

Downfall of a Dream

by

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Veiled in Shadow

As we both lived in the country, and neither family wallowed in riches, our wedding ceremony was modest yet beautiful. The local inn was decorated with thousands of harebells the good people of our village gathered from the woods. Their blue heightened the similar color of her dress when she arrived, escorted by her proud parents. Unfortunately, my parents were both gone, thus they were not there to witness the best day of my life, but my good, trusted neighbor was there with his lovely wife to support me.

The first year went by quickly. Our plentiful crop helped us to endure the winter, leaving a handful of days with nothing else to do but share the warmth of the fireplace and our sparkling love. However, what came later struck me, as well as the rest of the world, completely by surprise. The year was 2145, the year when the eclipse would begin, and we had no clue that the pale sun of the fall was to be the last of the light we would receive in our lifetime.

Rumors whispered of evil that had broken into our world in the distant city of Palantheon where the mystics dwelled. Little did we know or cared about the southern affairs— but this time they were to change the lives of everyone.

At first it was barely noticeable, nothing more than dark grey wisps gathering in the sky, leaving the silently twinkling stars behind a thin veil of blackened mist, almost as if the sky was tarnished with ash that even the rain was unable to wash away. As time passed, and the winter began to turn toward spring, the sky remained silent and dark. The grass refused to grow like it had done before, the birds remained quiet in the murky light of what was supposed to be the best of spring. This was the first time we got truly worried, for the latest news from the south had not reached us yet, as if the world had completely frozen for the moment. No rumors of valiant victories, no news of retreating enemies – just

vague stories of traveling merchants that made very little sense to us. Stories of falling kingdoms and failing strength of our brave defenders— plain nonsense. Honestly, I had hard time to believe any of it, for they sounded more like malicious fearmongering than anything else.

Nevertheless, the depressing gloom prevailed, withering our hopes for a good growing season. The harsh, unforgiving weather was slowly getting us both on edge. Despite the disagreements and fights, however, our love continued blooming, and we were sure that once the vivid laughter of children echoed in our house everything would seem much better no matter how horrid it turned outside.

That summer brought poor crop, and as the fall crept to our doorstep, I found myself more and more concerned over the situation. Her body had not accepted my seed as of yet. We continued trying, but I was beginning to suspect that my dear wife might be unable to conceive, which was an unfortunate flaw in women sometimes. I enjoyed sleeping with her, but I knew that if she could not bear children, I might have to find someone else in order to have someone inherit the farm, and to have more hands working on the field. It would be such a shame, for her body was a magnificent artwork of the Immortals if I had ever seen one, and I loved her gentle personality. Unfortunately, in the end, none of that mattered. We needed children.

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The wedding day was the happiest day of my life. Although the location was not the fanciest, the ceremony was beautiful and touching. I was wearing my prettiest gown, and I am quite sure that my parents were satisfied with the way I performed. My dear, fresh husband told me later how beautiful I had looked at the ceremony, and I cherished his every word.

The family house he had inherited from his father was roomy and rather cozy, offering us more

than a convenient place to begin our journey together. Of course, it lacked the womanly touch, so I spent the winter months by working on the interior in order to bring that homely sense to the house. We sat on the porch in the evenings, watching the stars and moons shining their light on us. Sharing a long kiss before we escaped the approaching night inside the walls of our little haven, completely unaware of the approaching blight, our love thrived.

The spring began with sowing as early as we could to give it the best possible chance to grow tall and plenty, but a shadow had appeared over our little paradise. During the first winter we had sensed a change in the air, an unspeakable coldness that gave us shivers at night, but we could not tell what it was for sure. Wild rumors carried from the roads crossing our little hamlet. A darkness had crept into the woods and hills of the world, and while it made me feel uneasy and scared, I had no clue how bad it would get and how enormous impact it would have on our lives. The sun that had secured our living in the ages past was suddenly veiled by this black blanket of clouds, impervious and still. A dim, grey haze was all we got, and the spring brought no relief.

I heard the rumors just like my husband did, but unlike my good man, I was not sure if it made any sense for the travelers to downright lie to us. Something terrible had happened, and we may never learn the true nature of it, but, along with the rest of the world, we felt the consequences.

