of this glass expanse with his wakeful eyes. When the horizon had disappeared, Finn imagined he was floating with the stars, and pretended they were old friends. He even carried on silent conversations with them, and before he could decide if all this had been made real, he fell to sleep,

wherein he scarce knew the difference nor cared anyhow.

Merrick opened his eyes to the sight of a grackle flying overhead. Blinking himself awake, he barely managed to track the bird's speedy progress toward a treeline. The dingy was still afloat not far from shore. Managing himself out of the boat, he was able to stand with water only up to his chest. As he walked, he splashed water to wake his fellow castaway.

Finn was none too pleased at the water, and it took some time for him to grasp the situation at hand. Some relief he was given at the sight of land, but anxiety coursed through his veins. Nonetheless, he jumped from the boat and helped bring in the boat the rest of the way to shore.

They hid the boat further inland among some boulders that looked as if they were high enough and inland enough to avoid a high tide. This also provided some cover from some trees which overhung the rock line.

As they walked inland, there was a line of hollyhock that stretched as far as they could see shore in each direction. As they passed through the line of hollyhock Finn plucked a flower, sniffed, and took out a kerchief from his breast pocket. He gently folded the flower into the kerchief and put it back in his pocket.

When he looked up, he noticed Merrick standing past the line of hollyhock and looking confused. Finn approached him, and as soon as both of his feet had passed the flowers, it was as if someone had snuffed out the last lamp wick of the evening. The sun was gone, and so were the stars. Luna was nowhere to be found, either, but there was a glow that came about as their eyes adjusted. It was still dark, but the light that emanated was as if the moon was shining on one of her fullest nights. The glow came from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

Slowly, they both backed away toward the hollyhock, and the lamp was lit again. They had to shield their eyes for a moment from the sun as they had let their eyes adjust to the darkness.

Merrick was silent.

"Hmmp," was all Finn could manage to say.

Merrick decidedly walked inland once again. Finn took a moment and then whispered loudly, as if someone might be listening, "Where are you going?"

Merrick turned around and replied by looking first to where they had left the dingy, then out to sea, and finally back to Finn.

Finn weighed conflicting thoughts in his mind. Merrick stood waiting. Finn passed into the strange twilight and walked on ahead of Merrick who then, himself, looked again to the vessel they had arrived in and back to the watery expanse, considering.

Finn spoke back, "It's only because I've such a thirst. I expect to return when I've satisfied the need."

Merrick overtook him on the walk and once again took the lead. Finn took notice of the shift and ground his teeth absently.

For three quarters of an hour they walked with little sign of water. Once, they stopped abruptly at the sounds of sticks cracking underfoot from nearby, or so it seemed. Finn held a pose of quiet terror, but Merrick was gathered and vigilant. When nothing materialized, Merrick shrugged, and Finn took

this as a sign to relax. They resumed their trek.

"Where are we going?" asked Finn.

"Just walk," came Merrick's response.

"Are we seeking water? It's just that I'm so very thirsty, you see, and just, well, I'm very impossibly thirsty," said Finn.

Merrick continued onward, moving farther inland with each stride. Finn did not fail to follow. Another hour passed without word between them. The forest they were walking through never seemed to really change: trees, a hill here, a rock there. The trees seemed to gain more knots and boles as they infiltrated deeper among the woods. The roots grew outward more, reaching for each other, and would occasionally create cause for hazard while walking. The trunks grew wider. Some of them bore markings that Finn felt resembled scars. The darkness was oppressive, but not impenetrable.

"It's just that I'm so very thirsty, you see..."

"Yes, I heard you," Merrick retorted.

"I'd like to find some water, and I'm not certain that you..."

Merrick cut him off once again, "See here, we need to keep walk..."

It was Finn's turn, "Wait, shh. I see a..." he trailed off. Finn pointed. Merrick saw nothing. "I'm sure that... no... just..."

Merrick was only annoyed, "Let's just keep walking."

Before Merrick had finished his sentence, however, Finn had taken off at dead sprint. Merrick looked in the direction Finn was headed and saw a light; a sort of will o' the wisp it seemed. Merrick yelled after him once he'd seen it, "Stop! What're you...?"

Realizing it was futile to yell after him at this point, he decided to forego the rest of his plea for Finn to halt, and he followed after. It seemed no use, however, as Finn had passed well beyond the reach of Merrick, and the path he had taken was mostly obscured.

