



*Without
a
Shadow*

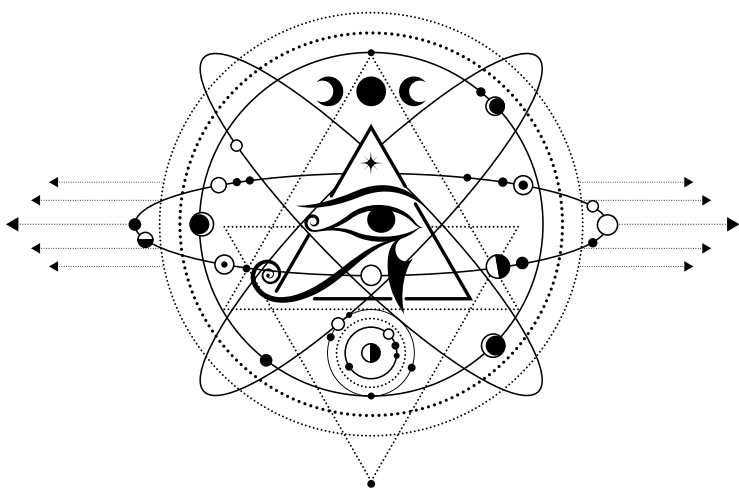
H. J. REYNOLDS

YOU CAN ONLY TEACH YOUR SHADOW ONE TRICK

Without
a
Shadow

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To my parents, for the stories.







1



Two a Dozen

IT WAS JUST A GAME at the start. Adlai learned the rules from her father; they would go out into the blazing sun, when the day was at its hottest with shadows burning black holes in the sand, and he would say, “Pick one, Little Drizzle,” and she would slip her hand out from his to search the crowd.

Even back then the marketplace had the best crowds, and not just of people, but of things. Star charts were piled to the high heavens, telescopes winked a thousand suns at every turn; gems dripped on stringed necklaces; long, luscious silks slipped like water through her hands . . .

And then there was the smell: aromatic herbs smoking in pots, and the stench rising out from the herds of exotic beasts that were either caged or flying in chains high above the tents, their claws swiping at careless passersby.

When she looked at the people in the market and the baubles all around her, Adlai felt like the luckiest girl in the world. All she

had to do was turn to her father and say, “There, over there,” and he would play the game.

The Shadow Game, he called it. You could only teach your shadow one trick. So, while she distracted the vendor, her father would come near—not quite by the stall of her choice, but nearby. It was always difficult for her not to look back—he’d tell her off if she did—but she loved seeing it happen.

His shadow would move; it would shimmer like a haze and become longer as it reached for something—all the while his body staying stock still—and when it passed over the item, his shadow would become faint. Fainter and fainter until his shadow would be gone altogether—along with what she’d wanted.

That was when they would leave the crowd to go back home and her father would present her with whatever small thing had caught her eye. Sometimes he’d give Adlai an extra surprise. A little trinket or silk scarf. Always he picked something golden—the color of her hair, he’d say.

THERE WERE NO curtains in the attic room, just a collection of bright, colorful scarves draped haphazardly across the single window that glared down above Adlai’s bed. Cold sunlight filtered in through the rainbow of fabric. A few of the scarves were starting to fade; reds turned to browns, blues to deathly gray. She would have to change those out. There was nothing more depressing than waking up to rags fluttering their last.

Her roommate, Penna, was already up and dressed. Her dark figure was quietly making her bed, and Adlai turned away with a sigh. Getting up was never easy. Adlai wanted nothing more than to sink back into her dream. It had felt so real. Her father had been right there in front of her, his shadow snaking over a stall as he

played the Shadow Game one more time. She pulled out the drawer of her bedside table and looked down at the heap of trinkets inside. Some were worthless. A dented tin matchbox, earrings with a cluster of fake pearls, an aged book on a royal family that had long since died out.

Others, though, she thought might fetch a decent price if she tried to sell them. Her fingers brushed over a bangle that had a large fiery topaz embedded in the gold. Everything in her drawer was golden. Her father had picked each one for her, seemingly not based on its value but based on something else she couldn't quite understand as she stared down at the odd collection.

They shone. The worthless trinkets gleamed as much as the truly expensive ones, and perhaps that's all they ever were: pretty, shiny things to distract a child who asked too many questions and who didn't know how to listen.

