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Opening extract from

Light

Written by

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EGMONT
We bring stories to life

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EGMONT

Our story began over a century ago, when seventeen-year-old Egmont Harald Petersen found a coin in the street. He was on his way to buy a flyswatter, a small hand-operated printing machine that he then set up in his tiny apartment.

The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.

ONE

88 HOURS 39 MINUTES

***THE** LITTLE GIRL'S hair caught fire. It flamed magnificently, for she had her mother's lush dark hair.*

Sam fired again, and the little girl's flesh burned at last.

But all the while the girl, the gaiaphage, its face turned away from onlookers, stared at Sam in undiminished fury. The blue eyes never looked away. Her angelic mouth leered in a knowing grin even as it burned.

Gaia had started a fire in some twigs that Diana had gathered. It wasn't much of a fire. It would die out soon, and Diana would sleep, again, on the cold ground.

There had been a moment, two days earlier, when Diana might have gone to Caine. Caine had been with Sam, and she could have broken away from Gaia then and run to him.

Maybe Drake, Whip Hand, could have stopped her if she had tried that. Maybe Gaia could have as well. But for some reason Gaia had kept Drake from killing Caine, and then,

seconds later, Sam had burned Gaia with his deadly light and . . .

. . . and right then, Diana could have run to Caine. She had wanted to.

Had she stayed with Gaia out of some new maternal instinct? Gaia had cried in genuine, terrifying agony from the burns. She could be hurt. She *had* been hurt.

Yes, Diana thought now, too desperate, hungry, cold, that had been part of it. Gaia was her daughter. What an impossible idea! Gaia had been created inside Diana's body, egg and sperm, Diana and Caine, the world's oldest story. And when Gaia was born in pain and blood, Diana had felt a connection. It had been good, that connection. It had been reassuring, because Diana had not been sure she would feel it. She had not been sure she was capable of feeling it. The connection meant Diana was human, that she was a woman, that she could feel something for the baby she had delivered.

That there was, despite everything, some hope for Diana.

But she had also felt fear. Gaia was a beautiful baby girl when she was born. She would be beautiful again, no doubt, when she finished healing herself of the deep and terrible burns that had turned her skin into something that looked like the top of an overcooked lasagna. (Gaia seemed unconcerned with all that.) But she would never be just a girl, the daughter of Caine and Diana. Because there was a third force, greater than

egg and sperm and womb. Greater even than a mother's love.

Gaia was the creature of the gaiaphage. The gaiaphage had taken her. It had brutally suppressed whatever slight, tenuous personality the baby might have had, and it had imposed itself. Diana had seen it and had cried out against it, but the gaiaphage didn't care. It didn't care when it was a seething mass of green seeping across the floor of a deep cave, and it didn't care now that it was a girl with half-healed burned flesh and hair only now growing back, staring into a fire.

'Nemesis,' Gaia whispered, not for the first time. Like she was whispering to a friend.

Diana's daughter was never going to love her. She'd been an idiot to even imagine it, to even dream of it.

But maybe . . .

Maybe what? Maybe what? Diana taunted herself, as pitilessly judgmental with her own self as she was with others. *What ridiculous hope are you holding on to, Diana? You know what she is. You know she's not yours, not really yours. You know she's not a 'she' but an 'it'.*

But so pretty by firelight. *Imagine*, Diana tortured herself, *imagine if she was really just a girl, your daughter. Imagine what a miracle you would see in her. Imagine how you would feel, Diana, if this beautiful girl was really yours.*

Yours and his.

A beautiful, perfect little girl . . .

A dark and terrible creature.

'It won't hurt, my little Nemesis,' Gaia said, but not to Diana.

Would Diana once again let herself be swept along in the wake of an evil person, first with Caine, now with Gaia? Was impotent snark all that Diana had to offer in opposition?

During her abbreviated pregnancy she had allowed herself to fantasize about being a mother, a better mother than her own. She'd pictured herself becoming a good person. She could do that, she'd told herself. She didn't always have to go on being what she had been and what she had become.

She could have been saved.

'The end is the best part of any story,' Gaia whispered, talking to no one that Diana could see. 'The end.'

Diana had imagined redemption, forgiveness, a new beginning as a young mother.

But she was mother to a monster who cared nothing for her.

'I don't make good choices,' Diana whispered as she lay down in the dirt and wrapped her arms tightly for warmth.