Soon after these ill news, another problem arose from amid ourselves, or perhaps it was just me. It was slowly becoming obvious that we had problems having children, and as the following summer barely gave us enough to eat, things began to slide downward much faster, nurturing grim thoughts within ourselves. More mouths to feed might sound like a bad idea, but at the same time I could not avoid thinking that the more hands there were working in the fields the better chances we had to survive. What was happening to us was an utter disaster.

My husband, once loving and pleasant, was becoming distant and cold. He still welcomed me to

his bed at nights, but there was no intimacy before or after his mechanical performance. An indifferent task to grant him some relief, and I was glad I could give him at least that, but I feared that if things did not improve soon, I might have a reason to be truly concerned over myself. He stared at me sometimes — far too long for an admiring glance. I saw him deep in thought, as if he was not quite sure what to do with me, and that saddened me greatly. I pondered these problems in the bed at night, praying and hoping that the next day would bring a welcome nausea, and along with it a glimpse of much needed hope.

Blistered Love

The second year showed no improvement in either weather or our relationship. The endless rain turned the crop into rotten mush, and what little was spared, the howling wind ripped out and scattered around the dying field. We managed to save some, but it was clear that I would have to rely on hunting a lot more during the coming winter if we were to live through it. My wife still carried no signs of pregnancy and my patience was running thin. With great envy I gazed at the neighboring farm, a very similar to our own, but with the exception of a healthy woman who had already given birth to one baby boy. What made it even more hurtful was the fact that they had married several months later than us! Great frustration and anger were growing inside of me, gnawing the core of my very existence. I still loved my wife, but I could not help the feelings of disappointment and disgust every time I looked at her, and I am sure that she knew of these feelings, for she had grown silent and reserved.

There was no lively chatter in the ghostly house anymore, no cheerful laughter or pleasant evenings out in the porch. It seemed as if the same disease that possessed the land had found its way into the structures of the building and into our very souls. I knew it was only a matter of time before it ate us all alive, leaving nothing but dead shells to suffer in the growing gloom.

Our supplies diminished over the following months. Hanging onto a fool's hope that somehow miraculously everything would get all better one day, one day that would break the darkness and shine light upon our withered lives. We hoped, but with each passing day our hope died a little as we slid toward despair. The memory of what we once had could not hold up the illusion of normality; we were barely able to look at each other without a shiver of discomfort—the cutting edge of despise. We argued – or I argued, as my dear wife chose to respond with indifferent ignorance to everything I said, rapidly driving me deeper into madness. I began to drink the mead we had stored in our cellar, saved

for the warm summer nights when a soft, soothing flavor of honey together with the refreshing coolness created bliss on the tongue. It was certainly not the cheap kind served at the roadside inns, but rather classy drink made from the best ingredients available to us. Now it served me to numb my troubled head and ease the restless turmoil in my mind. While it worked, eventually, it also pushed out all the loathsome thoughts and impulses I had tried to bury deep into the muddy waters of my poisoned consciousness.

Foul speech emerged, driven by the mead. I cannot describe the depth of embarrassment and shame by the words I used, and yet if I was put into that same situation under the same circumstances again, avoiding the recursion would be unlikely.

I became menacing and malicious. Once the locked chest of all ill-minded secrets opened, the wave of malignant filth was too much for me to hold back. I made all of her flaws known to her, watched her lips quiver as she tried to hide the pain, and it only fueled the intensity of my eruption. I told her how remarkably insignificant she had become, and while she bravely held the shield of silence, I noticed how all color disappeared from her face. That was how I killed her spirit before my foggy mind decided to punish her physically for the misery she had somehow cast over us with her plain existence. When she glanced up to me with those misty eyes, a bloody stain on her lips I had once kissed in enthrallment, I cringed.

There was no hatred in her eyes, only heartbreaking sorrow for the love that had been lost during that winter. I saw the ugly truth grimacing back at me, the twisted image of myself that I had become, and I hated her for it. A punch after another after another, I wanted to wipe away that sickening pity from her face. She cowered in the corner of the kitchen, trying to protect herself by raising her arms to ward off some of those scathing whacks, but her attempts were in vain. My fists hammered her head against the floorboards as all the anger and frustration suddenly bursted out in one

violent rush. I am not sure how long I continued, but at some point I realized that all her moaning and motion had ceased, and it felt like I was merely battering a full sack of sand that lied in a slowly spreading pool of crimson liquid.