She was about to close the drawer when she saw the bee pendant. She remembered him giving her that one. It was of a golden little honey bee with the tip of the wings grabbing on to the thin chain on either side of it. Adlai hadn't worn the pendant for a while, but it winked at her as she sat up, and the memory that came with it was a sweet one. Bittersweet, as it was one of the last things he'd given her. On impulse she reached out and fastened it around her neck.

"Did I wake you?" Penna called over in a soft voice. Adlai shook her head. Now she was up, she wondered how it was possible she'd been deeply asleep only moments ago. A baby was crying on the floor directly below them, and if she strained her ears further, she could pick up a thousand other noises. Much like a dripping tap, once heard they were impossible to unhear.

Living in an orphanage with twenty other kids of varying ages wasn't the best environment for peaceful sleep. But Penna and Adlai were fortunate enough to be stuffed up in the attic, where the sounds were somewhat muffled and there were no little feet

storming over their beds to demand breakfast. That was the benefit, Adlai supposed, of being too old for any family to want to adopt you: you got to be tidied away.

Penna took the tidying away a little too literally and kept her side of the room as undisturbed as possible. There were no personal items, despite having lived at the orphanage longer than Adlai. Her clothes were folded and hidden away in a chest of drawers, and on top of that single piece of furniture she kept only what was needed: a comb, a small mirror, some lotion, and a soap bar that smelled of lemon. If she left tomorrow, there wouldn't be a hair or thumbprint to say she had lived there. Adlai's side, on the other hand, would take a few trips up and down to sort through.

She headed over to a pile of clothes to dress. Unless she could bring herself to wake before the sun, which she wasn't likely to, she knew the washroom wouldn't be free again until nightfall.

She pulled on white pants in a shiny fabric and a wrap top the color of an atomic sun. It was bright and garish enough. Adlai had plans to play the Shadow Game herself today, and wearing something attention grabbing had always been her father's advice. It was the folk who covered themselves up in hoods and tried to melt in the background who garnered the suspicious looks in the desert market.

Sliding her sandals on, she let Penna climb down the ladder first. A mistake, as her friend was wearing a long green dress with fine stitching she was careful to protect as she climbed down the rungs. Adlai's stomach was growling by the time Penna finally dropped to the floor and the ladder shook, ready for her. She slunk down it, realizing at the same time that the crying she'd heard had finally stopped. A door opened, and Mother Henson, cradling a sleeping newborn, looked at them.

"Well, at last. While you two have been dozing, I've had the whole morning full of things to do. Couldn't count them to tell

you,” she said in that offhand way that told Adlai nothing had been done. Especially as she followed it up with, “I’m going to need some extra help today.”

Adlai rolled her eyes at that, but Henson pretended not to notice. Every day she needed help with something or other, and it was always for jobs she was supposed to do.

“What do you need?” Penna asked. Adlai wanted to hit her for so easily offering.

Mother Henson smiled. It looked odd on her, more so as she must have been at the mirror moments before the baby started fussing and had makeup on only one eye. It looked like a dark, dusty bruise, while her other eye shrank in comparison.

“You’re a good girl, Penna, dear. I’ll just need the meals cooked and some of the rooms cleaned. Gilly has a potential match, so her area will need tidying up the most. And if you could make her presentable too—you know she’s always running wild with the boys.” The baby whimpered slightly and she rocked him closer to her chest. “Perhaps you can make some honey cakes? The family will love that.”

Penna had work in the afternoon and all those tasks would take most of the morning without any help. She side-eyed Adlai, hopeful, but Adlai shook her head. She was done scrubbing floors and cooking for an army of ingrates. Mother Henson might have given her a roof over her head, but that was all she did these days.

“Leave it to us,” Penna said brightly. Adlai sighed and wondered why Penna still bothered to stay on Mother Henson’s good side. As soon as the baby started to whimper, Henson forgot they were even there.

Only the helpless, screaming babies could stir the mother in Mother Henson. Once a child started talking and walking, the mistress of the orphanage could easily forget the child still needed food and attention. Adlai, at least, had been old enough when she’d been

forced through the doors to know not to look for love from such a woman, but some of the younger ones learned the lesson harder.

“You know you don’t have to always help,” Adlai said as they walked down to the kitchen. There were three other kids inside, picking at corn muffins that looked like the runts of a baker’s litter.

“I don’t mind.” Penna’s eyes swept over the open cupboards and started putting things back in their places. Her busy hands stopped on a pile of mangoes. “What I do mind is good fruit going to waste. If I were to make a big fruity mash, do you think there’d be enough to satisfy the greediest little monkeys?”

