



S.H.E.O.L.

**The story of the Fall**

## THE DARKNESS

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Darkness. Before, I didn't truly know the meaning of this word. I didn't imagine how immense, all-pervading, and truly horrifying it could be because the more you try to evade it, the more you sink into it like an endless vortex that overwhelms and consumes everything. It dulls your thoughts, crushes your soul, saps strength from the young, and steals the voice from the old. We can't help but be terrified of the power that has descended upon us and robbed us of our planet.

Yet, we still endure, we still resist. On the ruins of what once were our great metropolises, now stands our Citadel, the Island of Light. Valiantly, with its three-hundred-meter-tall walls, it challenges the shadows. What is left of humanity has gathered here, to fight, to hope, or to brave it out until the end.

Today, I went up with one of my pupils to the top of the Citadel's walls to look out on the horizon. It was cold, and the wind blew relentlessly from the distant mountains. The darkness, seen from above, looks like a vast, boundless ocean that swallows lightly, almost quivering as if it were alive. Somewhere down there, terrible beings move among what is left of our cities in search of the last survivors or surrounding small outposts of Exiles that still dare to shine light opposing the destruction.

The child leans out over the wall, like a lighthouse keeper on a cliff, barraged by a raging storm. The circle of light that surrounds our ramparts gleams dimly of what could be considered the strange magic of technology, casting away the shadows that try to penetrate our stronghold. No one knows what the shadows' purpose is, if not to that of bringing desolation and death to everything in their path.

Two large sentinel mechs watch over the gates of the Citadel's walls. They await one of the few merchants traveling here from the external outposts or the scouts who dare to brave the darkness to look for something they too are unsure of what it is. Sometimes I think that everything we do, everything that we all do is all in vain.

So much time has passed since the day the sun shone on our Earth that I can't even remember the feeling of warmth on my skin and, even less, the color that light bestowed on everything. Explaining it to my son, I tell him that it was like the fire that warms us in the giant furnaces of the Citadel, or the suspended lamps of engineers shining bright on the Second Level of this Island of Light, but bigger, much bigger. He struggles to imagine it.

How much I wish that one day he could see the sun, even if for just an instant, so that he may hold the memory of it in his heart. Perhaps when the magnificent Spire of the Luminary Monks is expanded, it will be possible by climbing up its thousand steps, ascending beyond the void-like ocean that has enveloped our planet. Aviators say that our sun, high up there somewhere, still exists. For now, all we can do is to trust their word for it.



## THE LOSS OF THE MOON

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It all started many years ago, after contact with one of the stations on the dark side of the Moon was lost. No one could understand how all communications could so suddenly get interrupted. Nonetheless, every shipment that started from the logistics stations on the light side of the Moon to the dark side did not return, and every probe that was sent there stopped transmitting. The dark side of the Moon turned indeed into the unknown place that had intrigued astronomers since ancient times.

Then, a few months later, the scar appeared. A thin set of murky lines could be seen

forming, just on the peripheral edge of the Moon. Every telescope in the world focused on it, while day after day, the cracks expanded, like dark cancer, enveloping the once familiar Earth's satellite. Scientists from the evacuated bases on the Moon who had seen it up close described it as a set of obsidian rivers that swallowed light, a shapeless mass similar to solid smoke that branched out in all directions, chaotic, evil.

The most incredible theories were formulated: there was talk of aliens, of failed experiments, quantum strings, and creatures from another plane of existence. In the end, though, nobody could understand the true nature of the black ocean. Nations organized a series of independent missions to study it, but as soon as the probes approached the Moon, every single contact ceased, as if they had never existed.

Thus, while the brightest minds worked to solve the mystery and the most fragile either fell into a panic or devoted themselves to religion, the dark mass continued to grow and proliferate. It seemed that the deep void of space itself had chosen to engulf the Moon. After some time, the Moon became an invisible, aphotic disk that hid from view the cold, distant stars.

For a few months, there were no changes as if it had entered a stasis. Then, just when people had started to calm down, the worst began.



