



# GREEDY SHADOW

ERIC SHANE LOVE



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A highly detailed, black and white ornate border surrounds the central text. It features intricate scrollwork, floral motifs, and swirling patterns, reminiscent of Art Nouveau or Victorian book design.

# A GREEDY SHADOW

ERIC SHANE LOVE  
ILLUSTRATED BY LOGAN PEYMAN



GLINT & SHADE  
Book Two

*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.*

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## STAINED

The fire blazed, burning her skin and blistering her eyes with hot tears. Still, she could not look away. Neither could she quite believe what she saw in the flames.

It came first as a ripple in the elhwith, drawing her into it past the flames of her hearth fire and onto the landscape of the other. Marta knew these plains well. She'd traveled in the other realm enough to understand its constitution, both fundamental and cosmetic. But this was something unfamiliar, and it was ugly.

She breathed deeper, allowing the revelations to fill her lungs so she might better bridle them. The elhwith had as many faces as her own world: sunshine. Night tide. Summer storms. Winter calm. But she had never seen this face before. Shimmering above the darkened landscape was a burnished green horizon. She knew this green, but it had never appeared so angry or taken up so much space. Never had it felt more dangerous.



Something had agitated an ages old darkness. What began as a ripple was now becoming a tremor, and Marta steadied herself, both in the other and on her stool in her tiny hut, the fire there drawing perspiration from her skin like bunches of sour grapes.

She could not make sense of this occurrence in its meaning or intention, but she felt it reach inside her like oil saturating cloth. Her instinct was to push back—and hard. To pull out until she could better navigate the risks . . . but an illogical need to understand anchored her in place.

There was a cry then, and she turned toward it. In the distance, on a rise of stone high in the sky, lifeblood was spilled. A witch's blood, and one whose power was not earned but created. Marta felt her own strength go out in a flood, and she bent low. Her breathing was labored and hot. Back in her hut, the heat was stifling. But here in the other, the cold was hotter.

A brutal voice rose into the dark sky behind her. An old low voice, its bellows rose to a pitch that tore at her ears. She covered them with her hands, knowing this would make little difference here, and turned to face the source. To the east, but lower. This was not the voice of a folken. Nor was it faye. What then? If not human or magical being, who owned this voice? It was a behemoth, whatever it was.

Again, Marta stilled herself and drew in the other, breathing it deeper. This was risky, she knew. But it was necessary. It was no accident that she had been called here. She squared herself to face the behemoth, to fix it with her gaze. And she did. It leapt into the air before her in shapeless malice, far across a vast distance yet as close as her own breath. Had there been a sun here now, this dark thing would have blotted it from the sky. She felt seething tears running down her face, and she knew whatever she needed to understand, she must learn quickly. Her body could take only so much. She clutched at her ehwain and that vital substance that made her Eri. That made her fayelee. That made her Eri-Marta.

"Show me," she said to the behemoth. "Show me or be silent."

The ground beneath her jumped, and she almost fell. But she wasn't standing, not really. Not on her legs, anyway. She reached out with her spirit to find her many talismans back in her hut. Her silver bowl for seeing. Her braid of the Eries. The memory of her son. A burnished auroch heart. A gilded rumen tooth. And countless other charms she felt but need not name. Only those most sacred to her did she fashion in her mind's eye, and two others besides. These two bent into her thoughts as though summonsed by the calamity itself. But what had an auroch's heart or a rumen's tooth to do with this?



“I said, show me!” Her words hissed out of her like steam, and the behemoth did not answer. But her sight did.

Before her, the shapeless darkness on the elhwith horizon solidified somewhat, becoming a gauzy representation of itself. It was large, but it was not a beast. Not in the proper sense, at least. Though it was sentient and hungry—and incited by betrayal. This was a low place. A dark forest so malevolent, she could taste its hatred. It was violent with anger. Someone had taken something from it. Some promise had been broken. She turned her eyes again to the north, to the rocky rise. Could that be the Crag? she wondered. In her realm, it might be. The elhwith sat like both a gauze lying over her physical realm and as its twin, running perpendicular to it. The geography of each, neither shared nor replicated but suggested between them, would not clarify for Marta what or where she was seeing or what point in her physical world it represented. But the Crag was a dark place, and she felt certain this was where the witch now bled. Not a low place, but something akin to it. And in its belly lived a rip that stretched from there to her own realm and through who knew how many others, or through how many points on their compasses. This rip was the largest she had sensed. She had never dared enter it in this realm or her physical one, not as close as it was to the Barren and all its secrets. She had never needed to and couldn’t imagine she ever would. And the rip was not the origin of the witch’s bleeding, she sensed, so she pulled her thoughts away from it.

She turned again to face the dying witch. No, the dead witch who was now burning. *She’ll not be the only witch to burn this night if you’re not quick, woman*, Marta thought. “Show me,” she said. Her sight did.

She could only make out shapes at first. Movement. Fire. Sadness and victory commingling as sisters in a weary, vexed soul. Then the tremor became a quake. Fire had consumed the last drop of the witch’s blood, and a volley of green anger spouted like volcanic ash into the air, but not from where the witch’s body lay. And not like volcanic ash, but a sibling to it. She turned to face this calamity. It was not new, only growing worse.

The witch’s death was a catalyst setting in motion a hideous reflex, and it reached from horizon to horizon . . . from where in her own realm the sun set each night to the place of its rebirth the next morning. *A broken promise*, she thought. But then she understood better. *A broken pact*.

Her knees buckled as the ground beneath her shook. She felt her body fall from its stool in her hut, and she was thankful it had fallen away from the fire. She no longer needed to study the flames there. She stood before

a gloomier blaze here. A spew of putrid green bellowed into the air farther north and to the west. Marta knew this place well, and she understood more than she liked.

"No," she said, disbelieving. "Not you . . . not yet."

But she was watching as the dragon's breath turned the sky a wretched green. She saw it reach toward the rocks and the dead witch . . . but no. It did not reach for the witch, but for the other one. The vexed soul with the mad dance of emotion spinning inside them.

