

# IMPERIAL JUSTICE

A SHORT STORY BY THE WORLDSMITH

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Arland's eyes opened wide at the sound of the scream that came from the grounds outside. Throwing off his blankets he ran to his window and peered out.

The immaculately kept estate grounds were lightly lit by the waxing crescent of the sliver moon, Senrix-Luna. Even amongst the many shadows and dark corners, which were created by the garden beds and hedges, Arland could see two shadowed figures dragging the body of one of the grounds' guards into a clump of nearby bushes.

**Shit**, Arland thought as he pushed from the window sill and turned to a pile of clothes on a nearby chair, hurriedly searching for his pants to put them on. Adrenaline started to course through his body, making his hands tremble and causing him to fumble with his belt buckle.

Eventually putting the belt through the metal loop he pulled the strap to its end then froze, as from the floor above he heard the creak of floorboards as someone moved in one of the rooms. "My Lord" he whispered to himself as the gravity of the situation dawned upon him.

Arland knew that there was no way that the two figures he saw outside could have made it to the top floor of the manor in that time, there had to be more; what worried Arland now was how many?

Securing his belt around his waist, Arland looked at his chain mail armour that hung upon a stand, but decided against it, time was of the essence and he needed to get to his Lord's room as quickly as possible. With this thought he picked up his sword from the head of his bed and removing the leather strap from its scabbard Arland opened the door of his room.

The corridor outside was dimly lit by the meagre moonlight that filtered through the curtained window at one of its ends, making it quite dark. **At least I'll have some cover**, Arland thought as he started towards his destination.

Although the corridors were constructed with floorboards, they were covered with lush rugs which dampened Arland's footsteps as he darted to the corner and peering around, he briefly paused to listen and observe.

Arland had practiced this run many times during his earlier years and was now thankful for the time he had spent doing so. His main objective was to get to his Lord's bedroom which was located on the floor above.

In the still quiet of the house Arland noticed that he was breathing faster and not only had the trembling of his hands changed to a tingling sensation, but also his stomach had started to feel hollow. Arland knew that these were the first signs of fear and if he didn't get a grip on himself and his emotions he'd be of no use in a fight. With this he took a deep, slow breath to calm himself and clenched then extended his fingers to stretch them.

The hallway was grander than the corridor that he was coming from and was one of the main thoroughfares through this section of the manor. As such, it was much wider and due to several large windows that ran along its right side, it had an alternating pattern of shadow and light along its length.

Peering down at the end of the corridor, Arland caught some movement from one of the shadowed areas. Instantly his heart began to race as he tried to see what it was that moved.

There it was again, this time however, Arland let out a sigh of relief and bringing his right sleeve up to his brow, he wiped away some sweat which had started to bead, as he realised it was only a curtain from one of the windows blowing in the breeze.

Moving on to the stairwell, Arland contemplated the situation. It was evident that at least one of them was in the house and had likely gained entry from the window in the hallway. With two outside it meant that he was looking at some long odds for survival. Arland would put a wager on himself against most men in a sword fight but if he had to fight three enemies, odds would be that one of them would get lucky.

**I knew I should have put that armour on**, Arland thought, but quickly reasoned, **no, no protecting my Lord is the priority here.**

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Like the corridors, the stairs were also covered in plush runners, however Arland also knew how old the house was, and although the runner would dampen the sound of his footsteps, he knew that the slats of the staircase make a lot of noise when weight is applied to them. With that in mind he knew to keep to the wall as he ascended.

Passing the threshold of the stairwell, Arland felt something cold and wet drip onto his face. Startled, he jumped back and letting out a nervous cry, he nearly lost the grip upon his sword as his hand opened in an instinctual reaction.

Quickly putting his back up against the nearest wall, he let go of his scabbard and wiped his face. Drawing his hand away he could see a dark smear running across his palm. Bringing it back to his face he sniffed and then licked a little of the smear. Recoiling, he realised that it was blood.

Spitting out the bitter taste from his mouth, Arland returned to the stairwell and looked up.

In the dim light he could see the line of blood trickling down from the balcony above and to its right he could see a hand limply dangling over the ledge.

With this, Arland began to panic and he stumbled back into the balustrade; gripping it tightly with his free hand he remained upright. Calming himself first, he then wiped his face clean and grabbing his scabbard, he ascended the stairs.

Upon ascension Arland paused; to his right was the body of one of the servants lying face down. Swallowing hard, he stepped away from the scene and walked towards his Lord's room. However after only a few steps, he could see that his Lordship's door was slightly ajar and soft moonlight was emanating into the hallway from it.

The sound of steel being drawn from its sheath cut through the eerily quiet surroundings as Arland drew his sword and approached the doorway.

Arland held the scabbard in his left hand with a solid grip and kept it at about chest height. He had heard from a Tyremthius trader that warriors in Syan often used the sheaths of their weapons as an alternative to using a shield. He was sure that their sheaths would be reinforced allowing them to do this. He also knew his was not, but it would at least be better than nothing, besides he could throw it as a distraction if he needed.

Putting his left foot against the door's base to stop it being pushed back in his face, Arland put his scabbard against the door and opened it wide, "My Lord are you there?"

Silence was the only answer to his question.

Arland could see a still form lying on the bed and the lack of any response brought an ill feeling to his stomach. Ignoring what lay under the covers, he scanned the rest of the room but could see nothing out of place. With this he stepped into its centre in a defensive pose ready to react to any hidden assailants. But none came. All was quiet and still within the room.

