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The Shadow

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The Shadow

Description

A man creates a forbidden servant to wipe out rebellion in his empire.

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About the Contributor

Corrissa Smith is a student at Cedarville University who majors in computer science, studies music, and experiments in all things art.

THE SHADOW

Corrissa L. Smith

The room was dark, until he uncorked the bottle. Red light flashed up to the vaulted ceiling, away to the far columns, and forward onto the wall of interlocking sigils and the winding ribbons of narrative text. He tipped the stone flask. Fire poured out and cast light against the slender neck. The molten fluid hissed along curves and lines, writing in flame in the dusty tracks of the stone floor. Blood. Ruin. Flame. Shadow. Heart.

This was the creature he needed. A perfect monster. One that would answer only to its blood, to the fire, to his blood. He knelt in front of the runes and breathed in the ancient air. Pressed his palms against the cool stone, and whispered the old enchantment.

The fire retreated as he spoke, coalescing against the wall into a glowing figure. The chamber trapped his whispers, echoed them, and as his voice died away, the figure became wrapped in shadow. The man stood in the silence, slowly, his hand straying to the hilt of his sword.

Two blazing, white eyes winked open. The shadow cocked its head, and stumbled forward, as if walking for the first time. The man let his hand fall as the shadow came and knelt before him. There was

something strangely innocent about it: disarming, gentle, for such an instrument of destruction.

“Father?”

The man froze for a moment, then knelt with the shadow, and reached for its shoulder. He marveled at how sleek, and cool, and soft the darkness felt. A mane of smoke drifted about and brushed his hand. But it was the face that took him. Muted features, all but the eyes, the fiery, clear, deadly, innocent eyes.

“Yes?” he replied.

“Who am I?”

“You are my son,” the man said, and embraced the shadow.

It seemed confused, at first, motionless in his arms, and then mimicked him, putting its arms around him. It shivered, and drew closer, as if melting from his body heat, and buried its face in his shoulder.

* * *

He walked back to his estate in a daze, dissolved shadow swirling around his feet at every step, exploring. Anyone who saw him darted indoors. Perhaps they watched him, quaking, through their papered windows.

“Your Eminence,” the man heard, over the march of approaching footsteps.

He turned. Councilor Meridan in deep velvet, come with armed lackeys.

“That creature is a danger to us all!”

“I regret your cowardice more than your treachery,” the man said. He made the smallest gesture, and the shadow shot out from beside him. Cries arose from the armed guard. Screams, and rending metal. Swords slashed at the air, hitting nothing but the enveloping smoke that rose and choked all sound.

Then, in the silence, the smoke withdrew and the shadow reformed. The man surveyed the carnage. Bodies, slashed across throat or chest, only once. Viciously. Economically. He smiled at the look of terror frozen into Meridan’s jowls.

The shadow stood still, staring at its hands.

“You were perfect, son.” The man set his hand on the shadow’s shoulder, on the darkness softer than silk. It shifted to stand against his warmth. Childlike eyes absorbing the praise from its father.

* * *

“You had Meridan killed today.” It was her first remark since supper began, the two dining in the privacy of her balcony.

“You’re displeased.”

“If you’re willing to murder your own puppets, what should that tell *me*?”

“You are my honored guest, Senator.”

“No, your prisoner. Why you think I might ever give you my support is beyond me—”

“Senator, please. When have I been anything but kind?”

“Kind to whom? Me? Meridan? The people?”

A knock interrupted them, and the man leapt up. Before he could go even a pace, the shadow stumbled into the Senator’s quarters. “Father!” it rasped, clutching its shoulder.

“What happened?” the Senator cried.

The man peeled the shadow’s hand back, revealing a gash of light across its shoulder. Foaming white radiance, bleeding.

“What did this?” the man asked sharply as he pulled the shadow over to the table. There, he pricked himself on his knife and rubbed a drop of blood over the gash. It sealed instantly. Scarless.

The shadow proffered a rusted knife, gingerly, and the man lifted it. Impossible. No one but he

himself could even harm the creature. Was this his old hunting knife? Perhaps something *of* his had the potential to injure the creature as well. This was a vulnerability unaccounted for, and quickly exploited. He would have to double down on the insurgency.

“Will it happen again?” the shadow whimpered.

“Are they dead?”

“I killed them, Father.”

“Then no, child,” he said, pulling it into his arms. “No one else could ever hurt you, except me.” He stroked the shadow’s back as it lay against his shoulder. “And I never will.”

* * *

The Senator insisted on naming the shadow. She called it Elendi. And though it ate nothing, she requested its presence at supper day after day. He suspected her fondness for it was a result of concealing anything she felt for him. Let her do it, then. Every now and again she’d let a smile slip through. The shadow’s blood loyalty would not be bothered.

He didn’t tell her of the rebel hunts. Of the nights when he and the shadow prowled the mesa’s caves and catacombs. Of the desperate struggles of those they cornered; of standing back, arms folded, as the shadow closed in. Did he fear them? The man feared nothing for his own safety. The shadow never let a soul touch him. But he feared their knowledge. They had found a weakness, and the shadow couldn’t heal without him.

* * *

A speech, a fortnight after a rebel cell was cleared. He’d dismissed the shadow indoors and stood over the courtyard. Intimidation was not what he wanted, not right now.

When there are no rebels, he promised, there will be peace.

