

Land of Light

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To my children who have taught me how deep love can go.

And in turn show me how unfathomable divine love is.

For I can't imagine a love more vast
than the one I have for you.

Yet, the unimaginable, unfathomable, unseen can still be.

Keep your awe and wonder.

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Trapped

The guards drag open the golden gate to Uncle Basheer's pen; my uncle is a pig. I'm not being disrespectful. He is actually porcine; he chanced to enter the Dark Realms as a tall handsome prince and came out all pudgy and pink. But more on that later.

Uncle Basheer is sitting at his low cherry-red table, mouth agape while staff shovel pistachios, grapes, and crackers into it. He smiles, rises, and yanks his silk shirt back over his plump pink pig tummy with his hind legs. I kiss him on each cheek, then settle onto the dining cushions. Purple and gold embroidered pillows swallow me up to my chest. White-coated royal waiters place silver plates piled high with food. The cinnamon from the spiced kabobs fills my nostrils. However, it's the vanilla carrots that make me salivate. "Mmm-mm," should I start or end with my favorite?

Yet, as I watch him devour plate after plate, bits of orange carrot pepper his fuzzy chin. I'm hit with fear. My stomach seizes and I shove my meal away. Tomorrow I venture into the Dark Realms; the same realms that ushered him, possibly forever, into his lavish piggy lifestyle. If it ensnares

me, my future demise could be a pig or worse...

He spots the sweat on my brow and most likely hears the drumming of my heart; Uncle Basheer stops mid-bite, drops half a kabob. He plops beside me and places a comforting hoof on my trembling hands, the other is patting my chest. I wish Uncle Basheer's confidence could offer me the comfort that I need, but his support is meaningless. He believed in himself and now he's a pig. I stare at the genie lamp we found on our treasure hunt last week, wishing yet again that it had a wish-granting genie.

A tear escapes, and he reverts to his antics. Basheer balances on the black marble rock that lines his mud bath then flips off and lands headfirst, rear up, in the sticky, thick mud. He shakes his butt from side to side to free himself. I plod over and wrap both arms around his fuzzy paunch, tug until he pops out with a "shulppp". We domino on top of each other, mud-splattering, but unlike last week when we snorted with laughter, there is a heavy silence. He deflates. Today, all I carry are the nightmares of the Dark Realms. I clench my fist hard enough for my nails to dig into my palms. "How can they allow this to continue? They're spineless! Linda lies about her saving us from ourselves. We are a kingdom of cowards, feeding the young to the realms." Uncle Basheer blinks, sitting there powerless, a spineless being himself.

I dash out of the pen.

He can't help me, no one can. No one will. I'm running back down the gravel pathway when I trip and fall to my knees. Pain shoots up my leg, but adrenaline dulls it. As the prince, I can stop this savage tradition. I scurry up the palace steps, sprint through the marble hallway, dodging all the staff, and ignoring their questions and concerns. False concerns! I stutter to a stop as my father's voice booms down the hall. Standing straight, I ready myself to face him but freeze when I spy him, mother, and the vizier - another useless fool - arguing in the conference room. Their postures stick-straight as they pace around the grand table, one after another, like cats and mice. The mouse being the vizier.

"You still haven't found a cure. Fifteen years! What is the lifespan of a pig?" asks father.

"Sorry, your majesty. Please. Believe me. We've been working day and night. In shifts. Like requested." The vizier sputters.

"Find more wise men," my father booms.

"We've gathered them all... They continue work even when they are away." The vizier takes a step back, his long white robe catching under his heel.

"Then gather more," he yells, slamming his fist on the table. The water glass shakes.

"With all due respect, Prince Basheer no longer attempts our cures." The vizier responds, voice trembling.

"Cures! Cures work. Those are experiments. He's lost ALL hope in your failed attempts."

"But he's the only patient. The statue is more complicated to cure," the vizier wrinkles his brows.

"Farris can crumble. He's of no concern to me. Focus on Basheer!" father commands. "Any trace of Linda? She must be reachable." He rubs his brows.

"No, your majesty." The vizier bows, his bald head gleaming with sweat.

