

Shadow Passed — Caleb Rosenfeld

Regarding an eviscerated rabbit sprawled in the stained snow wasn't how I expected to greet the day, but it was hardly a surprise anymore. I rolled my eyes, a sigh escaping my blood-coated lips. At least it wasn't a person this time, but that didn't make waking easier. It never got easier.

I pulled out my blood-rag to wipe the mess from my beard, wishing that the shadow wasn't such a messy eater. I felt it nestled in my stomach, almost purring with its cruel diet sated. Yet, despite the shadow's inhuman satisfaction at such bloody glut, my own stomach rumbled beneath its curled form. It wouldn't be long before it was fighting me again, vying for control. I'd better restock while I had the chance.

Entering the market square of the nearest town, my eyes studied the boutiques of jewelry, fresh-baked goods, magical gizmos, and hand-forged weapons. Before long, I spotted a drab travel gear stall. Clashed cloaks, tinder and firewood, pans, pots, spices, and other basic cooking supplies all sat, neatly arranged, atop a creaking wooden base.

"Good afternoon, my fair sir," the salesman lied through his teeth. I was anything but fair with my matted beard and half-lidded eyes. "I see you're a musician," the salesman pointed to the untuned lute on my back with a smile. "I dabble a bit myself. Would you be interested in a selection of hand-crafted mahogany picks?—Imported from the far western coast." He spilled a bag of small teardrop shaped cuts of wood in front of him.

"No, thank you," I said. "I'm merely looking for meat confits: dried, salted, whatever's cheapest."

“Sure thing, sir,” the salesman said as he displayed his rations of preserved meats.

“That’ll be a silver per cut.”

“A silver? Are you the town jester?” My fists clenched and my eyebrows furrowed. I could feel the shadow slithering within me, reveling in my irritation.

“Certainly not, sir. These confits are seasoned with the finest southern spices brought from the most distant lands.”

“There’s not a speck of spice on them, you blind twat.” It was getting worse, constricting my chest.

“Oh, I can hardly endure your insults, good traveler,” the salesman lamented. “Perhaps two silver would be more reasonable.”

I felt my arm begin to shake. Though holding it in place, my insides grew hot, and I knew the shadow was red with a slitted sneer. I took a deep breath; this salesman wasn’t the only seller in town. “Listen, three copper per, and I’ll buy the lot.”

“You insult me with such prices? I travelled the breadth and depth of the Yseli Jungles, over the Mamluk Range, and through the Pearl Desert to—”

“Five per then.”

“Deal.”

Ale was on my mind now. I needed something to drink that wasn’t red and pulpy. My stomach still twisted with weight, but the shadow’s enraged iris had calmed. Anything to free myself from it, for even a night, would be worth it. A distraction was what I needed.

As if summoned by my thoughts, a crash resonated—the sound of shattering stone, wood, and metal. An armored figure flew through a building just down the road, a looming fur-coated

shape exploding from the wall after him. The figure slid, his greaves sparking against the stone road, shield glinting in the sunlight. Before him stood a white, horned beast the size of a market stall, and not the pitiful salesman's one at that. It growled at the armored man with three rows of long, narrow teeth dripping with blood, peering past the rubble with its six hungry eyes.

It was a gloomstalker, a monster that only left its hibernation to feed on anything and everything it could find. If left alone, it could ruin a town as small as this.

The armored man raised his sword, chuckling with a mighty voice. "You shan't hurt this fine folk today!" the man declared, and as he held the beast's attention, I recognized him. It was Armon, an old friend, practically family, from when I was—wait, that could only mean—

Armon stood firm, distracting the gloomstalker from the town's screaming denizens that ran past me. The beast crouched, smiling a demonic smile as it prepared to pounce.

"Get out of there!" I called, but it was too late. The speedy demon was already in the air, but before its front paws landed, a massive elephant appeared, slamming its tusks against the creature's furry form. As quickly as the animal appeared, it shrunk back to the size of a man wielding a wooden staff. It was Cacius the shifter, with his long silver hair, baggy pants, and everything. So, they really were here; that would mean that she was here too.

The gloomstalker soared through the air from the elephant's blow, exposing its pink stomach as it landed. A small portal appeared in the air, and I held my breath. A petite, robed woman flew upward from the portal, a volley of blue bolts zipping from her hands, her glowing bracelets pulsing with every blast. It was Izabel, and my stomach tensed, but not with the shadow's coil. The bolts landed, scorching the belly of the beast. It screeched and charged as Izabel fell back through her portal, disappearing from sight.

The beast huffed in a rage, turning its eyes to Armon again. Pouncing faster than an eye could blink, Armon took the beast's teeth against his enchanted shield, sailing back toward me. He skidded to a stop and stood with a groan, mere feet away.

"Get out of here, citizen," he said to me, "we've got this monst—" Then, he saw me. His eyes went wide, a shocked smile taking over his face. "Fabian?" he asked. "Guys! Fabian's here! I can't beli—"

The beast slammed against him once again, knocking him aside with an unnatural strength, barely missing me. My stomach writhed and slinked, but I held the shadow in, drawing my sword to take stance against the gloomstalker.

A hawk soared from the air, shapeshifting mid-flight back into Caciuss, who stabbed the gloomstalker in one eye with the pointed bottom of his staff. "Old friend; is that really you?" he asked, squinting at me from atop the beast screeching beneath him. It didn't take long for the beast to fling him off, so clearly distracted by the stain of my appearance. Caciuss tumbled through the air, landing with a painful skid against the stone path. The shadow within me was biting my inner throat now, but I held down a gag.