Adlai sighed, knowing Penna wasn’t really talking to her and that she’d be distracted making breakfasts for a good while. She took some fruit for herself and headed to their usual spot out on the balcony.

Outside the air was warm but not the sticky, sweating kind it would turn to later in the day. She jumped up to sit on the banister ledge and swung her legs over the dust path below. People were starting to head to their work or make those early-morning purchases, as much a part of a routine as getting dressed. The same sight as always.

She looked further ahead. The Arbil pyramid shone golden in the distance, creating a three-sided sun with the morning light glinting off its massive walls. They were ancient walls, older than the city gates, but the gold brick made it look brand new. Like the trinkets from her father, the pyramid was the city’s treasure; a place of birth, healing, and death.

Adlai took a bite of her pear; it was overly sweet but cooler than a glass of water. She was on to the second one when Penna arrived. Her dress had wet stains on the front and one of the kids must have pulled at her headscarf, as her tight curls were showing underneath.

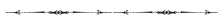
“You know it’s Henson’s job to cook the meals and prepare the kids for their appointments. She’s *paid* to look after us,” Adlai said.

There was a small crooked table and two creaking chairs on the balcony. Penna sat down on one and stared dreamily out to the same horizon Adlai overlooked. "Mother has her hands full with the little one. It used to be fun," She turned to Adlai. "Remember that game we'd play? Tell Me How . . .? We could play that again this morning."

Adlai laughed. Penna had round dark eyes that were hard to say no to and one of those genuine smiles that a child might make when presented with a treat. The problem in this was that the treat was a stupid game she'd invented to pretend they weren't cleaning up vomit or peeling their lives away in buckets of potatoes.

Penna had been her best friend these last seven years. Her only friend. But while Adlai wanted to flip the page to when they could get out of this place, she sometimes thought Penna wanted to freeze time and stick her feet into the foundations.

"I'm not staying here all morning," Adlai said, already regretting it.



THE BATHWATER HAD warmed to a level that, while it wasn't exactly hot, was at least pleasant to run her hand through. Adlai was sweating from hauling several buckets up and down the stairs and could do with sinking into a clean bath herself, but the water wasn't for her.

Not that Gilly was grateful for their effort. Adlai turned over the empty bucket and sat on it as she watched Penna fight with the girl to remove her muddy clothing.

"I washed yesterday!" Gilly argued. Adlai didn't believe her. Some of the kids might splash water on their faces and rub soap through their hair, but not many of the kids bothered filling a bath. Gilly looked, and smelled, as though she had been many days without even a cursory wash.

“Come on,” Penna said gently, “you want to look your best for your appointment, don’t you?”

Gilly snorted but let Pen pull off the last of her underclothes. Naked, the girl looked even more wild. Her dark hair ran long down her back in a tangled mess and she had an assortment of cuts and bruises, some healing, others fresh from a recent fight. They could hide most of them in nice clothing, but Adlai didn’t like her chances.

There were more boys than girls at the orphanage. There always were because when people wanted a child, what they really meant was a son. Mother Henson turned girls away like they were rotten food she didn’t want dumped in her kitchen, only occasionally adding one or two to her collection for the rare couple who actually wanted a daughter over a son.

Gilly, wild and unruly, was unlikely to be the girl the couple were coming for.

“We still have cooking to do,” Adlai said, “so unless you want to help out with that, get in the tub and let’s make this quick.”

Gilly scowled at Adlai.

“Ignore her,” Penna said. “She’s in a mood. You can go back to playing later. But right now you have to be clean.”

Gilly scowled again, and made sure the water splashed over Adlai as she climbed into the tub. At least she was in, though.

An assortment of bottles and soap bars lined a shelf by a small glazed window. Penna took a few items from there and handed Adlai nail files as she poured in oils that smelled of jasmine and smoke. Gilly wrinkled her nose but didn’t complain. That came when Penna dipped the girl’s head back and started work untangling her hair.

“Owww!”

“Why don’t we play the game?” Penna said. “Tell me how . . .” She looked over at Adlai as she dug the comb through a particularly large knot “. . . you learned to swim.”

“I don’t need to swim today, do I?” the girl asked, confused.

“No,” Penna answered, smiling. The knot loosened, and more water splashed over the edge of the tub and gathered by Adlai’s feet.

