

The Light of Evil

by Paul Melko

When the Emperor had grown tired of mundane pursuits, about the time that all that existed within one hundred days ride was his, he called his wisest advisor to him one evening.

"Why do the stars shine, Wise One?"

"The stars shine with purity, righteousness, wisdom, beauty, and love."

"Yes, yes, yes, but why do they shine?"

"When a person who loves truly with ultimate compassion and caring, and when that person dies, a new star, the color of red is born in the heavens.

"When a person who is pure in thought and deed, virtuous in body and action, and when that person dies, a new star, the color of white is born in the heavens."

"I see," said the Emperor. He leaned far out over the rail of his balcony, staring up at the sky. "I would think that before long-- long in the sense of eons-- the sky would be full of light."

"No, Your Eminence, after years the light of the stars fade."

"How are the green stars formed?"

"When a person who is truly righteous...."

"Yes, and yellow?"

"Beauty, Your Eminence."

The Emperor backed away from the edge of his balcony and stepped near his advisor. He looked closely at the grizzled man. "And what of the blue stars?"

"Wisdom."

"I see," said the Emperor as he plunged his dagger into the wise man's heart.

"Quick!" he yelled. "Find the new star! It must be blue."

His advisors sent one page to the Emperor's University and another to the Emperor's Observatory. The answer was quick in coming.

"It is there, Your Eminence," said the head of the astronomy department. Behind him, suddenly struck with a bout of shaking, stood the head of the Observatory. "Near the horizon."

"Ah," said the Emperor. There above the line of minarets was a twinkle of blue, bright and shining brand new. With his eyes on the sky, the Emperor

plunged his dagger into the heart of the astronomer. A flare of light caught his eye, and there was another twinkle of blue.

"Bring me the best scientists in every field!" cried the Emperor. "Bring them all to the courtyard below this balcony."

While he waited, he killed the other astronomer, but could not find the star that was his. "Perhaps he was not wise enough to warrant a star," thought the Emperor.

It was just past midnight when his guards brought before him a dozen grey-haired men and women, some dressed in bedclothes, and all perplexed.

"Kill them," the Emperor told his guards.

The night sky flared in a moment of glorious blue, and the Emperor was filled with joy that he was the source of such a sight.

"Bring me the most beautiful person in my realm," he said. "No! Bring me the ten most beautiful people in my realm. And bring me ten virgins, and the last ten people to be married in this city, and that dirty prophet Amri and his ten most dedicated followers."

And the guards brought the subjects to the Emperor's courtyard where they stood among the corpses of the wise. They stood there, then fell at the Emperor's order, as he watched the sky.

The sky was brighter than it had ever been, dazzling and alive with new stars. The Emperor stood on his balcony for an hour, watching the heavens sparkle.

"More," he said finally, his voice a rasp. He swallowed. "Bring me more! The wise, the beautiful, the righteous, those who love, and those who are pure. Bring them to my courtyard."

A thousand people, cold and scared and wondering, were herded into the courtyard that night. They stood and looked at their Emperor.

"Kill them all," he said.

There was no change in the sky at first, but slowly the color of it brightened. No single star could be distinguished. The sky was too bright for that. It was as if the sun was slowly rising, only the sun was three hours to the east.

And then the sky was brighter than it was at noon. The light was unbearable, and the whole city emptied into the streets, awakened by this odd daybreak in the middle of the night.

The Emperor was filled with joy, as the last innocent child was slaughtered in his courtyard. He truly commanded the earth and the sky.

And then he was struck with a thought as he remembered what his wise advisor had told him.

"Call my next wisest advisor," said the Emperor to his closest advisor, a man who was neither beautiful or wise, nor righteous or pure, and certainly not a man who loved or was loved.

"Yes, your Eminence," said the advisor. And he returned quickly with the wisest of the Emperor's Advisors, who worked in the kitchen.

"How may I serve you, Your Eminence?" asked the wisest advisor, as she stepped over the body of her husband and onto the balcony. She blinked at the light. There were no shadows.

"How long will these stars last? When will they fade? My advisor said that they would. Must I kill my entire Empire to sustain this light?"

"My husband told me that the light of the star is proportional to the light of the spirit." The wisest advisor looked to the point in the sky where the star that had been her only daughter did shine. The sky was so bright that she could not hold her eyes open for more than a few seconds.

"But I have already killed all my most virtuous subjects. The sky will never burn as bright as it does this second. I am saddened."

The wisest advisor stepped close to the Emperor.

"But you, Your Eminence, were lord over all of them, no matter their virtue."

After a moment, the Emperor nodded. "Yes." He paused again. "Would it be brighter than all of this? Would my star be greater than this day-break?"

"Its effect would be like none that you have seen tonight." The wisest advisor gently pulled the dagger from the Emperor's sheath.

"Would it truly exist for all eternity? Would I truly be remembered?"

"You will truly be remembered."

"Yes. That is what I wish. So be it."

"Yes, Your Eminence." The wisest advisor plunged the dagger into the Emperor's back, and stepped away as the man fell to the ground.

The Emperor lay there with wide, blind eyes staring at the sky. "It is so dark," he whispered. His eyes fluttered shut and he exhaled his last breath and the city was covered in black darkness. Not a single star shone in the sky.

Screams of panic echoed from the streets, but the wisest advisor of the last Emperor stood calmly by the rail of the balcony watching the sky. For a moment she was worried that the darkness of the Emperor's death was too great. But finally, she saw a star, dim and shimmering, but still a star of virtue, appear far above her.

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