A band tightened around her heart, and she felt it yank. She fell onto her back, the breath pulled out of her. The band yanked again, dragging her body across the uneven terrain. "Go," she heard a voice say. It was in earnest, but kind. "Go, Marta."

*Who are you?* she tried to ask, but her lungs were still vacated. She breathed in. That's when she sensed them. Two interlopers were close . . . so very close, but not to her. To someone else. To that other tormented presence. Again, she felt for the strength of her charms. Of her seeing bowl, and of her boy's memory. She saw him then, clear as day but somehow in shadow, as if the eventide sun were at his back. She did not believe this. He was older than he had been when he died. Older, but just as broken. Just as bruised. More perhaps, and something besides, something more troubling. Emotion fought against logic for the allegiance of Marta's soul, but she dare not believe this.

"I cannot hold you," the voice warned. "I cannot keep you. You must go. Now."

"But my boy," Marta cried, and she felt new tears wash her face. "My son . . ." She sensed the interlopers, their bleeding presence, press against her son. But also far from him. Why could she not see better? *My boy*, she thought and felt sadness deeper than oceans rage inside her. The sight of her son did more than surprise her. It paralyzed.

"He will come to you. But now, you must go." The voice was soft, but near enough she heard every word. It spoke into her ear, so close she was surprised she hadn't felt the speaker's breath.

The quake grew more spasmodic, but she sensed it was coming to an end. She also sensed once it grew still, it would be more dangerous. A snake hidden in weeds.

Marta rolled to her side, fixing the image of her boy in her thoughts. Wanting more than life to hold him in her arms, the way she had never been allowed in their shared world, and this desire felt like hugging fire. But with this fixed image, she drew strength. She brought herself first to her knees,

then to her feet. She looked again at the billowing cloud of dragon's breath, and she wondered how this must look on the physical plane, or if it might be seen there at all. She looked again at the rock where a dead witch lay, burning to ash. Then she looked at the behemoth. But now, that low place was not alone. The interlopers stood in its midst, placating. Pleading for it to calm. She did not see how they might satiate this force with words alone, magic or otherwise. It was hungry for blood.

She felt the now familiar voice telling her to go. She could not hear it, and that meant something, she reasoned. Golden light began burning in her periphery. She turned to see, but there was nothing in the elhwith. Nothing but darkness and green. Yet this yellow light crept in at the edges of her vision.

"You?" she asked, stunned.

The voice could not answer her, not with words now. And she dare not believe the ancient one had spoken to her. She had seen his likeness but never had they met. In the elhwith or in her realm. It made little sense why he would come to her now. But whether this voice had belonged to the ancient one or to another, she could not confirm. And she knew no matter who it might be, they meant to aid her. She trusted this being, and not just because she had no other choice.

She took one last glimpse at her boy—his form reaching toward her like the long-flung shadow cast by a setting sun—and turned her back on the violence as the final shaking dulled to a rattle. Her skin crawled. A *snake hidden in the weeds*, she thought. She hated to leave her son, but the voice was right. And her son was dead, most of her heart along with him. More died now as she turned away from him. The yellow light in her periphery pulsated like a beating heart. She saw the connection: she had thought of her own dead heart, and the light had answered. But Marta was in no mood for peace just now. She clasped the fabric separating the other from her hut and pulled, feeling the typical pain inside her: at once a ripping and a mending. She pulled herself in through the opening, halfway. Then the yellow dulled, and her heart skipped. She turned again to look at the darkness of the elhwith, only the darkness was no longer green. And it had taken new shape.

"Love," she said, then scrambled back through the rending between worlds. He was close to her now, or would be soon. She felt her guts twist in revolt at this sudden redirection, at her straddling the two realms, but she couldn't stop herself. She had let go of logic and discipline, and she did not care. Her son was here. Somehow, he was here. She had found him. Finally, she had found him . . .

"No," the voice said. So it came as either light or voice, but not both at the same time. The yellow was gone. "This is not your boy, Marta . . ."

But she was seeing him. She felt him. She believed her now fluttering heart more than she could ever believe an ancient. No shade's voice could strip the truth of what she knew for certain in her chest. *Not so dead after all*, she thought, but she could not say whether she had meant her heart or her son. How could this be? "Love," she cried, and her tears came as a flood. Her body taking up the quaking left off by the elhwith. But the elhwith no longer mattered to Marta. The dragon's breath. The dead witch. The behemoth, or its two would-be charmers . . . none of these mattered now. "My son," she said again, but then he stepped into the light cast off from . . . what? Yellow light . . . she understood. Then she saw him: not his silhouette, but his countenance.

His skin was dark, like hers. And he was tall, as her son would have been, but this was not her son. Ash and witch's blood stained his hands. His body was a wreck. He was broken but whole. She heard the twin songs of triumph and despair circling inside him. This boy was a wraith, but also a blinding light. And he was unaware of her or of himself. He could not see in the elhwith. He did not know where he stood. He did not see the dragon's breath, and neither did he see the behemoth. His eyes were downcast, hope all but dulled in them. He did not know who he was or what was in him. A brilliant light so white it stung her eyes burned in his chest and belly. A light so pure she could not trust what she saw. But beside that illumination was an altogether different substance. A darkness that was not a shadow cast off by light, but a residue left behind by evil. Concentrated and clotted, this darkness was not pitch black as it appeared. It was a deep shade of green so absent of light, it was void.

"Stained," she said, and more tears came. "My boy is stained . . ."

The band wrapped round her heart just then, and she knew if she could see it, it would burn yellow. With surprising force, it yanked her out from the elhwith and into her hut. She got one last glimpse of the boy before the rending fell shut. She saw his eyes, and they broke her.

She fell onto her side, wailing. A lifetime of loss and pain poured from her. And as it did, she gathered up their broken threads with all their desperate and fitful grace. Bleeding and heavy, she pulled them into a knot. She tied them fast, and she ate them. She would need their resolve. She would need their clarity, for nothing clarifies like pain.

