

Piercing the Darkness

By Danny Cove

The cold wind bites at us as we trudge through the snow, shuffling our feet lethargically. Behind us, we see the long gashes in the ground which mark our path, indicating our slow move through this icy forest. The longer we move, the more the slush penetrates my leather boots and brings that dreaded chill to my feet, further fatiguing me as I press forward. Above, through a break in the trees, I can see the sun resting upon the horizon, as if it's as tired as we are. In less than an hour, that great light has gone to rest, leaving us in the much paler glow of the waning moon. In this chilling twilight hour, the snow itself seems to glow, reflecting the moonlight so that it seems almost like we're walking on the clouds. Except the clouds, I can only assume, never exude such an icy grip as that through which we're currently trudging.

Less than a mile behind us rests our broken carriage, sitting motionless along the side of the pass. We'd been traveling for two days when the straps securing the horses snapped, and the great strain this put on the other securements caused them to break as well, an unfortunate situation which resulted in the sudden freeing of our horses. To make matters worse, the grumbling roar of our carriage veering off the edge of the path spooked the horses, and in their panic they vanished far off into the forest, leaving only me, my wife and our infant daughter stranded, and this, alas, was not the time of year nor the forlorn place which is ideal for such abandonment. With no other recourse, my wife and I dug through our luggage, putting on every piece of clothing which we owned before setting out into the forest in search of refuge.

That feels like endless eons ago, the span of many lifetimes lived twice over, but in reality it was only a couple of hours. Now, each minute watching the sun go lower causes our hearts and our hopes to descend as well. The wind seems to search us over every second,

exploring for any weak spot in our textile armor like some life-hating creature seeking only misery. But this torment offers not even the comfort of a sound; instead, it chills our minds with its ever-present silence, that interminable quietude which is echoed by the forest all around. These woods are as silent as stone, without so much as a songbird to cheer us or a cricket to remind us that the world still lives. But there is one thought that gives me comfort, and it's the reality that there are no howls in the distance nor growls from nearby. The wind is all the life which occupies this place beside us, and in my heart, I feel a gnawing fear that soon, it will once again be only the wind. There is naught but silence in this forest, and the chilling air seems determined to ensure that even the slight sound of our trudging feet will soon be silenced.

Something catches my sight, the faintest pinprick of light breaking through the darkening gloom. Then it's gone. We begin moving in that direction, but soon my wife's eyes have fallen from that spot and back to our daughter, who shivers beneath her three blankets and a shawl. Without speaking, I take off my cloak, the wind biting me from all sides as I do, and I place it over our daughter, adding an extra layer against our bitter enemy.

My legs grow stiffer, exuding little strength. This causes me to waver as I walk, sometimes stumbling. I look over at my wife, but she keeps her eyes down. She's not ignoring me, I know that; rather, I believe that she's protecting herself from the reality of what's happening to us. My breathing becomes ragged, coming in short gasps as my shivering dwindles. The cold begins to feel less cold, and that observation alarms me more than the silence or the shadows.

Suddenly, another light flares forth, this one much brighter, and only about a hundred feet away. Picking up our pace, my wife shuffles as I stumble toward the source of the light, and a great shape emerges from the shadows, a shelter with a stone roof and walls. As we approach, a

light flares forth a third time, revealing a window with its shade suddenly uncovered. Beside the window is a door and we collapse upon its landing. My hand quaking, I rap on the door as my wife huddles beside me, our daughter completely covered from the cold by the blankets and my coat.

Seconds later, the door opens wide, nearly blinding us with great light, and in it, I feel warmth. Before us stands a thin man in a brown robe, with a cord tied around his waist. He seems to define the word “monk.” With near-imperceptible tilt of his head, he ushers us inside, and we’re momentarily fazed by the cessation of the icy wind. Our lips frozen and our minds numb, my wife and I are silent as the monk guides us to some comfortable chairs. As we collapse into them, more monks appear and lay heavy blankets atop us.

Eventually, the feeling returns to my limbs in the form of painful needles, but this sensation is quickly replaced with a general warmth and relaxation. At this point, my wife and I detail our situation to the holy men around us. Some of them disappear, leaving us alone with the man who originally took us in.

He never gives us his name, only the calm presence of a contemplative man. With renewed strength, I follow as he leads me deeper into the structure, and in the heart of it I find a simple chapel with three tapestries depicting various forms of God and an altar with a lantern and a thick, heavy Bible atop it. “Is this a monastery?” I ask as I examine the tapestries.

“This is a sanctuary,” the monk responds. “We built it as a refuge against the darkness beyond its walls. I’m glad we did, or it would have claimed you.” He turns back toward the room in which my wife waits. “Some of my brothers have gone to repair your carriage. They will also find your horses and bring them here. You and your family may stay as long as you need.”

“We don’t wish to burden you,” I say, but he brushes my remark away.

“You are not a burden so long as we are needed. But there will be a time when you will again need to pierce that darkness on your own. Only when you brave those frightening depths, sustained by the power of your faith, can you bring the light into those shadows. There are many lost souls out there, wandering in the cold. Perhaps someday, you will have the honor of giving refuge to another weary traveler like yourself.” With those thoughts in my mind, I left the chapel and went to care for my wife and our newborn daughter, who was just beginning to open her eyes.