'What?' Gaia snapped, looking up at her.

'Eh,' Diana said with a sigh. 'Nothing.'

Little Pete was getting littler. That's how it felt, anyway. He could feel himself sort of shrinking, and he wasn't so sure it felt bad. Maybe it was a relief.

Life had always been strange and disturbing for Peter Ellison.

From the moment of his birth the world had attacked him with noise and light and scraping touch. All the sensations that were easy for other people to make sense of were terrifying and overwhelming for him. Other people could filter things out. Other people could turn down the noise, but Pete could not. Not while he'd been in his body.

That body had been the problem. The severe autism that had crippled him had been in his body, in his physical brain.

It had been a relief to be out of that body and brain. When Astrid, his sister with the cutting blue eyes and the yellow snake hair, had thrown him to his physical death, he had been . . . relieved.

Pete had been able to create a new thing for himself, a new place that was not a body. He had carried his power with him, but with that power he had made terrible mistakes. He saw that now. He saw what he had done to Taylor. He could no longer do things like that; he could no longer play with the abstract patterns that were actually human beings.

Now he was fading, like a light with one of those special switches. There had been one in the house, the dining room of the house he'd been raised in, the one that had burned down. A dimmer switch, that's what his mother had called it.

Turn the dimmer down, let's make dinner seem romantic.

Little by little, the light that was Pete was getting dimmer. He was romantic.

He had been like a rubber band stretched out. Like one end was attached to his body and the other end was . . . well, wherever he was now. But with his body gone the rubber band was contracting.

It wasn't so bad.

He could see the Darkness. The Darkness, too, could reach into this space of Pete's. It, too, had been dimming, the creature that named itself gaiaphage, but now it was stronger with a body to anchor it.

Pete could listen to the gaiaphage's mind sometimes. Pete knew the Darkness was watching him. Laughing at him as he weakened, but nervous, too.

So many times the Darkness had reached to him with its tendrils, sneaking up behind him, trying to find him, trying to make him believe things, do things.

The Darkness wanted Pete to dim. When Pete was all the way gone, all his power would be gone, too.

The Darkness whispered to him. *It won't hurt, my little Nemesis. It will just be the end, like the end of the stories your sister used to read to you. Remember how you always wanted them to end because her voice and her eyes and her yellow hair hurt you?*

Don't fight it, Nemesis.

The end is the best part of any story. The end.

*

LIGHT

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.

Orc had memorized the verse. In his head he said it 'yeah' instead of 'yea', but that didn't change the meaning. What it meant was, if you're scared, don't be, because God is there. That much was clear. But the next bit about a rod and a staff . . . as far as Orc knew, a rod was maybe a stick and a staff was, like, all the guys who worked for you. My staff.

My staff will comfort you. Which made sense because if you were God you'd need a staff of, like, angels or whatever to take care of comforting people and so on.

He had walked up Trotter's Ridge at sundown, up above the town of Perdido Beach. But as he'd reached the top of the hill where the barrier sliced it in two, he'd crouched lower and lower, afraid even to be outlined against the stars. He'd finished the last hundred feet on his belly.

You still couldn't touch the barrier, that hadn't changed; it would still zap you. But now you could see right through it. Like it was just plain old glass. Which meant people out there could see in.

That thought made him sick to his stomach.

He peered through a crispy, dead stand of tall yellow grass, and there it was. The other side. The out there.

No one was on the hill right where he was; they were all

down on the highway and around there. It was so amazingly bright out there. The hamburger place was lit up like light cost nothing. The motels, so many lights. Like Christmas or something. He could see the lights of cars and vans and campers backed up in the world's biggest traffic jam. It went on as far as he could see. There were police lights flashing all over the place, near and far, the Highway Patrol trying to get things organised. Problem was, the highway just hit the barrier and stopped. Someone had bulldozed a turnaround, but with cars lining both sides of the highway as well as jamming the highway itself, that whole turnaround thing wasn't working. There was a slow-moving stream of red tail lights.

Up against the barrier in the Out There were a few big news trucks all covered in antennas and satellite dishes and crazy bright lights. A little past them it looked like some kind of army base, because earlier he had seen green uniforms and Humvees.

Above all there was the neon, red and gold and a little green – a Carl's Jr. His mouth watered. Fries. He would do just about anything for some fries and a chocolate shake.