After hours had passed, she had spent her reserves. Ages of them. And she had feasted on their substance. She sat with her back against the

wall, her body draped in a chill. The fire had long since died out, but not the image. Not the sight of her boy.

“He’s not my son,” she said. “But he is mine, nonetheless.” She dropped her face into her hands, but she had no more tears to offer them. She smelled clay on her palms, and salt. And though she had long been a barren hull, she also smelled her motherhood, rekindled. And if pain brings clarity, this kindling brought formidable strength.

“Get off your ass, Marta,” she said. “Stand up. Your boy is coming. He is coming to you, and both his stains and his light come with him.”





## CHAPTER ONE: CHAPEL OF SPRING

“Hello, boy,” she said.

The girl sat in a pocket of shade in the far corner of the chapel’s ruins, alive with a riot of spring. This was likely the reason he hadn’t seen her until now. Her song had bewitched him, but now her eyes did worse: they drew out of his extremities any control he had over them. His tongue was a limp thing in his wagging mouth. His hands were dead weights at his sides. His legs were wobbling bows, pulled too taut. He stammered, but her hold on him was total.

She laughed. The sound was zyphlen bells. Then, as much to betray him as obey, his mouth spoke.

“She’s beautiful,” he said, breathless. He felt his face burning hot, and he understood that even with his dark skin, she would see his shame like the glowing tip of a firebrand.

She laughed again. “Is she now?” Her cheeks burned, too. Her skin was fair and covered with freckles the same auburn shade as her hair.



Her face was a constellation of sparks in a sea of milk, with two mild suns for eyes.

Eliot cleared his throat of an unwieldy knot. He felt like a child playing at being an adult, or an insect flying into a flame.

Then she was standing and already walking toward him. His heart galloped. His breeches tightened. She would take his hand. She would name this his birthday since he had no memory of his real one, only that he was born in spring. She would kiss his cheek. But not now . . . All that had happened months before. This was a dream. In it, he relived the sweetest moment of his life since he had finished his kohlas, a quest that had promised to make him a man but had served to rob him of his humanity. After his quest, he had wandered for a year before stumbling upon the old chapel and the star shining in its heart.

Cora.

He came back to this memory often, both when awake and while sleeping, to relive those first moments in every detail as though for the first time, but not now. Something interrupted this peaceful repose. The way the pooling shadows in the farthest corners of the chapel folded in on themselves made Eliot alert. How they leaked into the bright warmth of a perfect spring day to leech away its color proved this was not just his memory of meeting the girl. And then Cora stepped into one of these shadows and disappeared out of Eliot's dream. The chapel, filled with sunshine and spring, fell away as well, flakes of color tumbling into darkness.

He didn't wonder where he was going. This, too, was a dreamscape he knew well. He may have frequently revisited those first moments with Cora, but he'd felt this stone beneath him every night since he'd left the witch and her minion, burned to cinders on the Crag. The woodsmen, who had taken him from his father's farm on his errant quest to hunt a scarecrow, had made no appearance since he had reached the witch's hut . . . except in this recurring dream. Their hands always warmed him, even though he never saw them. Even though when he awoke, he hated them. The stone of the altar was a comfort to him in some perverse way. And now he was rushing toward it, trading the chapel of spring for the Place of Skulls.

Eliot stood shin deep in water, the current pressing hard against him. The cold night draped over his naked body like a wet sheet. His skin was gooseflesh, his nipples hard, his testicles walnuts. He should be afraid but could not manage it. This place was so familiar, it almost felt like home.

Chilly hands lifted him from the water. The stone was cold beneath his bare ass, the carvings sharp against his young skin. He threw his head back, willing the night to fall harder upon him.

All around was silence. Eliot had to strain to hear even the difficult murmuring of the creek. This place was not known for its silence, but the bones in the trees beyond were keeping their secrets for once. Though he could not see them, he felt hands on his chest, pressing him flat on the stone. He knew these hands well, and they knew him. They held him still.

Eliot reached to feel his body. His chest and stomach were smooth and soft. There were no scars. Not the faintest hint of hair. Ah, he remembered now. He was just a boy of seven years. He found this truth relaxing. Warmth suddenly replaced the cold of the night and the wet stone. He looked down at himself. In the moonlight, he saw liquid the color of mulberry juice streaming over his chest and stomach. It was warm. Sweet too, he expected. He dipped his fingers into it, putting them in his mouth to suck. It was blood. He saw then the wound in his own flesh, the fountain issuing from it like a living thing. An asp hungry for something, searching his body for it.

The wound was small and just inside his thigh, very close to his little bits. He giggled at this thought. Who would go near his little bits? It was so funny. He was surprised it didn't hurt, but then again, he'd known it wouldn't. He'd experienced this before, night after night. He knew how things would go next. It did not surprise him the blood from his thigh crawled over his chest rather than pooling beneath him. In dreams, blood could do that. In particular, blood animated by hunger could do that.

The invisible hands were back, groping him in the moonlight that turned red blood deep purple. Next, and he knew this was true, the hands would speak their incantations. Their words would tickle his skin even if his ears could not hear them. They would make him want to laugh. Except he wouldn't. That might break the spell of the moment, and he'd grown to love these baleful trysts. They made him feel wanted and powerful. They felt like purpose.

He was not bound to the stone, but he might as well be. He could no longer move his limbs, only his neck. He did not have to see the hands to discern their work. They moved the blood around on his black skin in circles. In patterns. In runes. He liked how it felt. He wanted them to keep doing it, but he knew it wouldn't last. There was something else he had to do, something important that came next. Something he'd waited for all his life. Something from his past he would need to begin soon. Something

this dance of hands and blood on naked skin prepared him for. But before that, he might enjoy this for a few moments longer.

He settled into the pleasure, wrapping himself in it. The hands were attentive. They were efficient. His blood grew sticky on his skin against the night chill. He could feel the tacky mess grab as the hands moved over his body, pushing and pulling on his skin. Rubbing their spell into him. This was his favorite part. Except this time it hurt. Not a lot at first, but his stretching skin felt like it might rip. Like it was being twisted to the point of burning. The dream had never hurt before. He moaned. He meant to cry out but could not open his mouth or conjure the sound. Panic thrust its way into his vision. Something was wrong.