"Where could she have gone? She curses this land, then takes her leave. This burden she placed is so heavy." So, father believes it to be a curse, heresy from the Sultan.

"There is always a cure. Every disease comes with a cure," the vizier regurgitates.

Father slams his palms on the table, the sound reverberates. "Then why haven't we found it?"

Mother walks over and places a hand on his shoulder. "Patience, my dear." He shrugs off her hand.

"I've run out. Run out. Now our son's time has come,

followed soon after by our daughter. What happens if he fails? If she fails? What then? We wait, meekly. Sit. Pet his little piggy head. Install her statue at our door."

"Please dear, you must not think of that, my love." The worry on her face deepens. "He is more prepared than we were," my mother tries to reassure him.

"You think the same, my dear. I simply said it aloud," he deflates.

"No, we have filled him with knowledge. We must have hope." She rubs his back.

"He still thinks it's a curse." He lowers his voice, "as I do, occasionally, it's my fault," father says.

"You ventured in with the same beliefs and succeeded. Everyone has their wisdom and experience. He will return. Whole." She pats his shoulder and now he leans his head into hers.

I scurry toward my bedroom. They can't help, they can't change anything. We're all stuck. Mom's positive words drown out the negative until the fear creeps in again and I crawl into my bed. The feathered blanket is not heavy enough to stop my trembling. Yet, the sun's rays warm my back and I fall into a much-needed sleep.

The mattress rises and falls in my sleep. "Up! Up! Up! Ridwan, time to play," a soft voice says.

"Fatima!" I startle awake. She jumps higher, tossing me like a bag of marbles. My head pounds.

"Come on, you said we'd play today. It's our day. My day." Now she's unsuccessfully shaking me with her hands. I flip away and close my eyes again. "I can get ice; that'll wake you." She hates chilly hands as much as I do; I ignore her empty threat. "Ridwan, it's three, please."

"Where's Hanna? Go play with her," I say.

"You promised," her voice breaks, "and it's your last day." I flinch at her sudden deflation of joy. "Sorry, didn't mean to." She slams her hand over her mouth.

"It's okay. I know." I pull her hand away and swallow the lump in my throat.

"Let's play hide-and-peek," she says.

"Okay, you hide first," I say, buying time to wake up.

She pushes her upper lip up and bounces again on the bed with her knees; her mood lifts again. "You first," she says. My stomach growls.

"Change of plans. First, let's make cookies. How does a flour fight sound?" I ask.

"Like last time?" her eyes widen and a smile fills her face. "Yes. Then hide-and-peek. Dolls. Oh, we can roll down the grass hill."

"Race you to the bottom of the stairs. Whoever wins, get double the cookies 1...2...3... go!" I frog leap over her and dash out of the room, closing the door before she can reach it.

"Cheater!" she yanks the door open.

"No, I'm older, remember! I need more time." I bend over and wheeze, for show, as she sprints past me, her purple silk dress billows. I hop on the cherry wood banister and slide past her with ease.

"Hey! When you come back, I'll be the master at that cheater move and you'll lose every race." I slow and hold her hand.

"You're going to have to get taller." I lightly bump into her.

"All in the plan. Taller, smarter, and faster than you. Shrimp."

"That's it, you're in for it." I chase her, vaulting over chairs in the great room. Chairs that she slides under. We reach the kitchen at the same time.

"Hello, Ridwan and Fatima," says the head chef, Noah. "What can we make for you today?" He asks with a wide smile. He's a pudgy man all over, with a jovial spirit.

"We are going to make cookies today," chirps Fatima.

"Oh dear, we have what you're looking for," he turns to open a cupboard.

"No. No, thank you, we will bake them ourselves," I say.

"Except for the cleaning," Noah says under his breath, with a tight smile. I guess I was wrong. He's not always jovial. Fatima chuckles.

"You're right, you know us so well. Thank you, Noah."

After cookies, really after a flour fight, we ended up eating the ones that Noah offered initially. Fatima dashes out to meet with Hanna. I'm left covered in flour with a stab of pain, already knowing that I'll be missing days like this.