Adlai reached for one of the girl’s hands and began picking the dirt from her nails. “How I learned to swim?” she repeated, thinking for a moment. It had been a while since they played this game. “I never had to learn to swim. My mother was a mermaid, you know, so I was born with a fishtail. Before I could talk, I could swim.” She looked down at Gilly’s confused expression. “I know what you’re thinking: ‘Where’s your fishtail now?’ Well, fishtail scales are worth a lot of money, and when I was very young, three or four years old, I was kidnapped for them. They peeled off my scales like I was a vegetable for a summer stew.”

Gilly yanked her hand away. She had the look of someone who’d long ago stopped listening to fairy tales, probably right around the day her parents didn’t come home. Had Adlai once been this child? The girl’s features seemed to be screwed up permanently in anger, her frown as deep as claws.

“Don’t worry,” Adlai said, grabbing Gilly’s other, equally dirty, hand. “My father saved me. I wouldn’t have legs at all if he hadn’t brought me quickly to the desert market. Everything is sold there, you know. Including a magic potion to grow limbs. He had to use his blood for it and that’s why I have his knobbly knees, and I have to shave every day or else I break out in man hair. Though”—she lowered her voice to a conspiratory whisper—“sometimes I still get the odd scale . . .”

A tooth of the comb became stuck in another big knot, but both Pen and Gilly ignored it. “What color were your scales?” Penna asked.

Adlai thought for a minute. Her eyes drifted over every color in the room—the blue tiled floor, the white tub, the cracked gray walls. She discarded them each in turn. “They were colorless. They picked up all the colors in the light, like glass does.”

She could tell Penna liked this idea. Her pretty dark face was entranced, and even Gilly loosened her frown, staring wide-eyed from one to another. They were adults in her eyes, albeit adults talking nonsense about mermaids, but for a moment all three forgot what they were doing in the room. Playing the game could sometimes make Adlai forget this was an orphanage, or that Pen hadn't always been family to her. The thought tugged at something she wished it hadn't.

"Have you ever seen a mermaid?" Penna asked. She pulled the comb loose and smiled down at Gilly. "They look so beautiful in the picture books, don't they?"

Adlai finished cleaning the last nail and dropped Gilly's hand. She stood up and came away from the tub. "How many mermaids you expect to come across in the desert, Pen? It's not like orphans, where we're two a dozen."

Penna shook her head. "But there are other places. Oceans and mountains out there. Places with snow, even. Do you think they really exist?"

"Mermaids, or other places?"

"I don't know. Both, I guess."

Adlai didn't answer her. The truth was she wanted it all to be real. If she could leave Libra and travel the kingdom, she thought she might see things just as impossible as her shadow that could steal. She stared down at Gilly. "What do you think?"

"I think this game's stupid, and I don't see why all this fuss has to be made every time one of us has an appointment. I don't want to be adopted. I'm going to move into the attic when you two leave."

Adlai shook her head. "Then you're even more stupid than if you'd believed I was half mermaid. Don't you get it? You have a chance at a family today. Take it."



2



Nothing but Dreams

THE WAITING ROOM WAS THE only part of the orphanage that had a homey feel about it. There were two plump sofas with feathery cushions, a bookcase with little animal ornaments, and a feature wall of drawings that the younger kids added to periodically. Even the tiled floor was of a happy, bright orange.

This was where the adoption appointments took place. Adlai and Penna were busy setting the stage for Gilly's potential new family, while Mother Henson had taken the girl to her office to run through the script of what to say and do, as well as what *not* to say and do. That was important too. Adlai had messed up each and every one of her appointments through some perceived slip.

Once, she'd stolen the watch off a woman who'd made her open her mouth to check her teeth. Another time she'd spilled the coffee a man had demanded she serve. She had never been able to be the girl a couple wanted. She doubted Gilly would either.

"How is it you were never adopted, Pen?"

Penna had been a light in the darkness. A sister when she'd had no family left. Always so kind and patient, she had the sweetest temper Adlai had ever known. If anyone was going to be adopted, Penna was the model child.

"Oh, I was close once," she said with a fake kind of breeze to her voice. "Everything was going well and then they asked me if I liked to read . . ."

Adlai frowned. "But you do like to read."

"Because you taught me." She took a small, well-worn book off the shelf. The cover's title was written in a playful, childish script: *Fantastical Fables of Glories Gone—Heartfelt Heroes and Irredeemable Ignobles*.

"I was eight," she continued. "I could only understand the pictures and so I made up what I thought the stories were. Mother actually apologized for presenting such a simple-minded child to them." She put the book down. "After that she had me helping out with the cooking and I didn't get any more appointments."