The moon was big overhead, full and low. It swelled with a jostling purple fluid. Eliot scanned the surrounding darkness, looking for something he might grab hold of if he could just convince his arms to move. Perhaps someone was there, someone who could help. A friend. His skin ripped. He felt it like a blade of ice slicing up his middle, followed by an angry heat. He opened his mouth to cry out, but his throat was shut fast.

His arms and legs may now have been stone themselves for all he could control them. His back bowed, but his ass was fixed. And his shoulders. He felt the invisible hands dancing along his nakedness, exploring his broken, bleeding openness. Something moved in his periphery. He turned his head, tilting at a painful angle to better see.

There was nothing there. But there had to be. He'd seen—there it was again. A bulging of the darkness. A pressing from behind it as though a hungry thing wanted in. Somehow Eliot did not believe this intrusion would be friendly. He studied his body, willing the hands to finish their work. He felt them gripping him. Holding him. Squeezing his parts, inside and out. He screamed in his head, and the force of it cracked the moon. A viscous drop splatted on his lips. Eliot looked again at the darkness, the bulging, hungry darkness. It was closer. The movement in the black was virulent. Offensive and manic. It was pressing against the darkness of his dreamscape, pressing itself toward him like a hound on a scent.

And that was it, wasn't it? Eliot felt its hunger for him. He felt its seething lust, a violent craze. He was very aware of his nakedness. He was strapped to a stone cyth by his own imagination, no longer a boy of seven. He was bound within a realm made of dream fabric, and yet an intruder scratched at the door. He was again the sixteen-year-old boy who'd survived his kohlas, only to be devoured here by a new fiend in a familiar nightmare. He struggled against his bounds, fear pooling within

him like a deep reservoir of icy water. If this was a dream—and it was—he could find his way out. He must.

The gurgle of the creek was gone. The only sounds remaining were his frantic breathing, the festering desire stretching the darkness, and the *drip drip drip* of a bleeding moon. And then, his voice at last.

“Wake up,” he said. “Eliot, wake up.”

But the darkness pressed in on him, not from one side but from all sides. It reached for him, sharp needles just beyond an elastic night. A tentacled nightmare grabbing for him with thirsty vigor. Even dream skin has its limits, Eliot feared. What was just beyond the night scrim was worse than the darkness he knew. It was hungrier, and it was real. It was not part of his recurring dream. It was not part of his memory that informed the dream. This darkness was unfamiliar. This darkness was close.

“Wake up, dammit!” Eliot cried. He pulled against the forces pressing his shoulders to the stone. He pulled until he felt the bones come apart inside them. He pulled and pulled. He would pull himself to pieces if he must. That would be preferable to the thing on the other side of night reaching him; if it should reach him, it would take him to whatever foul place it called home. It would digest him there, or worse.

“Talker!” Eliot cried, astonished at his own traitorous instinct to survive. He had once trusted the woodsman, and that had been folly. Yet now, the woodsman was the only hope Eliot could conjure, though neither Talker nor his silent companion made their presence known. “Talker, help me!” Tears stung his eyes. Tears and blood. “Help me, dammit! I’ll give yeh what yeh like!” But Talker was not there. The woodsmen were not there. Their invisible hands were silent, their work completed or abandoned.

There was a rip. Eliot heard it. A heavy coldness poured in on him, wrapping him up in its wetness and surrounding him with violent gratification. He was erect, his penis throbbing. His body arching in exquisite pain. Jolts of electric pleasure funneled through him, engorging him to a painful state. His hands remained fastened to the stone, his neck, arms, and legs cemented in place, but his body spasmed. Fear wrestled for placement against his dark ecstasy.

“Wake up wake up wake up!” he shouted, only aware after his words had come. But the darkness was on him, lusty and expert, and he spent his fluid on his belly as orgasm rippled through him. A waxy cream in a smear of deep purple on his black stomach. And the fat moon burst, a cataract of blood pouring over Eliot in a flood.

Eliot was screaming, scuttling backward on his behind. The nightmare receded into the shadows of his mind. He was in Roland's barn, the first hints of morning tiptoeing their way across the dusty floor. His heartbeat pounded in his ears. He looked down at his bare chest and saw the frantic organ fighting to escape the cage of his ribs. He took several steadying breaths. He had to calm down.

Out back, he washed his face with cold water from a bowl near the tub he used for bathing. He had lived in Roland's barn since coming here. He considered the man and his family. Roland was the strong, quiet sort, and Eliot often found him intimidating. But all it had taken for Eliot to love the man was seeing him dote on his daughter, Cora. Or seeing how his eyes drank in his wife, Leah. Eliot had entertained no illusions: he was not home here, but until now, he had felt safe. Until now, he'd almost believed his dark dreams would fade with time.

The woodsmen plagued his dreams every night. They had since he'd left the Crag, and each night thereafter as he wandered the land, aimless. Even after he found Cora in the chapel of spring. That's what he thought of the ruined chapel. It was bursting with spring life when he'd met her, but more than that, he'd found her there during his own season of rebirth. He had overcome generations of lies by resisting the kohlas of his people, by seeing through the woodsmen's deception, and by defeating the witch and her thin man. He had not accomplished these things on his own. He had his mother's oath to thank—and the help of a strange wizard. It had felt like a lifetime since he had watched the witch burn. His wandering took a full year before he found the chapel—before he found Cora—and that was two months ago. He could yet feel his palm sticky with the witch's bleeding tongue and his fingertips scorched from sifting through the still hot ash for any trace of her survival. But the witch was dead, and her ghost remained on the Crag. Still, even after Cora's eyes turned Eliot into juniper jelly in the chapel of spring, the woodsmen haunted his dreams.