He saw a silhouette rise above the crowd, and his words died. A figure climbing up a statue amidst them. *The silhouette*—he began to take a step back—*held*—he tried to turn, and dive to the ground—*a bow*—but before he could turn far, an arrow sang across the courtyard and slashed past his shoulder and into his ribs. The shadow rushed out and stood over him in the calamitous noise, his guards filled in between him and the railing, and a physician broke off the bloodied shaft. He was carried into the nearest bedroom, where the physician cut the arrowhead from his chest. Not too serious, he pronounced, wrapping the man’s shoulder tightly. His mantle had likely saved him a month’s recovery.

The shadow stumbled in, hands pressed against spiderwebbed cracks in its chest. It paused against the wall to yank out an arrow-shaft, the headless shaft that had been spattered with the man’s blood. The shadow ran to his side.

“Father! Father, are you well? Father, I failed you,” it panted. Wisps of light leaked between its claws and curled up to the ceiling.

He raised his good arm to point to the door. “Go kill whoever did this,” he barked. “Find whoever was involved. Get answers before they get away.”

The shadow bowed and dashed away.

There were bodies, but no answers. It returned again and again, bowing, hand clutched to chest. Never news of the rebels. The man scarcely spoke but to send it again.

The Senator expressed little concern for his well-being, though he came to supper with his arm in a sling for weeks. He kept the shadow away until the day it burst into her quarters unbidden—“Father! Father,” it cried. “The assassin is dead.”

“Where was he from? Who was he working with?”

“I could not—”

“Go!”

And the shadow bowed, light leaking through its claws, and dashed away.

“You haven’t healed him?” the Senator asked. Her fingers strayed to the blade of her knife. The man gave silence for answer.

* * *

He left for a week, paying respects to one of his lords further south, as proof that he was neither ill in bed nor dying. The shadow had work to do, and remained behind. It was upon his return that he

went to supper and found the shadow there before him, talking quietly with the Senator. The shadow’s wound had become an old scar.

“You’ve gone beyond murder this time,” she snapped once she saw him. “They were *children!*”

Bile rose in his throat as she described the acts of terror. “On my life, Senator, I gave no such order.”

“Yes, you did,” the shadow hissed, almost thoughtfully. “You ordered it directly, Father.”

The man’s blood thickened with ice. “Did you— *lie* to me?”

“I can’t. I’m bound to you. Aren’t I?”

“Senator,” the man whispered, around a pasty tongue and numb lips. “Senator.” He tried. He tried, desperately, to get her away from the shadow. She didn’t see the danger. Gave him a pointed look, and didn’t move.

“What do you want?” he asked the shadow.

“I want you to be proud of me, Father.”

“I—I have been.”

“Yet you say nothing. Am I nothing to you?”

“You,” he faltered, “you are my son.”

The shadow rubbed the spiderwebbed scar on its chest. “Do you love me?”

He saw the look in its eyes. Frightened, pleading. White and blazingly cold, icy, dark. *Senator. Senator, move.*

“You love her,” it whispered, slowly, “more than you love me.”

The Senator finally understood, startling from her seat, but the shadow grabbed her. She screamed. It hissed back at them, claws against her throat.

“I’ll kill her!”

“You won’t!” the man said. “Stand down. You have no right to disobey me.”

“Your mistake,” the shadow spat. “That’s no longer true.”

He saw the claws flex.

“No! *Celeste!*”

The shadow stared at her blood, flowing over its claws, then flinched back and dropped the body.

“I made you!” the man roared. “You have no right to do this! None!”

But he raged at air. The shadow fled out the window and was gone.

* * *

He had never felt quite so strange as that night, sneaking out of his own estate in dark cloak and

sword. Once he’d come to the low, sprawling town, he scaled a ladder onto some family’s flat roof. They had a small potted garden; he skirted the rosemary silently. One foot on the lip of their rooftop, he waited, letting the night’s chill seep through his cloak. The stars hung bright and lonely.

He heard a scream, faintly. A pause, shattered by wailing. And he took off running, leaping over the little alleys. The wailing stopped. He carried on. Perhaps he woke the men, the women, the children sleeping under him as he ran across their roofs. Perhaps no one heard him at all.

But the shadow did. He saw it waiting for him, only the blazing eyes, on a rooftop in a swirling mass of smoke. “Elendi,” he whispered. “Son.” Now that he was done running, his wounds burned, throbbing in his chest.

The eyes blinked.

“The fault is all mine,” he said, lowering his sword to the ground.

The shadow took a step forward. The man opened his arms, and the shadow came to him. For one heartbeat, two, he stood with its head against his shoulder, cool and soft and silky.

Then he wrested the two of them to the floor, locking his arm around the shadow’s neck. The shadow’s claws raked him. It burned. Like fire and poison. As they rolled over, his sweat-beaded face came pressed up against the shadow’s ear.

“I never should have made you,” he growled.

The shadow kicked and thrashed and tried claw its way free, but screamed in pain with every rivulet of blood that touched its skin. He pinned it to the ground and twisted, twisted until the shadow froze, panting in his arms.

“Father—”

He gave one last, vicious, twist. The shadow’s neck snapped. Cracks splintered over its body, light and smoke seeping over his arms, spilling to the ground, swirling away. He lay back and closed his eyes, unmoving, chest heaving. Arms still wrapped around the body, until dawn.