

# A Darkened Path

By Rachel Adkins

“Death will come to you all... The fifth sun will bring with it a new age...”

“I...- Your Highness... What do you mean?”

“The fifth... sun...”

The princess' hand slips from my fingers; dulled eyes drifting shut as the smallest of exhales draws her soul away into the world beyond. A singular candle at her bedside flutters in response before dying with her – its flame her only constant companion since her illness began. The room had otherwise been kept in darkness; heavy black curtains blocking out the light and strength and hope of the sun. We had done all we could. It wasn't enough.

I raise her arm again; gentle fingers probing the sensitive spot of her wrist where her pulse once resided. There was nothing of it now.

A woman behind me screeches; mindless anguish tearing from her throat before she fell to her knees with agonised, heartbroken sobs. Yet, I don't turn around. I can't. My eyes remain locked on the sallow, withered face of this child; this witchling girl whose wrist I still held with as much tenderness as any physician would the living; her final, whispered words replaying over and over in my head.

Her father stands beside me, regaining his composure long before I do. This tyrant, this usurper – this rapacious, homicidal *butcher* – he gazes at me pityingly before stepping forward, gently peeling my fingers from the growing chill of the princess' skin.

“Your Majesty, forgive me, I-”

“... Leave us.”

“But-”

“Out!”

A King, trembling with anger – trembling with grief – shoves me back towards the door, his face red with rage. “Out!” he roars, hands tearing frantically at the rope holding up the thinner net curtains around his daughter's bed. “Out! Out! OUT!”

An armed mob of soldiers arrive within seconds, heavy hands impatiently jostling the assembly of maids, priests and healers from those once-bright, sun-stained walls and into the cold maze of corridors within the castle.

I had no intention of hanging around.

Wind snaps at my heels as I rush from the palatial chimera of iron and stone, desperately hoping to outpace my thoughts. The lingering throb of voices and bleating animals is an unusual salve on its own as I make my way through the market and toward the gatehouse; those greying towers that much darker and more formidable under the tenebrific shroud of a passing storm. A bag of coin had been left for my services, though I open the pouch slowly; warily; too anxious to appreciate the auriferous shimmer within. A folded note catches my eye, trebling my unease in an instant. In flowing hand amongst the sea of minted metal read a fresh summons for the following morning; the King's royal insignia manifesting from the bottom edge of the page like the devil's own crooked claw.

The request was one I thought peculiar. Yet not one I should dare to question – nor ignore.

I return to the inn in a haze of trepidation; my heart pounding as hard as every beat of my boots. The familiar array of mesmerising hangings greets me from within: each one surrounding heavy, candlelit tables – themselves secured by loud, bawdy groups of men

and boys. I settle into a quieter corner where a fair amount of mead, roasted pheasant and a spot beside the fire soon lifts my spirits, and with the return of my wits and a quill from my satchel I scribble the princess' premonition into my journal; the page already littered with notes of her condition, and all the treatments with which we had tried – and failed – to save her. The fifth sun would surely mean five days from now. But the rest? I could only imagine.

She haunted my dreams that night. And not just that night, but any time I closed my eyes; the shell of my eyelids doing little to protect me from a withered, transcendental spectre reaching toward me from the gates of the damned. Dawn eventually rouses me from my broken slumber; clouded rays of gold drawing me away from Hell and back into the cramped, contaminated confines of the quarters I shared.

I could've used my earnings to procure myself a better room, but the effort of transferring my bags and equipment dwarfed that of the inconvenience of a snoring western trader and an unwashed, mendicant pilgrim, both of whom would be long since dead before reaching their destinations, were the princess' omen to fall true.

I wash and dress in silence; heading outside to a city which seemed so much quieter now. Even the baying cats had moved on; the lustre of a few free meals from the rats plaguing the granaries no longer enticing enough to hold their interest. Fog rolls down from the gargantuan parapets before settling over the scattered sea of ramshackle houses, and I can't help but shudder; a terrifying chill and a deep-rooted fear quickening my pace toward the castle.

Three pairs of guards haul open the heavy metal gates, and despite the silence and the colours of mourning I'm relieved to see the general bustle of activity inside unchanged. An ill-mannered steward leads me to the throne room; several immaculate, red-carpeted stone floors and an astounding array of tapestries and murals guiding our path through corridor after corridor of this most resplendent of labyrinths, until the boy finally drew to a halt, bowing his head before opening a single set of grand oak doors.