## THE WEEPING OF THE MOON

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There is an age-old legend telling of a time when the Moon was dark and, frightened by the surrounding abyss, it wept. From its tears, the demons that populated the Earth since time immemorial were born. This weeping continued until the Sun, moved, decided to give the Moon a part of its own light. The Moon stopped crying, but not before shedding one final tear made of light. This gave rise to the first humans, who defeated the demons and took over the Earth.

When the Moon began to swell on the side facing Earth, and a pitch-black stream of darkness trickled down toward the planet, some believed the apocalypse was upon us, while others thought it was filled with the demons coming down to Earth to reclaim it.

The great powers reacted strongly: dozens of antimatter missiles were launched to repel the lunar tears. At first, they worked and dispersed the mass of darkness into space, but then the flow increased, and it was clear that nothing could stop it.

In the Citadel subnet, in some almost forgotten virtual layers, there are still images of the day when the flow of Sheol touched Earth's atmosphere. Like ink that spills into a glass of water, the darkness began to contaminate the atmosphere, little by little, obscuring the sun and expanding across the Earth like a black tsunami. I was never as frightened as I was that day, or perhaps I should say that since that day, I have only known fear.

The black tide was neither water nor gas. It was something different, something no one had ever seen before. It was more like a fog or dense smoke capable of devouring you, of stealing life right from within you, if you just ended up immersed in it. Only light could keep it away; only light could save you but how can you escape something that keeps getting stronger?

Those were terrible days. Millions died as the darkness grew more and more dangerous. The nights were always longer and colder, and resources scarcer. In less than a year, the sun was completely obscured. Nations collapsed. Those who did not defeat the shadows suffered death from the ensuing chaos and the sheer struggle to survive. There seemed to be no more hope for humanity.



## THE ISLAND OF LIGHT

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However, humans are resilient creatures. They are adaptable and somehow manage to give their best in times of crisis. Indeed, in a way it was miraculous: all the divisions that had plagued our society for millennia were suddenly set aside and, with the latest resources available, the lux, the liquid light, the only weapon capable of destroying Sheol's darkness and the shadows that move inside it was discovered. Little is known of those days, except that it was too little too late. The humans who had survived were too few to claim back a world that had become boundless and alien.

Thus, the Citadel became humanity's new home and new hope. Light for us is everything. It is what stems the tide of shadows, which allows us to warm ourselves, what feeds our machines, and brings life to our homes. In every level of the Citadel, even the upper ones where the wealthier classes live, every human being strives to preserve the light. Some of the beautiful areas of the Citadel or the efficiency of its greenhouses sometimes fool us into believing that we are self-sufficient, but the truth is that our resources are limited. The shadows are waiting for our lights to go out or the lux reserves to end.

Periodically, scout groups must leave the Citadel and head out in search of spare parts or other vital resources that we cannot produce directly to ensure the survival of the Citadel. Many do not return. Fewer and fewer individuals volunteer for expeditions.

Ours is a constant struggle against the darkness that holds us hostage, and every day becomes a more deadly challenge.

## RESIST

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We have been going on like this for years. These days of eternal night that we call “cycles” make it difficult to keep track of the passage of time. Even the seasons no longer exist, there is only an immense cold stasis that covers the whole world.

By now, most people think that the Island of Light is approaching its end and take refuge in the virtual worlds of the subnet or indulge in alcohol in the slums. They no longer want to think about the world of darkness that surrounds us, and they are content with the decadent microcosm that has become the Citadel. Only scouts, despised by most because they still remember humanity’s failure in the face of darkness, hold faith in the future. Some of them, teams of brave individuals, travel through the land of the night, resisting the cold, the attacks of the shadows, the terror that devours the souls, and the infinite solitude because they still hope.

Perhaps I am delusional, but I am firmly convinced that these men and women will be our way to victory against the shadows and the day will soon come, yes, the day will come when we will finally reclaim our home, our planet, our Earth.