I threw up on the kitchen floor. With stomach aching, feeling dizzy and disoriented, I stumbled outside where the cold rain cooled down my burning skin. I felt sick for what I had done, but I could not feel true regret.

In time she recovered, and her wounds healed, but the couple of scars that were left behind would remind her, and me, forever about the steep step downward we had taken that day. I did not have the least bit of confidence in coming back from this dark hole that once was my soul. Thus, while it was the first time I made her suffer, it was certainly not the last— and as more time passed, my violence toward her became more calculated and regular.

I am not sure at which point I began to use a knife, or when exactly was the first time I yearned the feeling of control so badly that I saw it proper to take her against her will, but somewhere along the way I noticed a change in her eyes. The gentle and kind glance gave way for a cold and emotionless gaze. The love that had persisted for longer than I would have ever thought possible was finally gone, broken and scattered like dust in the wind. It silenced my conscience, but one thing bothered me more than anything— she never fought back. She bewailed, sobbed and whimpered, but she never yelled in anger or screamed in fear, and those were the reactions I was so desperately trying to invoke. I can honestly admit that none of those would have offered absolution or forgiveness for all of her shortcomings, for I had gone too far to turn back, but somehow it would have made everything worth it in a strange, twisted way. She had to pay the price, which, without the slightest doubt, was going to be her life— nothing else could end this vicious spiral.

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The frightening changes in the weather together with the news from lands afar shook the balance of my husband's mind. I knew something bad was going to happen when the talking ended. The days of oppressive gloom weighed heavily on him, eventually suffocating the warming fire of his kind soul, leaving it empty and cold. I felt his weary, darkened eyes following me as I tried to continue with my daily chores around the house. The lack of children, the shortage of food, and the general feeling of failure in everything we tried had all caused such a grievance that could not be repaired with a smile or kind words. But I tried—the Immortals be my witnesses—I tried to stay cheerful and take care of all his needs the best I could, but it was not enough. In the end, I believe, he became blind to anything I tried.

It was gradually becoming harder and harder for me to get up in the morning as the time crawled on, one agonizing day at a time. The love we made, more like an angered rush completed upon the urge of a moment, was aggressive and dull. I could not bring out the feelings I once had for him, so I just laid still and waited patiently until he finished, knowing that he would lose his interest as soon as he got what he wanted. I was losing my will to live, and the brightest days turned out to be those when my husband went out to hunt. A day without him allowed me to breathe for a moment without feeling his icy stare on my back.

Every day I walked quarter of a mile to fetch water from a well we shared with the neighboring farm. We had our own by the house, but a careless animal, I am not sure if it was a young deer or some larger rodent, had reached out for a drink, slipped and fell down. I often played with the idea that it was a mouse from our house that had inhaled too much foul air inside, became too bloated from it and jumped into the well to save itself from the torment. How much I wished I had the courage to follow.

Whatever it was, the mere stench around the well was something so sickening that I could not approach it anymore, and my husband could not bother to take a look at it. The neighbor did not mind me using the shared one, but then again, it was not his main well either. I believe it was used to provide water for the cattle in his fields, and a small piece of a plantation where he used to grow some slightly more exotic vegetables during the short summer season, which, of course, had become impossible since the weather changed. At that time I had grown very tired of all the hardships the world had thrown at us, and I could not quite understand that something much worse was coming for me. I was certain I could not drown any deeper into the filth of self-pity and regret. I still existed, but I was not truly alive.

I knew of his drinking long before he opened his mouth and unleashed all the worms upon me. I knew of it because sometimes I stored a bottle for myself, and I saw how the quantity decreased faster than I could ever consume. Keeping count was not really required though, for the grimy, disgusting smell around him nearly latched my breath. It was more than enough to let me know what was going on. Heavily intoxicated was the only remaining state when he still attempted to sleep with me, but I began to reject him firmly, for I had no passion left for this mockery of a man— a mere shadow of the man he used to be.