That I'd seen it all before made it no less jaw-dropping.

Several knights stand armed inside, the high vaulted ceilings only serving to increase the echo of sword and armour as their King commands them to withdraw. I shuffle my way down the steps and across the stone, kneeling ten paces before the man who only yesterday had lost his last remaining kin. His eyes looked empty, hair greyer than when I had left him, though his bearing was anything but frail.

He sweeps his beard aside before heaving himself up from his throne; a warm smile disturbingly out of place on a face I only ever knew to be cruel.

Even his voice fell softly.

"Rise, sir. There is a matter I wish to address."

I pull myself to my feet, tentatively lifting my gaze from the floor.

"I await your request, my King."

"This is no request. It is a command."

He pauses, fiddling with one of the many rings adorning his fingers.

"You will never repeat the words of my daughter to another. Do you understand?"

"But why, Your Majesty? If something is to occur-"

"Silence-!"

I snap my eyes down, focusing on the colourful, well-worn mosaic beneath my feet.

"Do not *dare* question me! I will not have loose tongues bringing my kingdom to ruin!"

“But Your Majesty, your daughter possessed great power-”

“Yet not enough! Not enough to... to save herself...”

The fractured roar brings me back down onto my knees. I had no other response. The King was stoic, ruthless, indomitable. Yet he was still a father.

“The ramblings of a mere child should not frighten my people,” he grumbles, scrubbing his hand over his face before turning away; his heavy gaze falling upon the massive stained glass window behind his throne. “If word spreads, I shall know whose traitorous tongue I need cut out. So I ask you again; do you understand?!”

“I... Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Good. Now get out of my sight!”

I don't hesitate, drawing myself to my feet and backing out of the room with a bow. If this kingdom were truly to be forsaken – if he were simply going to let it happen – I certainly wasn't going to sit and wait for it to occur. I retreat to the inn once more, packing my belongings away and setting off that very afternoon.

The first sun had already risen.

The hours pass swiftly as I edged myself further and further from the cursed palace, each day marked off with a small – if not unnecessary – entry in my journal. Still, as far as I fled, it never seemed far enough. The sky grew darker until there was scarcely enough sun to count the hours; the heat beneath the clouds abnormally foul, withering the previously abundant flora of the area away to nothing. Bird and beast alike were quick to abandon the rotting trees and scrubland they once called home. They were the smart ones.

Meanwhile, the few travellers I do encounter decide to continue their path whence I came; disbelieving of my whispered warnings, and dismissing my words as the ravings of a madman.

On their heads be it. At least I tried.

With no choice but to leave each man to his fate, I press on and away, spurring my horse toward a promise of sanctuary and salvation. Another day of searching eventually leads us to a stream; the land around it parched and unforgiving. Dismounting to investigate the water, I tug at the reins, only for the beast to refuse to move, whinnying and whining at every step I force from its hooves. It's only after I give up; after I gaze down into the water pooling around my calves that I realise why she had fought so hard. A scattered swathe of fish approaches before bouncing against my ankles; their dead eyes riddled with blood and insects; bodies completely motionless as that gentle, inviting current pulled them along and away. My eyes follow one in particular until its mottled scales vanished amongst the pebbled mosaic further along the bank. With only half a skin of water left in my pack the temptation to chance my luck was overwhelming. Still, the danger was undeniable. A deep breath sets determination into every muscle of my neck and shoulders, and I return us to our path; heel and hoof fumbling aimlessly through the looming shadows of the night. I had never considered myself a pious man. The word of the immortals had always seemed to me the words of mere masters over their slaves; an empty promise as though one were manipulating a child, while eternal damnation loomed for even the most nominal infraction.

But as the fourth day drew to a close I found myself praying, speaking to the unknown with about as much faith in them as they likely had in me. Me; a man who was little more than an insect, trudging along a plane of existence too unfathomable for him to ever comprehend. I lie awake the entire night, the distant growl of thunder or worse not once letting my thoughts settle until at length the dawn came.

The fifth sun was rising, ready to burn us all to cinders.

