

# Depths of Mardasus

The Consequence of Happiness

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Mardasus, City of the Deepest Dark. Vern was stunned by its beauty, following the descending spiral with his eyes and letting it all wash over him. At the centre of the city, so far below, it coalesced in a pit of black so terrifying that he couldn't help himself from gawking. It was, after all, why he'd come so far.

Vern crossed the empty fields outside the city, then entered without being checked by the guards. He wasn't sure they were even awake, the way they slouched against their post. But they were smiling, so maybe it was their break and they thought him alright to let in.

The people beyond the gates were smiling too, which was to be expected. He'd heard this was the happiest city in the world, and to become a citizen you just had to brave the dark that the city grew from. His own smile was weary, after all he'd been through to get here, but it looked like it would be worth it in the end.

The city was designed by its rulers, and the farther one got from the central pit, the more colourful it was. Up by the gates, everything was bright reds and blues and greens. There was a stable painted the worst shade of pink he'd ever seen, but he already felt better just seeing it. Looking over a railing, down below he saw the gradual fading of the colours to grey and then deepening to black.

Vern's back was sore and his arm hurt from a poorly healed break, but there was almost a spring in his step as he turned left

and descended the spiral. Oddly, there were no stairs or ladders that would let him take shortcuts down, so he followed the one road, passing gate after gate every ten minutes or so.

After reaching the grey section of the city, he stopped for a moment. The smiles seemed as wide as ever, but there was something churning inside that told him to turn back. He'd left a lot behind, but it was worth it. Right? All he had to do was brave the black and he'd be as happy as these people...

He looked at their expressions again. There was a glassy quality to their eyes. What was wrong with these people? Would he—

The gate he'd just passed through slammed shut behind him, startling him and getting him walking again. He lost his train of thought and started to dream of happiness once more. He rotated his arm at the shoulder, working out the ache.

Vern passed through another gate, thinking about the war he'd fled, way back in the north. He'd discarded his thick coat along the road somewhere when it had gotten too warm for it. He'd lost his backpack running from some wolves just before he reached Mardasus, but he wouldn't need it now. He'd be provided for.

As he walked through each gate it would close behind him with a crash, but he paid it no mind. There was something in the air that kept him walking. A smell. A scent. Mother's bread in the oven, or a beautiful woman's perfume. It had been getting stronger as he went deeper, and he want to know its source. If his own unlucky life hadn't driven him here, then hearing of this wondrous fragrance would have.

After an hour of walking he reached the black section. He stood at the railing a moment to stretch his legs and turn his

ankles in the air. Looking down into that void was amazing. It was close enough the if he leaned over he felt like he could touch it, but he didn't dare. If he fell he might never reach the reward. It was a tantalising thought, however. He couldn't tell if it was liquid or gas, but the darkness was dense and slowly billowing.

Rested, Vern continued through three more gates before reaching the edge of the darkness, like a pool, waiting for him to wade in so it could pull him down. He took another look at the people, something inside him telling him to really pay attention before stepping in.

The smile drew his eyes first. They must be happy. That was a gentle smile. Then he saw the eyes again. It was a placid smile. It was an empty smile. The people here were covered in black splotches on their neck and cheeks, their clothes stained by some unknown subst—

A voice so perfect that the universe itself shook came from below. He had to know where that song was coming from. It was a feminine voice, soft tones and melodious. He stepped into the black lake and it parted in a cloud around him. As he walked it wrapped him in a soft and comforting blanket of ebon fluff.

What was the song? He thought he'd heard it before but just couldn't place it. It was tugging at his mind but it was trying to evade him.

He walked on, determined to find whatever it was down here that would give him his happiness. The joy he sought so fiercely. The ground was smooth, but not slick, and each step was muffled by the fog. He couldn't see anything, but kept his hand on the wall as he continued to follow the spiral.

It was the black fog. That was the smell. It had the scent of

everything good he could remember, shifting as his mind drifted from memory to memory. It was the fresh linen as his father read him a bedtime story. Then it had the undeniable scent of the flowers on his grandparents' farm. And then it was the scent of firewood as he chopped it. Then the scent of his first love's perfume.

He stepped out of the fog into an open clearing, a swirling black dome above his head. At the centre of the area was a woman, entirely naked and singing that beautiful song. She had smooth, pale skin that made her stand out in the darkness and black hair that was so long it spilled across the floor behind her.

He stepped towards her, finally remembering where he'd heard the song. It was from a travelling showman who'd set up in a tavern not far from his army's camp. He'd sung this song and told the tale of Mardasus, happiest city in the world. He'd talked with Vern and told him to seek his joy in the pit. He had those same dark splotches on his neck.

The woman took him in her arms and stood on the tips of her toes. As she stopped singing the black fog stopped moving. Her form changed and the spell broke. Her mouth stretched to reveal endless layers of fangs and eyes, her fingers and toes became tendrils that restricted him, choked the air out of him, invaded his nostrils and mouth. Why had he come here? He didn't remember anything before entering the city.

Suddenly she was beautiful again, smiling at him. His vision fuzzed, and he smiled back...



Tomil looked into Mardasus, City of the Deepest Dark, from a rock near the gate. It was a wonderful spiral going deeper and deeper until it ended in a pit of the purest black he'd ever seen. He'd come a long way from the south to be here, after being told that all he had to do to join the residents here was to brave the black at the bottom.

Near the gates they were building a new house outside the walls, just inside the groove in the ground that would become the spiral of the city. The area descended so naturally towards the source of the joy that he soon found his feet moving on their own. He passed the gates, unchecked by the guards, who were smiling as they watched the men work to build the new house. And... what was that smell? It was wondrous.