"You mean she saw you'd do her work for her." Adlai dropped the cloth she'd been wiping the end table with. She was starting to wonder if the same thing hadn't happened with her. Weren't they always the ones doing Mother Henson's work for her? "Maybe we didn't screw up as bad as we thought, Pen. Maybe this whole show with Gilly is just to groom her into our replacements."

Penna shook her head. "You don't really think Mother would play with our futures like that?"

"I think *Mother* doesn't see us as having any futures."

Penna started to defend her, as she always did, but Adlai wasn't listening. She came over to the book and flipped through the pages. Some of the stories were as familiar as if she'd written them herself: smoke dragons living up in the clouds and causing droughts, firebloods who died and were reborn again, and of course the shadow wielders. Tales that people had once believed as fact were now

written as myth. She'd read the tale of "Menko and the Shadow Wielder" a thousand times as a kid.

Menko was the hero, sworn to save a princess whose land had been ravaged by disease. The tale featured three gallant princes, each using knowledge from their lands to try to solve the crisis. The Capri prince grew better crops to feed the people, the Libran prince brought superior medicines to cure the people, and the Piscetian prince built an array of freshwater spots to cleanse the people.

But the crops died, the medicine failed, and the water grew dirty, and the princes died with the people. Only Menko could see what others had failed to, for the princess was a shadow wielder. To keep her youth and beauty, she'd been sending her shadow out across her land and stealing from her people. Not riches—she had plenty of those. Her shadow could steal the rosy complexion of a young maid or the strength of the strongest man.

To end her reign, Menko searched the sky for wisdom and came across a fallen star. In his hands it became a dagger with flame like a comet's tail trailing the blade. He plunged it into the princess's shadow and trapped it there, where it would never harm another soul.

There were other tales that showed shadow wielders at work. Some were just petty tricksters, but most played the part of villain. It used to make her laugh to read of these great powers they supposedly had. She knew the stories were made up for children and that, as fantastical as her shadow was, it certainly couldn't steal youth or beauty. The only thing it could harm was a person's pocket.

The door to the waiting room opened and Mother Henson came swooping in with an almost unrecognizable Gilly at her heels. The girl's wet hair was braided back and she wore a light, frilly dress with long sleeves that covered up the scrapes and bruises. Gilly plucked at the frills and shot both Penna and Adlai a look, daring either of them to laugh.

"You look lovely," Penna said, and no doubt meant it.

“How she looks will hardly matter if everything else is out of place,” Mother Henson said, brushing her finger over the table Adlai hadn’t finished wiping. “What have you two been doing all of this time? Where are the honey cakes? They should be by the sofa for the guests.”

“Would you like us to pick fresh flowers too?” Adlai said. “Or hand sew a welcome flag?”

Mother Henson eyed Adlai with her usual coolness.

“Do try not to ruin the girl’s chances today. We all want this to work out for Gilly.”

“Do we?”

The coolness left Mother Henson’s eyes. For a moment she looked at Adlai the way she did when a small child was being led through the doors for the first time.

“You think I turned people away from adopting you, don’t you?” Henson said softly. “Simple girl. I wouldn’t ruin your few chances in life. Yours might not be the saddest story to come my way, but I still felt for you when you arrived. A father walking out on his child is a sad thing.”

“My father didn’t walk out on me.” Adlai gripped the book so tightly her nails punched through the leather.

Henson arched her brow. “Of course not. Mystery night intruders, wasn’t it? Strange they didn’t take you too.”

It wasn’t the first time Mother Henson had mocked Adlai’s version of what happened the night her father went missing—the city guards hadn’t believed her either. There had been no blood, no sign of a fight, no items stolen. And no body. Her father had simply vanished. Only Penna had listened to her, and probably she was just being nice. Like how she was now, coming over to Adlai and resting a hand on her arm to calm her.

“Don’t you have anything else to do?” Adlai said, her voice steady. “I know how busy you are.”

But Mother Henson didn't leave. She came closer. Close enough that Adlai could smell that sickly rose perfume sticking to the air like hot vapor.

She looked down at the book she was still holding.

"It always surprises me how many children come to my home with dreams fogging up their heads. They have nothing but dreams, even after life has already been so cruel to them." She turned to Gilly. "Let these two be a lesson to you, child. Almost full grown and living like rats in my attic. If you have any sense, you'll take this adoption seriously. There are so few chances for girls like you."