He yelled at me constantly, and I found myself building a solid wall of ice between us. I wanted to shelter myself from all the hurtful words by creating this shroud of silence around me. It worked by helping me to withstand the fury of his billowing assaults, muffling and softening the sharpest edges of his words.

While the veil of ignorance somehow protected my heart from being shattered into pieces, it could not reflect back the fist that hurled at me without any forewarning. It could not hold my husband from raping me by the same fireplace we had made love before. It could not keep the knife away when he had an idea to bleed the inner dirt out of my veins. I was able to take the words, but these new

manifestations of his madness were too much to bear. The flame of sympathy I had spared for him flickered and died, and a deep, cold emptiness took over. I gave the pain a warm welcome, for it felt better than the endless allegations I had poured upon myself during those dark days. I crawled to the corner and waited as his fists bounced my head against the shelves and walls before I fell to the floor. I could have tried to break free and run, but there was nowhere to run to, so I closed my eyes and silently wished that one of his pounding hits would be the last one.

A Path of Sorrow

There was a concern over my wife's daily water retrievals growing in my troubled mind. Feeling uncomfortable with her daily walks, I was quickly growing suspicious of my sweetheart's loyalty. She went more often, stayed longer, and brought back less water each time, clear signs that something strange was going on. When I asked about it, she responded with a hateful glare and ignored the question completely, just like she had done for the past year. I made my own conclusions, and it drove me insane. How she dared? A despicable, barren cow with nothing left to justify her presence in my house. She would pay— pay like never before to ensure this kind of lunacy left her head forever.

She looked beautiful that morning. Her sorrowful eyes glanced at my sullen face for less than a second, but I could swear I saw guilt in them. I did not speak. I had nothing to say, and knowing my wife's stance that had not changed during the long winter, I would not get an answer even if I did. The wall of silence was thick, impervious and insuperable like solid rock, but I planned to break and shatter it into tiny pieces. That day she was going to feel my wrath for all the misery she had caused, including betrayal.

My hands shivered slightly as I took another sip of my morning mead. It burned my throat like the withheld anger that itched in my watery eyes. I was prepared to deliver the punishment, and I did not have much time. She was about to leave for her daily visit to the well, and the image of her in the arms of another man danced vividly before my eyes.

"Listen, wench," I muttered without expecting an answer, knowing she would stay true to her way. But as I continued, my voice grew stronger, pummeling against the wall she had been building for longer than I cared to remember. "Devious whore, I know your little secret," I hissed through my

tightened lips, looking like a grimacing wolf preparing to attack. I saw her shoulders tremble, but still the only response was silence, which only fueled my anger.

"Every day you walk out to fetch water like a good wife, but don't fool yourself, for I know what's going on." The words dropped off my lips like venom seeps from serpent's fangs, and with each breath I aired the fire within, encouraging it to grow and burn away the last remaining bonds holding me back.

"You are a foul travesty of a woman, absolutely worthless. I'm sure our good old neighbor thinks otherwise while he's dipping himself into your wet, little spring. Now, why wouldn't he? I'm sure you've told him how the seed of a man is wasted in you. No fear for him having bastards running around."

I saw a sparkle of spite in her eyes; I saw her forming silent words with her mouth. Unsure whether she was too shocked from the accusations or if she was simply too infuriated to speak, I watched her tremble. After her attempt to produce audible words had failed, she randomly grabbed an item from the top of the stove and tossed it at me with all her strength. It was an iron kettle that crashed harmlessly by the table I was sitting at, but it was the final straw that broke the dam.

"You shouldn't have done that, wench," I growled like a beast as I stormed toward her.

She tried to pick up the knife that had been lying next to the kettle, but I was faster. Twisting her wrist painfully, I forced out a cry from her otherwise sealed lips, and it gave me a strangely satisfying feeling. The icy wall had cracked.

But I wanted more. I wanted her to squeal in pain, beg for mercy and cry out in terror. I wanted her to know exactly how helpless she was in my hands, how hopeless her struggle was against my overwhelming, bitter hatred.