Eliot hated dreaming of the woodsmen every night. He had no memory of what they did to him during those first days of his kohlas, but he thought his recurring dream must be from a fragment of what had happened when he was seven. After the woodsmen had taken him from his father's farm, they had led him through the Dark Wood and into the Place of Skulls. There they had performed a dark rite on a Lynthian altar known as a cyth. And even if he had no memory of this in his waking thoughts, it was buried there in his dreams. Each time he woke from this dream, he hated himself. Not for dreaming it: he had no control over that. But for enjoying it. For

still finding solace in the hands of the woodsmen, even though he knew those hands had never been kind. Though he could not square his delight in his dream with his dread upon waking, at least it had been only a dream.

But now, he wasn't certain of that. The dream fabric had been torn. A new thing had opened and entered it, and this was not a thing from his memory, repressed or otherwise. He hated to think it, but this new presence felt worse somehow. *A new fiend in a familiar nightmare*, he had thought in his dream. *This darkness is new. This darkness is close . . .* And that was it. He was always seven in his dream. This new presence affected his older self. His true self. And it hadn't just comforted him. It had brought him to orgasm.

"What are you, Shadow?" he asked. His skin crawled across his back, as if some wretched thing might answer. "Shadow," he said again.

He went back inside the barn and collected the things he would need for his day's work. In exchange for a place to sleep and three meals a day, Eliot had promised to help Roland rebuild a fence. He had been at this project almost since his first full day on the farm, so he could begin now without Roland. He had promised Leah he would not leave until the fence was finished. Though he had never felt at home here, neither had he ever felt such an urgent need to leave as now. He would keep his promise: he would help Roland finish the fence. But instinct told him this new Shadow had found him on Roland's farm, so he could not stay. A few extra hours of work on a morning charged and stinking from anxiety would only finish the fence sooner. And that was just as well.







## CHAPTER TWO: GRACELESS

Eliot ate his dinner with more enthusiasm than he'd believed he could muster. Roland had noticed Eliot's sour mood but had said nothing. Another reason to respect the man, Eliot guessed. They had worked on the fence all day. After his work, Eliot had wanted only to return to the barn and fall face first into the pile of hay. He had been so tired. But one look at Leah told him he could not turn down supper, and he guessed they were eating earlier just to shorten his labor. Now, sitting in the barn after dinner, he was grateful for it. The food had been hot and good, and there was plenty of it.

He pulled off his boots, a little too big for him but good enough. They felt like sacks of stone tied to his feet now, however. Roland and Leah had given him more than space in the barn to sleep. They'd given him clothes that almost fit, including boots and gloves. He peeled off his socks. They came away like a layer of skin. His body ached, top to bottom. His hands had been bloody patches of blisters for a week or more at the start; the

gloves had done little to prevent this. Now, those blisters were scabbed over and becoming callouses, but his hands still ached. His back felt bludgeoned. His shoulders were burning, his arms were trembling, and his knees were swollen pine knots. But all things considered, Eliot felt good. Perhaps for the first time since watching the shack burn on the Crag, Eliot felt good.

He went out back of the barn to the tub, ready with steaming water. He'd insisted Leah let him draw his own baths. She allowed this, but Eliot knew she enjoyed tending to him. He stripped and climbed in, luxuriating in the heat. He grabbed the soap and began scrubbing. He watched the suds fuss against his scars. Would these skin ghosts left behind from his kohlas go away in time? Maybe. Maybe not. He understood the runes burned into his skin by the woodsmen may never leave. And the scar from the thin man's cut was a mad ridge of angry flesh in the center of his chest, as though it were frozen in time. Perhaps it was best if these never faded. Best if he could never forget them.

He slid under the water's surface, feeling the heat penetrate his scalp. Surround his face. He waited like that as long as he could, so long his chest demanded air. He pushed himself out of the water again, leaning back against the tub. He worked the soap into his hair, massaging it into a lather. He enjoyed feeling clean. He loved the hot water. The lavender scent of the soap. He loved the way his body ached from real work. He welcomed the pain he felt. It was the right sort of pain. The good kind. It had been a good day, despite his night terror before.

The touch of invisible hands on his chest scuttled through his memory, and unbidden the woodsmen were in his thoughts. They must be searching for him. He knew they must. If they sought him out, he had little confidence he could remain hidden. Most days he felt them lingering just outside his periphery, but he thought this was paranoia. If they had wanted him, they would have had him. He wished he could rid himself of their stink as easily as that of a long day's work. And now he had this new presence to suffer. This Shadow . . .

Eliot dunked himself again, using both hands to rinse the suds from his hair. Allowing the bath to rinse his thoughts. Then he came up, relaxing. Soaking. Enjoying the heat. He watched the steam rise in the soft light of the sunset, his mind blank. Or almost.

"Aye, mah," he said. "I know. I can't stay. Mayhap tomorrow'll be a good day for goin'."

He felt mad for this. He sometimes talked to his mother as though she were with him. As though the Dark Wood hadn't eaten her when he

was six years old. He shook his head, trying to fix her in his mind. She'd spoken an oath into him, and it had preserved him against the evil of the woodsmen on his kohlas. It had become a light inside him, one that allowed him to overcome the witch. He needed that light now. He needed her. Neither felt real. Perhaps the last remaining light of both his mother and her oath had burned out on the Crag.

Eliot pushed himself again below the surface of the water. His scrubbing was done. He'd even scrubbed his clothes, another thing he insisted Leah allow him to do: he could wash his own clothes. She scoffed when he did so in his bath. It did the job, Eliot reasoned. And it was an efficient use of time and water. He held his breath. He felt his chest expand against the effort, insisting he come up for air. He heard blood pumping in his ears, water jostling in the tub. He heard his joints creak and pop beneath the water. He heard knocking.

He considered what kept him at Roland's farm against better reason. That fault lay with his gummy need for pain. The longer he stayed, the more it would hurt when all was taken away. And he had no other place to go. He would be willing to go to the smoking man, the one person from his past who may not be a fiend. The stranger had been Eliot's wizard ally, but he had since been as absent as the woodsmen. The smoking man didn't even bother making an appearance in Eliot's dreams.