She looked down at Adlai and Penna, her gaze lingering on Adlai as her voice became soft as a whisper. "You think I ask too much, but I could turn you out to the street tomorrow, and then you'd see how generous I've really been. You have a bed here and food. Neither of which come for free."

Adlai didn't answer. She couldn't. Penna's hand gently pressed down, reminding her again to stay calm.

"You're very good to us, Mother," Penna said. "I'll have those cakes warm and ready."

Mother Henson nodded. "You're a good one," she said. "I know if I extended *your* stay here, you'd appreciate it."

She took a last appraising look around the room and then at Gilly, whispering something final to the girl before leaving.

After the door shut, the air seemed to thin out between them. A boy rushed past the window and tapped on the glass, making them all jump. He laughed and stuck his tongue out at Gilly.

"Eat sand, Billun," she yelled. She looked like she wanted to run after the boy but stared down at the frills of her dress again. "I hate wearing this thing. And I don't want to meet any strangers."

"You want to be a rat in the attic then?" Adlai said, still bothered by Mother Henson's words. The girl's eyes widened and she looked to Penna for comfort.

“If the family takes you, it’ll be because they want you, Gilly,” Penna said. She came toward the girl and brushed a wild strand of hair behind the girl’s ear. “Prettying yourself up like this is just a nice way to meet them for the first time. You’ll still be able to run outside and make friends and do all the things a child should, only you’ll have a family to love you and take care of you. That’s not so bad, is it?”

“What if I don’t like them?”

“Then you can always come back here,” Adlai said, again with force but this time the girl relaxed.

She really did look pretty. Adlai unclasped the necklace she’d put on this morning.

“Take this,” she said, putting the bee pendant around the girl’s small neck. “For luck.”

Gilly stared down at it and grabbed at the wings. “Is it real gold?”

“It’s real luck,” Adlai said. “Bees are like faeries; they fly around making flowers grow, and their sting keeps away anyone with bad intentions.”

Gilly fingered it uncertainly, then tucked it under her dress collar, out of sight, as all good magic should be. Her eyes jumped back to the window and she tugged at her sleeve again.

“Best not to risk your pretty dress running about outside,” Penna said, seeing what the girl was thinking. “Why don’t you check over your room? Make sure you have everything tidy and ready to go.”

The girl nodded. Amazingly, when she left through the door they didn’t see her immediately pass by the window outside. Perhaps she would be good and stay indoors. Or perhaps she’d head out through the kitchen.

“Gilly won’t be as foolish as us,” Penna said in the silence afterward. “She’s not the type to mind what anyone says, and she doesn’t talk nonsense. She doesn’t even believe in mermaids.”

“Sensible girl.”

“Yes, there’s no good reason why a family won’t want her.”

Adlai wasn’t as confident for the girl, but she stayed silent on that point and went back to wiping the table.

“Pen?” she said after a moment.

“Hmm?” Penna was taking down the books from the highest shelf, as though anyone would check for dust that high.

“You don’t still believe in dragons and . . . and shadow wielders, do you?”

Her friend laughed. “No more than I believe you ever had a fish-tail.” She brought the feather duster down. “But . . .”

Adlai looked up. “What?”

“Well, it’s just that if I ever have a child, and they want to believe in those pretty tales, I wouldn’t tell them otherwise, or call them simple.” She smiled. “In fact I’d have their Aunt Adlai play several games of Tell Me How and really get them dreaming.”

Adlai let herself smile at the thought, but her chest was heavy, as it always was when she wanted to—but couldn’t—tell Penna her secret.

You can only teach your shadow one trick, Little Drizzle. But that trick isn’t worth your life. Others can’t do what we can, so others can’t know.

Well, her father was gone. Disappeared. Dead. She didn’t know, and yet his voice stayed in her head. Sometimes she wanted to rebel against it.

Other times listening to him and keeping this secret just between them kept him near somehow.

Shadows and secrets.

Her shadow didn’t have the kind of power that could save or destroy kingdoms, not like the stories. But it was enough, she hoped, to make the kind of money needed to leave this place.

It was a small dream, but it was a start.

BY LATE AFTERNOON the usual crowd was flocking around the city gates. Adlai slipped among them, letting herself be herded down the stone-slab road that curved out toward the desert.

The first place to visit was the Stalls of a Thousand Suns, where everything shone from the high heavens. From jewelry to saucepans, knives to chains, the desert sun sweated beads of light off every item.

Of course Adlai wasn't in the market to buy. She fingered the signet ring she'd stolen last week during the Rain Festival and hoped that enough time had passed that not too many questions would be asked over it.