I pulled her away from the counter and pressed her wriggling body against the sturdy kitchen

table. She tried to fight back, but I was too strong for her. Holding her arms tightly under mine, I forced her to lie on her back, then I used the weight of my body to hold her still and moved one hand from her arm to wrap my fingers around her slender throat. I pummeled her head against the table for a number of times, turning the wooden surface moist and slimy as blood smeared on it from her lacerated head. She had one hand free now, but because of my straightforward, scathing violence, preventing her from breathing, she concentrated on trying to get her throat free instead of attempting to hurt me. I pushed her tightly against the surface and began to squeeze as hard as I could. She coughed and gagged, and finally began to reach for my face, but her moves were affected by the pressing panic, and so she failed to do anything more than a few harmless scratches. I released her other arm, too, in order to gain more strength behind my grip, so now she had both hands free, but she was still unable to help herself.

Her eyes leered around wildly among her desperate attempts to push me away. I continued to strangle her, and I watched how her face turned bright red before beginning to fade paler. I felt her muscles working, fighting against my irresistible grasp, and then weakening as she had to focus more on gasping air into her lungs, but the brave struggle was utterly useless. At first, the pulse of her racing heart felt rapid and sharp under my fingertips, but then it slowly faded along with the color of her skin. I listened to the sound of her raspy, gurgling breath while watching, mesmerized by the cruel beauty of the sight as she slowly turned limp, and the intense glint in her eyes glazed and died away.

Breathing heavily, for she had fought back with everything she had in her little body, I kept her down against the table with the full weight of my figure, which left her without chances to slip away. I squeezed until the skin beneath my fingers turned cold, at which point I released my grip with one strong shudder, stepped back and gazed upon the result of my grim task.

A wail escaped my lips for the irreversible loss I had brought upon myself, but everything was not said and done yet. My hunger for retribution remained unsatisfied as my unstable mind spawned a

new target to focus on. The cursed neighbor should be at the well around this time. How many times he had fooled around with my wife there? How many times he had growled in lust as he watched my wife's face flushing in shameless pleasure?

Without thinking any further, I rushed outside, grabbed an axe that was leaning against the steps of the porch and headed toward the well. My head was strangely empty as I walked across the yard, but at the same time the solid determination that burned in my eyes would have been enough to conquer kingdoms.

To say that I was surprised seeing the neighbor's wife at the well instead of the man would have been a crude understatement, but that did not leave me confused for too long. Sweet vengeance would be delivered by desecrating her body instead, like her husband had tainted my wife.

"Good morning, neighbor!" she yelled when she saw me. I did not respond, just walked toward her with the axe in my hand. She must have interpreted my unfriendly intentions from afar, for she took a couple of steps back, but the polite smile never vanished from her face. She was not sure, unwilling to think anything bad about me, her good old neighbor.

"How— how may I help you?" she tried again. She was taking additional steps to grow distance between us, but she moved too slow. I leaped forward and grabbed her long hair tightly in my hand. She screamed, and the sound of her voice echoed in the nearby trees, followed by a haunting silence, as if the world around us ignored her plea with a careless shrug. I began to tear her clothes off, revealing the milky white skin underneath. Stumbling on the slippery mud around the well, one of her breasts bounced free from the half-torn dress. Another desperate cry left her lips as I gave her a fierce push to make sure she could not maintain balance. I stared at her, imagining how it would feel to have her legs around my waist. I wanted her to squirm and wriggle around me, feeling the helpless resistance of her body against mine.

In my lustful rush, I had forgotten to pay attention to the house across the field. Even though it seemed as if the entire world had died and no one could hear the screams, the reality was something else. Her husband, our beloved neighbor, was approaching us fast with a sickle in his hand. He must have grabbed it from the porch like I had taken the axe just a few moments earlier— as a simple, secondary thought. Now he was almost to the well. My axe lied several feet away in the hay. I had his woman under me, her legs spread out and ready, but the frustrating truth was that I had no time to finish what I had started, for I had to take care of this new nuisance before anything else.

While I was trying to hold the crying woman down in the ground, I occasionally lost the approaching figure from my sight, which made it difficult to estimate his location and speed. Most unfortunate it was that he reached me much faster than I anticipated, and he did not slow down to ask me how I was doing. He rammed the curved blade into my stomach with such force that it slipped under the ribcage smoothly like a cleaver through carcass, piercing my lung along the way.