The noise of sloshing water filled Eliot's ears as he turned in the tub. And knocking. And muted voices? Eliot pushed himself out of the water. Cora stood just outside the curtain, her head poked inside the stall. Eliot knotted himself into a ball, lowering in the tub so his chin rested on the water's surface.

"What are yeh doin'?" he asked, almost a shout.

"Don't worry, boy," Cora said. She pushed the curtain open and stepped inside the bathing stall. A cavalier confidence filled her voice, but her face burned red. Her face could hold few secrets, he'd learned. "I'm not here to see yeh. Not much to look at, aye?"

"Then why are yeh here?" Eliot asked, his voice turning gruff to hide his embarrassment. The soapy water swirled around him, his great advocate against exposure.

"What? Do yeh think I care at all about what yeh got under that water?" Cora was convincing. Eliot did not think she cared. If she did, she hid it well. He shook his head, but that wasn't enough. Cora bent, grabbing the string attached to the cork. "If I wanted to see, I'd just empty the tub."

Eliot reached out his hand, begging for the string. "No," he said, his voice quick and sharp. He could not say more. Cora wasn't moving. Wasn't

smiling. Wasn't talking. Her eyes were wide, her mouth open. Then he realized Cora saw the scars on his chest. He'd raised just high enough, and she'd seen. He lowered his arm and slid back into the tub, hidden. Cora dropped the string. She cleared her throat.

"Mah sent me out here. She says we're goin' to Throm come mornin'." Cora's voice was softer. And was she embarrassed, likely on his behalf? Eliot felt his face burn. He was grateful he'd lost the capacity for tears. Otherwise he'd be crying.

"Throm?" he managed to say after a moment.

"Aye. Have yeh heard of it?"

"Course, girl. I were watchin' it the day we met."

This was true. He'd been studying the village in the distance when first he had heard Cora's singing inside the chapel. Throm had been a sprawling, fat thing squatting on the highest of a congregation of hills. It stretched up from the crown like a coil of bound burlap. Even from a distance, Eliot had imagined he could just hear the bustle of the place. He'd seen nothing like it. And the thought of walking inside it had been less appealing than sleeping in a viper's nest.

"I know, Eliot," Cora said. "Can't yeh tell a joke when yeh hear it?" They watched each other, each waiting for the other. The moment stretched with awkward silence.

Eliot nodded. "Aye. Throm. Tomorrow."

"Mah says come up to the house once yer bath is done."

"What, tonight?"

"Aye. She says yeh can't go to Throm lookin' like yeh grew in the cabbage patch."

"Cabbage patch?"

"Just come up. Da's gone give yeh a haircut. Yer sore for one, aye."

Eliot nodded. Then a thought came to him. "Wait. Leah sent you up here to give me a message, while I were in the bath?"

Cora did not smile. She did not scowl. But she looked at Eliot as if he were peddling Hidain tokens alleged to be blessed by the Weeping Mother herself. "No," she said. "Normal folken don't take so long in the bath. We'd all thought yeh finished long ago." Eliot felt stupid. "Makes a girl wonder what a boy must be about to spend so much time naked in a bathtub." Now Eliot felt mortified.

Cora left, leaving the curtain open to the dusk and the wide world beyond. Eliot listened. He heard her footsteps leading back toward the house. Only when he felt confident she was gone did he get out of the tub. He grabbed the string, a long bit of twine hanging over the edge of the tub, and tugged it. The cork came free, and the milky water started swirling through the

hole. A latrine caught the water, carrying it downhill toward the pigsty and on through the back pasture, spilling into the bog. Eliot pissed into the stream of soapy water, dried himself, and got dressed.

The porch creaked as he stepped onto it. The front door was open, light spilling out onto the wooden planks. Leah must be inside. Eliot walked to the door. He'd never been to the front of the house, only in through the kitchen door on the side. Eliot had never felt the front of the house, so close to where Roland and Leah slept, was a welcome place for an outsider. He approached the door, ready to knock, when Roland came barreling out. He carried a towel over his arm and a bowl of steaming water in one hand, a razor and strap in a pouch on his belt.

"Ah, there yeh are." He slapped a stump of wood with his thick hand. "Sit yerself."

Eliot did as instructed. Roland wrapped a towel over Eliot's shoulders and gave him a pat. Eliot jerked. He didn't mean to. It was reflexive. He couldn't see Roland, who was standing behind him. But he heard the man draw in a breath. Cora came out then. She walked around to face Eliot.

"High time yeh let those eyes of yers out from behind that mess of hair. Aye?" She was smiling. Something about Eliot's expression did not impress her. "Aye, then. Anywat, I'll not watch." She left. Eliot realized he'd been scowling.

Roland took Eliot's hair in his hand. Again, Eliot jerked. Why did he have to be so damn strange?

"Fools got into yeh, boy? Do yeh want a haircut or not?" Roland sounded angry.

Eliot thought back on the first time he'd seen Roland, just outside the chapel on the day they met. If Cora had enchanted Eliot, Roland had made him feel sodden with panic. Roland had towered above the hedge of azaleas choking the entrance to the chapel. He was a boulder of a man. His chest was ox thick. His dense beard hung long and red. He had worn a knitted cap on his head. In one hand had been a giant axe. In the other, the handle of a wood cart over half full of firewood and too heavy for an average man to pull one-handed. His wary eyes had bordered on aggressive. Eliot's knees had gone delicate, as if Roland hadn't just found Eliot talking to his daughter but with his hand down her skirt. Still, months later, Eliot felt tiny next to this man. He also knew this had nothing to do with why he flinched.

"Aye, kinnit," Eliot said, hoping the respectful term communicated more than his flinching. "I do want a haircut." But every instinct within Eliot made him want to run. He thought again: tomorrow was a good day for going . . .