Finn became lost and frightened, but he continued to catch glimpses of the wisp. He continued his pursuit, not thinking about losing Merrick, only the light and his fear. Perhaps the light would comfort him once he'd found it. Perhaps it would befriend him and welcome him to this place and show him that there was nothing truly for which he should be afraid.

His foot slipped on a wet rock and his head hit the ground with a singularly loud thump. Two wisps seemed to appear before his eyes and then merged into one just as it passed away into the trees. It was then that he realized that he had tripped and fallen. While dizzy, he began to thank his lucky stars that he hadn't lost consciousness from such a fall, but then he remembered that the stars were not there, and so his thanks would go unheard. His heart sank and he looked in a more earthwardly direction. His eyes settled on water that was coursing through a stream. He began to thank the stars again, and was doubly disappointed of the reminder of their absence once again.

Nonetheless, he moved toward the water's edge, grateful for a drink. As he scooped up a mouthful of water, he saw beneath the surface and began to scream. Not the scream of a child or a sailor, but the scream of death losing its rook in a game of chess. The pallid, dead face of a woman lied just beneath the surface of the stream.

Finn shrieked once again, no less earnestly, and stood up to back away. He bumped into something and turned around, nearly falling back again into the water he had just retreated. It was Merrick, grabbing him by the shoulders to prevent him from falling. They both looked again to the water, and there was no more to be seen beneath the surface of the water. She was gone.

Finn looked to Merrick once again, "What is this place?"

Breath and sweat. Chest heaving and arms pumping. Blood pulsed forcefully through his veins, navy and deprived of oxygen. Merrick hurdled over the large outgrowths of fallen logs and tree roots and another pair of feet followed his own. Branches reached out to lash at his face. Briars latched onto his long jacket. He filled his lungs with oxygen.

"What did you do?" He yelled back angrily while dodging a swoop from a very large pair of claws grasping for him from above, "Forget it. Just run."

They turned and ran for an especially tight copse of trees, and tried to lose sight of their pursuer, of whom he had yet to get a clear look. Twice, Merrick spotted black feathers and a monstrous pair of wings from behind neighboring trees and they were forced to resume the retreat. Finally, though, he hid behind a tree and threw a rock at a well-timed moment and waited while it threw the predator off their trail. The trick worked. Merrick grabbed the hand of the woman who he was fleeing with and whispered, "Hurry, this way," he turned back again, "and be silent," as he led her quickly in the opposite direction.

She snapped back, "I wasn't making any noise. And beside the point is that it was your boy who made such a fuss when he saw my friend."

"Silence."

They paused and indeed silence did follow. They continued on and away. When they had passed a little farther, Merle continued, "In any event, how was it that you came upon me?"

"Pardon."

"How did you find me? That is, I mean to say, it couldn't have been easy."

Merrick stopped in his tracks, "See here, madam--"

"My name is Merle, and you will address me as such. Answer me, how did you find me and how long have you been here?"

Merrick attempted to tense his muscles and discovered they already were, "And as it pleases, Merle, I haven't the slightest idea who you might be and I am not inclined to care. I'm as gentleman-like as the next, but I take a risk by bringing you with me, so if you take me from the tinder box and into the stove because you don't know how to hush, then I may as well throw you to that thing out there and not lose an ounce of sleep about it."

Before continuing his retreat, he reconsidered the direction he had been traveling and decided on a new course. Before the soles of his thick leather boots had made four or five prints in the soft earth, he turned back to Merle, "Now, are you coming, or are you not?"

She hesitated. She tied up her skirts. She followed.

Breath and tears. Chest heaving and arms flailing. Blood pulsed sporadically, navy and deprived of oxygen. Finn tripped over the fallen logs and large outgrowths of tree roots as he ran. Branches reached out like fingers to capture and devour him. He fell to the soft earth and lay motionless in fear. Slowly he lifted his eyes from the mossy undergrowth to see that the coast was indeed clear. He rolled over and discovered that his ankle was tender. He filled his lungs with oxygen and counted three times in long, steady rhythm. After settling his stomach for a moment, he looked to his feet and then to the trees, "When am I going to get the hang of these things?"

A voice, gentle responds from behind, "I be catching your drift there. I've a bit of a clumsy side myself."

Finn made a run for it, but his ankle decided it was going to stay put. His face decided the same when it plunged to the soft earth again after Finn's ankle betrayed him.

She pleaded with him, "Wait. It weren't my intention to hurt you," and with that she continued

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