My horse had bolted sometime in those early hours: the rumbling loud enough to have shaken the earth with it. Yet as I drew back the flap of my tent I couldn't help but wonder if my soul had crossed to the other side, or whether my final, desperate act to save myself had indeed succeeded.

I stare out into Eden. Elysium. Zion. Valhalla – whatever the ancestors had named their given and holy sanctuary, I had been transported there. I must have been.

Where fallow field and broken stone once lay now stood luscious stretches of green; butterflies and bees dancing across a polychromatic wealth of flowers as far as the eye could see. The sun shone. Birdsong sifted through the breeze.

I spin on my heel, wonder straining my eyes. This had to be a dream. Yet, as I reach my hand out, the grasses answer to my touch. Laughter bursts from my lips. This must've been what the witchling had spoken of. Far from a curse, she had foreseen a new and extravagant change in the seasons. And with no danger to fear, I could finally, *finally* go home.

I stumble back to the stream, overjoyed to find life there in all its splendour. My heart began to hammer in ecstasy; its beat a victory march within my chest.

Dipping my head down, I drink deep until I quench my thirst entirely. I should have been more careful, but the light and beauty of a world renewed stole my better judgement away with my despair. I refill my skins before packing away the remnants of my supplies, swift steps carrying me back toward the city I had abandoned in what seemed like a lifetime ago.

I was two days there when I found my horse lying dead on the side of the road.

The sight, though peculiar, wasn't altogether unexpected considering how hard I'd pushed the poor beast on our escape. There was no sign of injury or attack: indeed, the creature looked entirely at peace, as though she had died quite suddenly. I couldn't help but assume natural causes before my thoughts were drawn to the first fish I'd seen in the river. Perhaps there had been some miasma which had overcome her.

I stare down at the animal, pondering a few minutes more before abandoning my search for answers. If they were to be found, they'd likely be back in the kingdom I'd fled.

These parts were known for stranger things, after all.

I pass little else of note as I continue; the journey one of almost two weeks before the acrid smell of ash fills my lungs. A dense, billowing plume of black cut the sky in two; its arc centred ominously above the walls of a city I used to recognise.

Only, little stood of those walls now.

Rubble and flame replaced that once-mighty fortress, and though the outline of the palace proper was still visible through the smoke, its towers were dilapidated; crumbling beneath their own weight. The ground before the city walls was little more than a mire, as though the waters of the moat had risen up against their master before receding, stealing the kingdom's foundations away with them.

I force my feet forward.

Fear and the growing stench of death should have sent me running far from here, though some fractured memory convinced me that I was safe; that any time of harm had long since passed, and that I could now find the answers I'd wished to have known all those weeks ago.

The first thing I see are the birds; huge numbers of ravens as black as the night clustering around patches of deserted, muddy street until nothing of the ground remained

to be seen, their beaks pecking mercilessly at the cobbles as though they were trying to pull the earth itself apart. I throw a rock to scatter one such group, only for a rising bile to burn the back of my throat at the sight which appeared beneath their frantic, fleeing wings. The ruins of a child remained; rotting flesh torn from face and body both; haunted holes where bright eyes had once resided.

My knees buckle, cracking hard onto broken stone. I can barely contain the gorge coating my tongue before swallowing it back down, my shoulders heaving and trembling as I stare at the corpse blocking my path.

Beyond it, another mass of feathers writhed and churned in the breeze, and beside them, another; and the further I lifted my gaze, the more the speckled grey of the road disappeared beneath those screeching black swarms; a corvine sea drowning the land in their bloodlust.

I pick myself up, making sure not to disturb any other groups.

From the other side of the road, I stare in horror at the remains of the inn; its third floor barely breaching the earth's surface from the gargantuan hole which had opened up beneath it. The roof had collapsed; timber beams forced skyward from the pile of debris; the unmistakable tint of blood still dripping from the rocks. The fissure which had swallowed it led in no other direction, and I call down into the pit, keeping my distance and praying that someone may have still been alive.

My cries go unanswered.

After several minutes of nothing but the echo of my own voice amid the cursed shriek of those damned, feasting birds, I give up any hope that there may be survivors. A cold sense of emptiness steals the beat from my heart before lodging it firmly in my throat. I was alone, and all the people I had known, no matter how fleetingly, were dead.