A cloud outside passed in front of the moon dimming what lustre it gave. The change in lighting startled Arland and he jumped to face the window with sword raised. Realising that his nerves and mind had started to take control of him, Arland shook his head to clear his thoughts and then quickly closed the door to the room and latching it, made his way to the bed.

As he had suspected when his Lord had not woken at his entry, his Lord was dead. Lying in the large bed, was the body of his Lord with its throat slit and a wound in its chest, both of which were freely bleeding and had severely stained the white cloth sheets that he was sleeping in.

Arland looked at his Lord's face and was taken aback by the expression of horror and pain that it displayed. His eyes were wide open and his mouth was poised as if it had been trying to gasp in air, while the wisps of white hair that were unkempt due to sleep, only added to the horror of the scene.

Arland turned his head away from the bed briefly and took a breath to quell the rising bile from his stomach. Then returning to the scene, closed his Lord's eyelids and brought his arms, which were flayed out to the side of his body, back to its sides. Raising the blood-soaked sheets, Arland brought them up to cover the body of the deceased.

Standing from his kneeling position next to the bed, Arland walked towards the door of the room and quickly thought about his options.

The idea of climbing out of this room's window briefly came to mind, but he dismissed it as it would expose him to the two figures he had seen earlier in the estate grounds. Realising that escape through the grounds may be too dangerous, he was left with one option, the tunnel from the servants' quarters.

With a plan of action, Arland roused from his thoughts to find himself standing in front of the closed door. Looking back one last time at the now covered body of his former Lord, the retainer brought his focus back to his own situation. Already he could feel his stomach tightening, making him feel slightly nauseous, and the impulse to simply run and escape the situation continuously gnawed at his body.

Again Arland took a deep breath, and then unlatching the door, he cautiously opened it peering into the half-lit hall outside.

To his relief Arland saw that there was nothing but the still environment in which he had made his way here earlier. Although reassuring in one sense, the sensation of fear started to rise once again within him and he unconsciously shut the door. ***Should I stay here?*** He thought, ***if they have already slain my Lord then perhaps they will not return, as their job is done.*** Although the idea was appealing, Arland knew that he needed to get out of the estate if he was to survive.

Taking his hand off the door knob he grabbed a tuft of his hair and pulled it, ***get yourself together,*** he scolded; ***there's no one else to protect here now but you, take it slow and easy.***

Snorting a short breath out from his nose, Arland straightened his back and once again opened the door, wider this time, and stepped into the hallway to head for the stairwell.

Although moving carefully at first, when Arland once again looked upon the corpse of the servant, a wave of panic overcame him; the only impulse he had was to flee.

Carelessly he made his way down the staircase, the steps creaking and groaning under his hurried weight, echoing throughout the corridors as he descended to the ground floor.

His flight came to a halt as the creak of floorboards from behind made Arland stop, and pirouette. Silhouetted against the moonlit corridor behind him appeared a figure.

With his fear now unchecked it overtook his senses and Arland frantically ran to his left, his only thoughts were on escape, behind him however he could hear his pursuer giving chase.

Knowing that the servants' quarters were not far, he ran as fast as he could but each step was laboured as the strength of his legs started to fade and each passing stride seemed to take longer to make than the last.

With his heart pounding, Arland blindly made his way through the manor house and clumsily tripping on one of the runners, he fell to the ground, losing the grip upon his sword as he did so. Ignoring the sharp pain of the fall he gathered himself up and continued, picking up his weapon as he passed it.

The closer he got to his destination, the greater the urge to escape became and finally he turned into the corridor leading to the kitchen and his freedom.

Looking behind him to check his pursuer he realised that he was too slow, as his foe was upon him. In desperation he turned to face the figure.

It was dressed in a tight fitting black outfit and hood that masked everything but its eyes. Its right arm was angled slightly behind its body; in that hand it held a long bladed dagger while it concealed something in its left which it had brought across its midriff.

To add to the scene the figure seemed to blur and waver as its outline and form distorted and rapidly changed where it seemed to be standing. At one moment it was to the left of the corridor then it magically shimmered, darting to the right and a little behind where it was previously.

Regardless of its distorted positions one thing was certain, it was taking large gaited steps towards him.

Arland stood there frozen, hypnotised with fear, as this was a combatant that he was not familiar with, and as a wave of helplessness washed over his body, he felt his muscles weaken and the strength drain further from his legs.

As his opponent shifted its way closer, Arland's vision was becoming tunnelled, the periphery of his sight was now black and all he could see was the image of this figure surrounded by what little light there was.

Before Arland truly realised what was happening, the figure had drawn close enough and acted, throwing a cloud of dust into Arland's eyes as it engaged. Futilely he brought up his left arm as an instinctual response to the attack, but was unable to stop the cloud from blurring his vision further. In a desperate attempt to defend himself and unable to properly see, he weakly thrust forward with his sword.

Sharp pain erupted from his back; Arland's mouth opened wide as the pain rippled through his body and his back arched in spasm. Even with his mouth open he could not take a breath, and although his eyes were wide, he could not see more than a few blurred images. Then the pain came again, this time slightly higher and with it the light at the end of the tunnel became increasingly distant as the blackness enveloped his vision. In his last few moments the only thought that ran through his mind was ***shit, this is it.***