An utter and irresistible weakness was the first sign of damage that had been induced to my body. I do not believe that I fully realized what exactly had happened at that point. I lost control of my legs and fell down to my knees, watching as our neighbor pulled his lady away from me. I had this brief moment of clarity, a moment when I fully realized what a monster I had become over the last couple of years. The feeling I had just one blink before I fell into the cold, muddy ground was deep and utmost sorrow for all the atrocities I had wreaked. During that passing moment, I loved my wife like I had loved her on the day I married her, fervently and unconditionally. These rediscovered feelings could not bring her back, but I felt like I had grasped onto something that had been the real me in the past. I had found myself again at the gates to the other side. Lifeless and deserted, my body embraced the dirt, exposed and ready for the worms that would consume the earthly remains, marking the end of my torment.

A Whisper in the Wind

The accusations, while I should have known to expect them, came out of nowhere, astounding me with their disturbing malice and taunt. The wall I had so carefully built to protect myself began to quail, the focused hatred created cracks and shook the foundations violently, causing the entire structure to vacillate dangerously. I tried to resist with all the willpower left in me, but I could not hold myself together any longer—I shuddered under the devastating fire of his verbal ballista, and he saw this weakness, noticed the crumbling wall. I cannot remember everything being said, and there really is no reason to, but one thing I recall, as clearly as the twinkling stars on my wedding night, was the uncontrollable fury those words invoked within me. It was like a mass of water that could not be sustained by the weakened dam anymore. There was no sound coming from it, but I certainly felt the sudden, irresistible rush in my veins.

The first item that happened to touch my hand, an iron kettle on top of the stove, flew across the air toward him. But as it was poorly aimed, barely just tossed at his general direction, it missed him by far. Regardless, it was the opening for a series of actions that would be the last stretch on our long way down.

Still angered beyond words, I attempted to grab a knife and assault him with it, but even in his heavily drunken state, he moved faster than I did in my burst of reckless rage. He pressed me against the kitchen table and knocked my head repeatedly against the surface until I was on the verge of a blackout from the inflicted injuries. At this point I had abandoned all ideas about hurting him. I wanted to escape before being hurt worse than a few bleeding cuts on my head, but he refused to let me go.

When I felt his hands on my throat, I knew what was on his mind. The realization of this turned me into an animal, desperately trying to break free from the trap. I screamed and yelled, but the

tightening grip muffled the sound, and before long it was nothing more than intangible gibberish among the snorts, gags and gurgling as I struggled for every breath. Tiny black spots danced in my eyes, resembling a swarm of mosquitos on warm summer day. My throat was on fire from the furious yet meaningless fight. My strained muscles suffered from the lack of oxygen, which only increased the pressure on my throat as I was quickly losing the strength to resist.

The black spots increased in number and I began to hear strange hum in my ears, as if high waves of water washed upon a distant shore at a rhythmic pace. The hum quickly surpassed everything else. I was not able to feel the rest of my body anymore, and the last thing I saw was a blurry image of my husband's reddish face. The eyes full of hate and unforgiving resentment stared intently at me. The grimacing, slightly foaming lips, twisted like those of a rabid beast, indicating how much he yearned for this, yet all I could feel was sadness. My pain and suffering were almost over, but he would have to live on, bearing the sins of these wasted years upon his shoulders. For some odd reason, I did pity him. Perhaps it was because of the love I once had for him, the kindness in him that I still remembered like it was yesterday.

My last sigh carried out a small prayer to the Immortals, which sounded no more than a meaningless, barely audible wheeze. It might have seemed absurd, for the Immortals had not been with us for the last two thousand years, but at that moment I wanted to believe they could still hear us. At that moment it seemed more important to me than the struggle that was already lost.

Our tale was one of many that occurred during the dark years of the eclipse, forgotten like the fallen leaves of autumns past. So many victims, so many lives lost before the sons of Aradea rose to oppose the tyrant of Angarath and won our freedom in the battlefields of unspeakable horrors - or glory, as the chroniclers prefer to write.

Once the dust settles, the funeral pyres die away, and the songs of celebration fade into the

night, our bones have rested in the dirt for ages, cracked and worn. No one will remember the events that took place in our farm, our lives or names. All of them are nothing but faint whispers in the wind, bundled together with so many other stories that bear the sorrow of that time.