"Ms. Adlai." Izel, one of the nicer stall owners, grinned at her. He was a big man with a Gem accent that clipped each end syllable as though he hadn't the time to finish the word.

"I have jewels as bright as lemons just waiting to adorn your lovely hair." He held up a long hairpin with decidedly ordinary yellow beads. "The very latest in fashion."

His stall had an array of mannequin heads dressed in badly combed wigs and displaying similar cheap hair accessories, necklaces, and earrings. A single arm hung off the table, sagging from the weight of many bracelets.

"You know fashion best," she said with a smile, but she didn't stop. She'd rather put real lemons on her head than his tack.

The stall she stopped at seemed to merely sell a haphazard collection of knickknacks: used candlesticks with wax stains, and cutlery that made their clay counterparts look sharp. But Vima made his real money off the black market, peddling items Adlai stole for him.

"If it's a haggle you're after, this time it had better be worth it," he said.

Vima was dark-skinned and had his bald head wrapped in an even blacker scarf with the ends slung over his shoulders like two coiled snakes. He had thick lips, a strong jaw, and watchful eyes. If he wasn't always moaning about their deals while he cheated her, Adlai might have thought he was attractive.

"You're telling me you didn't sell the headdress? It had phoenix feathers."

He shrugged. "The plumage was very faded, I had to add a discount or I would have lost a good customer."

"A customer who doesn't pay enough is a bad customer," she said.

"And a thief who asks for too much is lucky to have buyers."

"Fine. Maybe I'll find my own buyer for a ring worn by one of the prince's personal guards, then?"

Vima leaned forward and regarded her coolly. "How did you get a knight's signet ring?"

"How could I not when they wandered in the market for last week's rain celebrations?" She pulled out the ring. The silver band had markings—words of obedience and loyalty, but it was the red cut gem that spoke the loudest.

"Hmm, you don't get more money for daring," he said, but from the flash in his eyes she thought she would get a good price on it.



SHE'D HAD to haggle for half an hour before she got a deal she was happy with. It was enough to rent a bed for a month or so but it wouldn't be enough to live on for much longer than that. Stealing like this was like feeding her future one spoon at a time when she really needed to feast.

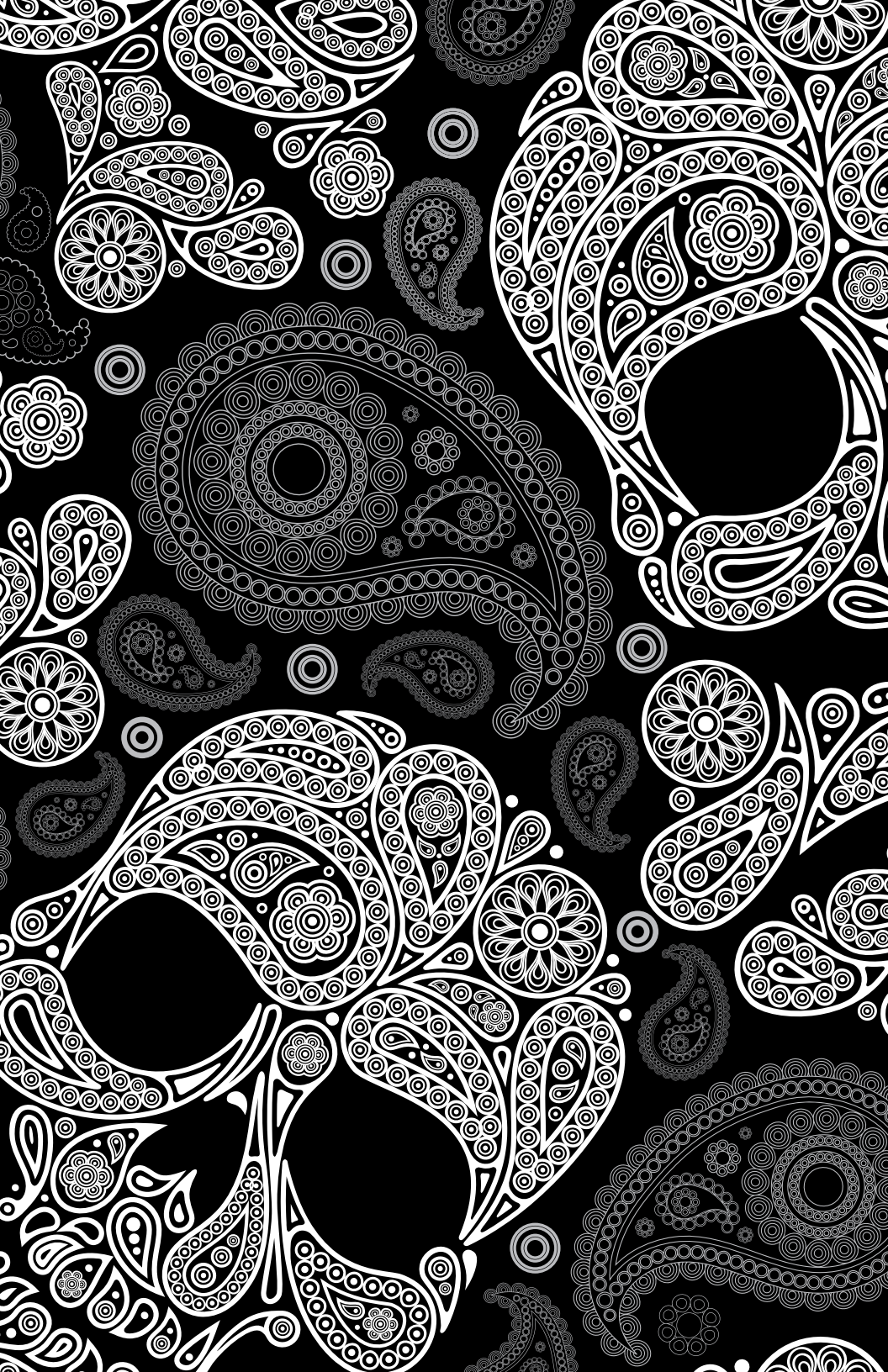
But wanting to steal something monumental was like wishing on a star or praying to the gods: it didn't mean it would actually