From this angle he couldn't see the kids up against the inside of the barrier, but he knew they were there, because unlike the stuff outside he could hear the things inside. He heard voices, some yelling like they didn't believe no one could hear through the barrier.

A girl with a high-pitched voice was yelling, 'Mommy! Mommy!'

Everyone seemed to think it was all going to end. They all thought the barrier had to come down now – sooner, not later. Caine, who called himself King Caine, had told Orc to help him get people back from the barrier, get them back to work, because here in the FAYZ every day was hungry, and starvation was never more than a couple of days off.

But of course Orc had said no. No way. If he went down there, every camera would point toward him. People would scream: he wouldn't be able to hear them, but he'd see them, see their mouths making big O's and see them point at him.

Orc had always been a big kid, but he was more than big now. He was probably more than six feet tall and almost that wide just standing with his arms down at his side. And he was made of something that looked a lot like wet gravel, or maybe concrete that hadn't set yet.

He was a monster.

He wanted a drink of booze so bad. If he got really rip-roaring crazy drunk, then maybe he could go down there, down into the valley of the shadow. But not sober, no, he couldn't take that.

His mom might be there, if his dad hadn't killed her yet.

He tried to picture her and succeeded. Then Orc tried to

picture his mother without a bruise on the side of her head or a cast on her wrist and he couldn't.

And his father . . . he didn't want to picture his father, but he couldn't help it, the pictures came: pictures of his father in a cold and evil drunk, sizing up his son, making sure that Charles Merriman, who had long been known as Orc, was hanging his head and looking away. Making sure his son was afraid.

His dad liked that part, the part where Orc was desperately trying to stay out of his way but was forced to sit down and do his homework while his father drank beer after beer and dropped the cans beside his chair, waiting until he had an excuse – almost anything would do.

His father sober was distant and indifferent. His father drunk was a monster.

Like Orc, but not as ugly.

He wondered if his father knew he could come here and glare at his son again through the dome. And what would he say if he saw Orc now? Make that snorting sound of his, that sound that said, *You're worthless.*

If that happened . . .

His father was a big man. But Orc was bigger and had strength to match. Orc could snap him like a dry stick.

With one thick, stony finger Orc delicately touched the tiny patch of human skin near his mouth. It tickled.

If the barrier came down, everyone would see him in the

bright TV lights. And sooner or later his father would, too. Orc was sure if he ever saw his father again, he would kill the man.

That was the death that shadowed the valley. That was the evil. And God's staff would have to move pretty quick to stop it happening.

'Don't let it come down, Lord,' he prayed. 'I know all them kids want to see their moms and all. But please, God, don't let that barrier come down.'

Sam was asleep, finally, facedown, uncovered, naked, and turned slightly away from Astrid.

There was a light. Sam Temple, the hero of most of the kids in the FAYZ, had always been a little afraid of the dark. So he had created a night light for this dark space.

It was not a normal light: a tiny ball, no bigger than a marble. It floated in a corner above the bunk. Astrid had taped a sheet of red paper in front of it so that its green, unnatural glow would be softened. The tape had come loose, so the imperfect lampshade blocked the light only intermittently as the paper twirled in the slightest breeze, drifted as the boat gently rocked.

When the light brightened, Sam would appear as bits and pieces – a broad back, a flicker of round, pale bottom, a length of muscular thigh in harsh shadow. When the light softened, he would be almost invisible just sounds of breathing, and a scent, and a warmth.

She should cover him. Really, she should. He'd get cold after a while and wake up and realise she wasn't sleeping and that would worry him.

But not just yet, she thought.

She was trying to read by the uncertain light. The book was on law, and Astrid had become convinced by the book that she would never be a lawyer, or even try. She could read almost anything, but this was a very dull book, and it did very little to distract her from the view.

My God: she was *happy*.

The very idea that she should be happy was absurd. It was almost a crime. Things were desperate, but then they had been for a long time. Desperate had long since become the new normal.

If the barrier really did come down . . . if this really was the endgame . . . They were fifteen. Out there, out in the world, they had no legal right to be together.

They'd been through hell. They'd been through a whole series of hells, and they were still together. But none of that would mean anything in the eyes of the law. Her parents, or his mother, could snap their fingers and break what Sam and Astrid had built.

It was not the first time Astrid had had the thought that maybe liberation from the FAYZ would be no such thing.