"Don't squat yer head," Roland said. Eliot realized he, like a turtle, had retracted his head and neck into his shoulders as far as he could. Roland tapped Eliot just above where his shoulder blades pulled together in a vise. It was a simple gesture. Relax, it said. Instead, Eliot jerked again. "Bah!" Roland cried, throwing the towel and razor in Eliot's lap. "Do it yerself, then."

Roland stomped away, back inside the house. Eliot felt fresh shame. Heavy humiliation. He gripped the towel in his fist. The razor had fallen to the floor.

"What, love?" he heard Leah say inside the house. He heard Roland rumbling an answer but could not understand it. The blood was pounding in his ears. He bent, picking up the razor.

"Is that all?" he heard Leah say. Eliot opened the razor. Watched the light of the oil lamps reflecting on its surface. He laid the edge against the skin of his wrist and held it there. "Yer boys, the both of yehs," Leah said. And he heard her coming toward him, her steps light and quick. If Roland was an angry bear, Leah was sun-warmed honey. Of the three, Leah had made Eliot feel the most welcome, as though she had expected him to show up. As though she'd wanted him to. This worried Eliot. No one good could like such a damaged tramp, but he did not doubt her sincerity, only her judgment.

"Give me that, Eliot." She took the razor from his hand. Then she took the towel, wrapping it around his shoulders. Again, Eliot jerked. He stiffened, but she did not stop. Rather, she grabbed him by his shoulders and gave him a sharp shake. She knelt, leaving her left arm across his shoulder as she squatted next to him. "Eliot. Look at me."

Wanting to pull away from her, wanting more than anything to be high-tailing it through the hills, Eliot turned to look at her.

"I don't know what yeh've been through. I don't pretend to understand. But I'm gone cut yer hair now. Yeh don't have to like it, but yeh do have to sit still. Yeh can't be jerking ever' time I go to cut, or I might cut more than hair. Do yeh understand?"

Eliot nodded.

"Tell me yeh understand," Leah said.

"I understand, lady." He looked at Leah. He did not see pity in her eyes. She said she did not understand what he'd been through, but that's what he saw in her face: understanding. Maybe not understanding of his past. Perhaps it was understanding of his present. Whatever it was, Eliot felt a familiar warm hope burn in his stomach. And he hated it. He could not afford to indulge any such hope. Still, her eyes were convincing. Perhaps she saw more than he knew. Again, he nodded.

Leah stood. She placed her hands on his shoulders. They rested there, a gentle weight. Eliot did not flinch. It took incredible effort, but he did not flinch.

Leah began cutting his hair, and Eliot held his body rigid for the duration. It did not take long, and by the time she was finished, Eliot was sore all over. She went inside the house and brought out a looking glass.

“Here,” she said, “have a look.”

Eliot didn’t recognize himself. His hair was cut short and even. He’d regained color and shape in his face. From his work in the sun, he had lost the circles around his eyes. And from the abundance of food he had three times a day, his cheeks were no longer concave. He’d lost the haggard appearance of a vagrant. He wanted to say thank you but could not manage words.

Cora came out onto the porch. “Let’s see then. Oh . . .” Her voice fell.

Eliot looked up at her. She was staring at him as if he had a spider on the tip of his nose. A flash of her staring at him in the bath ripped into his thoughts. His face burned. He would pay in blood to have his mess of hair back to hide him just then. Instead, he looked away.

“Looks good, aye?” Leah asked. “Come see, Roland.”

“I’ll see tomorrow,” Roland said from inside the house.

“What say you, Cora?” Leah asked. Eliot glanced back at the girl. Her mouth was open. She looked as if the spider on his nose had started dancing. She saw him watching her, clamped her mouth shut, and shrugged.

“It’ll do, then,” Cora said, and she bounded back inside the house.

“I think she likes it,” Leah whispered in Eliot’s ear. “Now off to bed with yeh. Be back at sunup. I’ll have coffee on. It’s an all-day affair goin’ to Thom.” She patted his shoulder. “Ah,” she said, surprise and satisfaction coloring the word.

Eliot turned to face her. “What?”

“Yeh didn’t flinch that time.”

Eliot lowered his gaze, unable to hold eye contact. Leah gathered her tools and stepped inside the house. “Lady?” Eliot called. Leah turned. “Thank yeh.” Leah smiled, nodded, and shut the door behind her.



Milky light filtered through the skeletal limbs. The moist earth exhaled mist. The stone called. A boy answered. The boy always answered. The creek mumbled. The shadows twitched. And waiting there in the creek bed was a wet thing, vile and exposed. Open and hungry with lust.





Eliot woke, startled. His skin was cold. He looked around. The sky was dark with thinning rain clouds, but moonlight filtered through. His body was naked and drenched with rain. He was standing in the open yard of Roland's farm. Instinct took over, and Eliot crouched.

Roland and his family's kindness were unaccountable, and, living on their farm, Eliot always felt like a boy testing the edges of a lake on the first freeze of winter, unsure if he'd step right through the ice. And here he was, traipsing through the big man's yard by dim moonlight, naked and aroused. He pulled himself into a tight knot, wishing just then for a shadow to slip into.

Shadow, he thought. What was he doing out here? He'd been dreaming. The dream he always dreamed. Only again, he had not been alone in it. The Shadow was there as well. This time, it had lured him out of the barn and into the cold rain. Not even the cold had awakened him, he had been so rapt.

"Dammit," he muttered. No one could have seen him, surely. Had the rain not come, the moon would have been bright and clear. Not full, but close enough to make him visible in the night. His shame on display for any to see.

This was new, waking to find himself walking naked through the yard. Naked, cold, and erect. It was bad enough to wake with his breeches soiled, wet from his dream. It was worse to wake without pants at all. Worse still, to be out in the open. Already he'd felt out of place here. The last thing he wanted was to disrespect this family. Ambling through the night as though his prick were a divining rod was not the way to show respect. What ugly root was growing inside him? And was he strong enough to pull it out? He must be as repulsive as the thin man. Just as perverse and twisted as the fiend who'd served as the witch's goon.