happen. Adlai walked through the crowds, assessing and discarding marks, hoping to find some worthwhile trinkets to steal. She wasn't expecting to see the flash of metal that winked at her from a nearby fruit stall. Not gold. It looked more like copper, only she knew it wasn't copper.

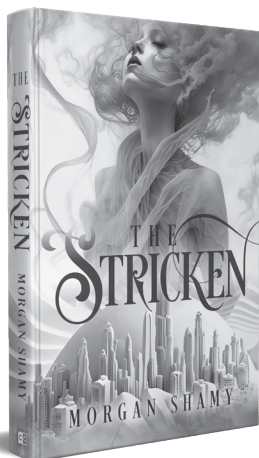
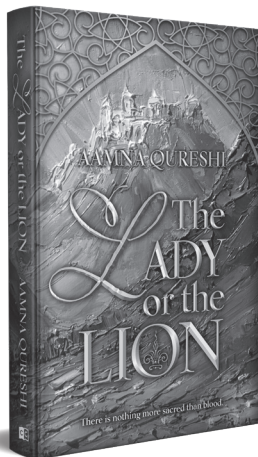
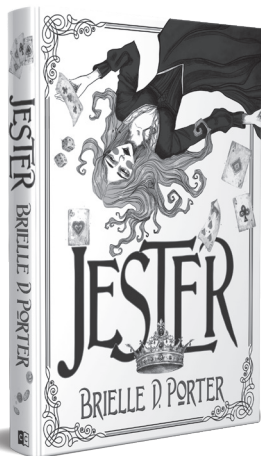
Suraci. It had to be. No other metal had that bronze, fiery sheen, and it couldn't be faked like everything else in the market. She'd never seen it with her own eyes before, but her father had told her about it. Specifically to stay away from it. Some silly superstition that the metal was cursed, but nothing had looked more beautiful to her. She could already feel it weighing heavy in her palm.

She smiled, already thanking the god Himlu for her luck.

It was time to play the game.



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IT WAS JUST A GAME AT THE START...

Adlai Bringer remembers going to the desert market with her father. The colorful tents, the wink of gold, and her father's shadow, black as night, as he sent it over to the stalls to steal whatever trinket she wanted. He called it the Shadow Game.

After her father disappears, Adlai goes back to the market determined to find some trace of him and stealing what she can with her shadow. Until one day she picks the wrong mark—someone who knows her game and brutally tries to take her shadow for himself.

Everything Adlai thought she knew about her shadow is turned upside down, and her father's disappearance takes on a new light as she's forced to flee the city or risk being hunted. From the desert to the shadow world to even more unlikely places, Adlai soon discovers that her shadow is a gift worth killing for.



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