I grunted, narrowing my eyes at the beast. I wouldn't let it get away with knocking them around like that. I hefted my sword and stood my ground, no shield to guard me, my arm quaking from the searing shade within. The gloomstalker bit at me like lightning, but somehow gravity was faster. I fell through a portal beneath my feet, landing sprawled, out of the side of a building, beside Izabel.

"Use your lute, you old dolt!" Izabel shouted, pulling me to my feet with a strength she never had before. She was so much taller, her eyes filled with a confidence I'd never seen in her, but somehow making the same face she'd make when I said it was too late for bedtime stories.

“Izabel, I—”

“It really is you.” Her face softened for just a moment, and I was unsure if she would hug me or punch me. Thoughts raced as she stared into my weary eyes, a defeated old man, not the esteemed musician who’d raised her. “You’re here,” she decided. “Use your music. Stop that monster.”

“I haven’t played in years—”

“We don’t have time for you yammering! Either help us, or stay out of the way!” She dropped through a portal, leaving me and my sword out of the fray. I still held my arm in place as it quivered, my breath starting to steam now.

I’d expected this reaction out of her. Even though I spent every day thinking of what I would do or say if I ever saw my family again, nothing could prepare me for the paralysis I felt now, seeing Armon, Cacius, and Izabel in the flesh. My lute was dusty and dead, about as tired as my very bones. I doubted I could even produce music anymore, much less magic from the old hunk of wood.

Still, knowing the only people who ever loved me were fighting a deadly beast I’d never dream of facing, I drew my lute free. The callouses on my fingertips were long gone, but as I plucked a chord, the alien gave way to familiarity. It was discordant and horrible, but I worked with the tuning pegs, the lute sounding better with each strum. I might actually be able to do this.

I leapt out from behind the building, strumming an old song I used to play in battle as I glared down the street at the gloomstalker. Heads turned in recognition as Armon, Cacius, and Izabel heard my song. It flittered in the air, light and winged, drawing inspiration from the very soil beneath me. The shadow within me retreated as my hands felt music again, each chord resounding in a comfortable coolness that travelled up my arm, bringing me almost to a smile.

Yet, the music did not hold the gloomstalker in place as I'd hoped, my magic unpracticed and impotent after so long. The creature took advantage of my compatriots' stunned silence, knocking Izabel aside. She tried teleporting to safety, but no portal could stop her momentum into the ground as she slid across the stone, leaving a trail of blood from her shoulder.

In the same move, Cacius was thrown free from the beast's back. Though he tried to shapeshift into a cat to land on his feet, I watched one of his legs snap as he landed.

Last, the beast bit its toothy maw into Armon, and the metal of his armor creaked, the screech of metal combining with his scream, echoing through the streets.

I had never felt my stomach burn hotter, never felt the shadow stronger, more overjoyed. The anger was all-consuming, the shadow's coil cackling in my throat. My muscles tensed. My throat constricted. My lips bound for fear of what would escape them. What had I done this for? Why had I taken this horrible shadow?

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I heard little Izabel's laughter as I hummed, playing a tune on my lute. The music flowed through the crystal sands of the Pearl Desert and lifted a few pebbles into the air. They hovered like bubbles on a lake, swirling above the campfire that Izabel, Cacius, Armon, and I sat around on a cool, quiet night. Izabel tapped them, giggling as they bounced and bobbed slightly to the beat of the song.

"I can't wait until I'm powerful enough to do cool magic like you!" Izabel said, grinning at me.

"You think that's power?" Armon asked, "I lift this helmet with my head every day, and it's heavier than a thousand pebbles."

"But your head isn't magic," Izabel laughed.

“But there’s certainly a few pebbles inside,” Cacius said.

“You’re one to talk, birdbrain,” Armon chuckled. “Your brain is probably half its size half the time.”

“At least it’s not the whole time.”

I chuckled, breaking my song, and the stones dropped. “Don’t listen to these two jokers,” I said. “It’s not about power or pebbles. It’s about practice.” I strummed a wild set of chords, and she giggled as the music made her hair swirl.

“That tickles!” As she giggled, a small portal opened beneath Cacius, and he fell, appearing above Armon to land on his lap in a heap. His stark hair was tangled and wild as he looked around in confusion like a startled cat, Armon chuckling.

“Get off me, ya grody shifter.” Armon scooped Cacius from his lap and dropped him in the sand.

“Wait, was that—?” Izabel looked at me in excitement. “I’ve never made a portal that big before!”

A smirk grew on my face, “I guess you might not need as much practice as you thought.” I tousled her hair, and she continued to smile with those sweet, bright, beautiful eyes.

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The wonder and hope of that little girl drew forth new courage. I took a deep breath, opened my mouth, and sang.

No voice escaped my lips save for a sputter. Something caught in my throat, and I coughed, blood spitting onto the stained stone. I could hardly stand, my vision clearing slowly until I saw the mess—the horrible, crimson mess. The gloomstalker was dead, its head severed, fur dyed, guts splayed on the stone. Yet, there was no triumph. Blood coated the street, the walls

painted in smears and sprays, a couple of scattered white specks floating amid the red rivers.

Three corpses lay in rest, twisted and tangled into agonizing positions, snapped and splattered.

My stomach wrenched, but the shadow stayed still, satisfied. I couldn't move for fear it would be true. Staring back at me, crying sockets, was that beautiful little girl. I wished I'd never woken.