Eliot crawled back to the barn, going as slow as he could manage. It was hard to gauge the time, but he thought it must be late, well past midnight. He hoped it was late enough for everyone inside the house to be sound asleep. It felt like an age before Eliot reached the barn and crawled inside.



Roland tucked his pipe inside its pouch and leaned back against the house as the boy disappeared inside the barn. Roland had been sitting on the stump of wood on the porch, enjoying both his pipe and the sound of

gentle rain, when Eliot walked out of the barn naked. The boy had been sleepwalking. That was obvious. So was his erection.

Uncertain if he should intervene, his heart thundering in his chest, Roland had watched as the boy walked into the yard, then awoke like a startled rat and scrambled back to the barn.

Ever since he first found the boy with his daughter in the chapel, Roland had felt a deep, quiet unsettling. He did not worry overmuch about what the boy might do. He was a thin, gangly thing. It looked a miracle he could command his frail body to walk most times, much less harm anyone. Still, harm would come. Roland felt it in his bones. Even a single rat could spoil a pantry. Roland had a deep-seated understanding of darkness. He had once been on familiar terms with the low things found in the hearts of men. That was long ago, before Leah came into his life. Before Cora. Even so, Roland knew low things when he saw them, and this boy was fitted tight with vexing shadows.

This was a difficult thing. But that's why he knew what he had to do. He had no choice. The boy could not stay. Any devils roosting in Eliot's head would come out in time. Leah and Cora were what mattered, not the stray boy. Perhaps Roland might suggest a place Eliot could go, someone he could ask for work. Roland shook his head. Who would he send Eliot to? If he was unsafe for his own family, he would not push the boy on another. And any single man he would consider sending Eliot to, who might have work for a sixteen-year-old stray with dark secrets, would likely turn Eliot into something even worse than what he was now. Roland understood that risk more than most. Perhaps he could find Eliot an apprenticeship in Throm, but even that felt unlikely.

Eliot would be on his own. Roland hated the truth of that, but it was the only way. He stood, glancing at the sky. The clouds were breaking up. The rain would be gone by morning. He'd hoped for a little more. The fields could use it. But when had anything ever been simple?

Roland looked again at the barn. Come first light, he'd tell Eliot he had to go. For now, he wished the boy quiet dreams.



Morning came. Roland slept little, the events of the night stirring his thoughts into a fretting stew. He opened the barn door and stepped inside. It smelled dry and sweet with hay. He walked to the stall where Eliot had set out his pallet for sleep the night before. The boy wasn't there. He'd gone

on his own. His bedroll was packed tight and set on a far shelf. The floor was swept clean. Had he cleaned the barn where he'd slept before running off? Roland smiled, but with little humor. Eliot must have good substance, despite his devils. Roland was surprised to feel disappointment. He'd dreaded coming into the barn this morning to tell the boy he had to leave. Now that he was here and the boy had left on his own, Roland realized he hadn't wanted Eliot to go at all.

He sighed. For once, things had worked out on their own. Simple measures; not complicated. But Roland was disappointed. He shook his head, realizing he would not have made the boy leave. He felt overwhelming gratitude Eliot hadn't left him the choice.

"Mornin', kinnit," Eliot said.

"Cryin' goat shit," Roland cried, turning. "Yeh pert near scared my pants off, boy." Roland saw Eliot then, standing just outside the door. He stood as if he wanted to fold his long, thin body into itself, to shrink into something too small to be seen. Roland felt uneasy relief that he remained, but something else besides. Warm anger touched his cheeks, and not at the boy.

Neither spoke. Roland waited to see if Eliot would say more, but what? Confess to traipsing naked through the yard the night before? He wouldn't do that. But Roland felt suspicion in Eliot's stare. How else would the boy feel? Of course he would wonder all day if anyone had seen him.

"Listen," Roland began, unsure how to broach the subject. He waved his hand. "Come inside. Let's talk."

"But Thom—" Eliot began.

"Thom'll wait, yeh wee rat. Do as I say."

Eliot's legs were stiff as he walked inside, like they barely bent at the knee. He was so awkward, Roland thought. He felt guilty, as much for calling Eliot a rat as for what he would do next. It would only make Eliot's graceless shuffling worse. Eliot looked scared to death, his face blotched with stains of humiliation as though he discerned what was coming. Perhaps Eliot knew Roland had seen, but Roland thought this unlikely.

"Listen," Roland said again, clearing his throat. Who was being awkward now? he thought. "Eliot," he said. The boy's eyes were open and vulnerable. His face had no artifice. No pretense. The boy was broken. The boy was haunted. Roland recognized the look Eliot was giving him. Broken or not, dangerous or not, Eliot was starving to be known. To be needed. Accepted. Or wanted. Maybe to be loved. Roland couldn't say what it was the boy longed for, not exactly, and he doubted Eliot could name it himself. Still, his vulnerability plucked a string inside Roland.

So much for simple measures. Roland sighed. "Bridle Nag," he said. "And put fresh straw in the wagon. Leah has coffee on."

"Yes, kinnit," Eliot replied, the respectful term spoken with conviction. He turned to do as instructed.

"Did yeh sleep all right?" Roland asked, watching the boy for a tell.

Eliot shook his head but answered, "Aye, like a stone."

Roland nodded. He left the barn. Wanting to find out what the boy was made of, Roland had used work to push Eliot in the weeks since he'd arrived. He had driven him to exhaustion every day, and he wondered how far he could push Eliot before the boy would push back. He needed to see if Eliot would crack. If he would show any signs of the danger lurking beneath his calm exterior. But the boy had never complained.

Roland had not often seen such determination. Perhaps Eliot was strong enough, or would be in time, to find his way out of what haunted him. To begin fresh. Perhaps. In the meantime, Roland had weighed the boy's substance. He doubted either of them would get much sleep in the coming weeks. He thought again of what he'd seen the night before. He should not let the boy stay. Roland did not question this: this was the simplest truth. Eliot was dangerous. And yet, Roland did not want to make the boy leave. This conflict must have shown on his face, for as he entered the house, Leah cornered him.

"And what did the boy this time, aye?"



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