It couldn't be true.

No, there was still one place which held some semblance of hope, no matter how ruthless and uninviting I had otherwise known it to be.

As if on cue, a peal of thunder roars from the direction of the castle. My head snaps towards it, eyes fixed firmly on the few remaining flags fluttering from the walls; a welcome more bright and cheery than I had ever received from its inhabitants. I take off at a run, keeping my gaze up and away from the death and carnage littering the streets around me, hoping I may yet be fast enough to outpace the pungent reek of blood and decay clinging to my heels.

I approach the castle entrance in a matter of minutes; that once-mighty beacon of strength reduced to little more than a fractured burial mound for those who had once guarded its gate. A broken lance protrudes from one side; the fingers and wrist of its previous owner pecked clean to the bone. My stomach turns as I wrench the weapon free, watching a now-lifeless grip clatter back into the dust. Sorrow filled my mind, but if nothing else the blade was still sharp, and I could cut out the heart of the King – if such an organ had ever occupied his chest – and avenge the hundreds of innocent lives which his cruelty and neglect had claimed.

My boots sink into the debris as I climb over the rubble, haphazardly recalling my steps through the broken path inside. Great cracks lined in the inner walls and chambers like streaks of lightning, mercilessly carving through wood and stone and tearing apart anything – or anyone – which stood in its way. Flags and paintings had crumbled or burned beside the bodies of those who had been employed to their care; the kitchen itself now little more than a black mass of charred and molten metal; and what little remained of the

hallways' magnificent carpets were stained a darker shade of red by those whose lives had ended upon them.

The souls of the living resided here no longer.

A half hour of wrong turns and dark passageways eventually lead me to what I wished to find. The towering doors of the throne room splinter easily at the third ram of my shoulder, practically shattering in my wake as I burst through to the steps on the other side.

There's no describing the relief flooding me when my hand catches the edge of the threshold.

Mere inches from my feet, another enormous chasm had ripped the floor in half, fierce lines petering off in various directions to chase down the agonised faces of their victims: men frozen mid-scream, wearing suits of armour which looked like they'd boiled their bearers alive.

Gorge coats my fingers before I even realise I've thrown up. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out the horrifying scene of the peeling, reddened flesh and melted eyeballs the birds had yet to discover. I vomit again before forcing myself to look around me; my eyes falling upon an empty throne – or what remained of it, the metal misshapen and crumpled in on itself where that singular fissure had originated. But there was no sign of the King. None, save for a tattered cloak and a set of bejewelled fingers; barely attached to the burned forearm they once belonged to.

I crawl forward, my eyes fixed on the floor and my heart in my mouth. The mark of the devil had been branded into the King's palm; a dark seal of blood torn deep into flesh. The King may yet have lived, perhaps by some magic of his own, or perhaps merely trapped in the rift which had swallowed him. I peek over the edge of the void, my eyes trying to adjust to layer upon layer of darkness.

It's then that I hear it.

A laugh. A girl's laugh; cruel and mirthless and quiet at first, growing louder as it began to speed towards me.

I pull my face back from the edge sharply, terrified as a violent, churning wind rushes past my shoulders. The ground shivers beneath my knees.

*"Death will come to you all..."*

A child's hand pierces the floor as it collapses, rotting fingers I had once held at the cusp of death tearing at my arms; pulling me down toward the bowels of Hell.

## **Editors Thoughts**

This story was chosen as my winner because it starts so innocuously and innocent and then takes you on a twisting and turning rabbit hole of fantasy horror.

Rachel has written this story very well a clever mix of dialogue with a healthy dose of description kept me hooked to the last scene.

## **Bio**

When not decimating the competition in pub quiz music rounds, Rachel spends most of her free time working on the final chapters of her second novel. As an LGBT writer, she's hoping to broaden the availability of LGBT fiction, specialising in historical, horror, thriller and romance genres.

If there's any chance to involve dinosaurs or cuttlefish as well, she also considers that fair game.

Rachel's first lesbian historical romance novel – drafted during the first year of Covid19 – was an impromptu creation manifested from the general boredom of Lockdown. With iconic female protagonists, fierce action scenes, and baddies you love to hate, she's anticipating the publication of both novels by February 2023.”