

*Book One of the Night's Dream Series*

# WE SHADOWS

Revised Edition



**THOMM QUACKENBUSH**

## **Prologue: Ravenous**

Before it all began, Shane remembered the knives slipping between her rib and the mushroom light above.

She had needed to mope—a talent at which she excelled through a year of careful practice—and couldn't do it in her room. She opted to indulge the primary objective of bars: drunkenness. The secondary objective of bars—picking up strangers and making use of their bedrooms—didn't interest Shane. She hadn't kissed anyone in over a year, but she would before the week was out.

The moment her night went from a solitary bitch-fest to the end of her life as she knew it was accepting the drink.

The bartender had nudged her out of her self-pity, yelling, “Miss, I said that someone sent you a drink!”

“Oh! Who?”

The bartender shrugged his stout shoulders. “Didn't say! So, you want it?!”

“Who sent it?” Shane asked again. He made of show of scanning the bar as though seeking land. Few dry faces looked back.

“Don't see him anymore.” He put a wine glass in front of Shane and turned away to tend to a customer who would not be so inquisitive.

Shane peered at the glass. The liquid within gleamed the purple of first kisses. In the center floated a star-shaped seedpod smelling of licorice. She swished it around in her glass and she took a sniff bordering on a snort. It smelled like her grandmother's kitchen after making cinnamon rolls.

She sipped. A trap of spice seized her tongue and was disarmed by honey. A larger mouthful radiated the warmth of glowing coals. She swallowed the remainder of the glass in two gulps, licking her lips to make sure she missed none. She even chewed the seedpod, ravenous.

The din around her muted, the world filtered through the bottom of her glass. The bar palpitated with her heart, a fuzzy orange glow waxing with her every exhalation.

She felt as though she floated, embryonic. She didn't want to be wearing clothes anymore. “Clothes” seemed such a funny word to her, syllables invented to annoy someone with a speech impediment. Like “chrysanthemum”. She just wanted to rise to the ceiling, unfettered and ignored, and be carried around by the current like the last balloon after the party ends.

She remembered falling from the stool. And the knives. Accepting the drink was absolutely the wrong move, she thought.

## Chapter 1: Some Other Beginning's End

From Shane's diary:

Autumn turned to winter then to spring and summer. I sort of wish it could surprise me how few boxes it takes to sum up eighteen years or that boxes couldn't measure my life, but it seems as good a barometer as any.

According to the orientation propaganda, Annandale University is "nestled in the creaking forests of upstate New York". It's the sort of bucolic bulimia that comes as a shock to those who expect the state to be one sprawling skyscraper. That skyscraper comment was not a part of the pamphlet, but they should consider it. (I'll understand if they ignore the bit about bulimia, people are queasy about vomiting.) The entire campus was a massive donation by some steel or oil magnate a hundred years ago. Who does that, just gives everything away and leaves nothing for those they love? He had to be scared of people, because why else would you go through such an effort to hide.

That wasn't supposed to be self-aware.

I'm in the oldest dormitory on campus, Manor House, hidden behind one of the modern architectural abortions. (Today is a day for gross alliteration!) I was excited at first but I'm beginning to think it might be my punishment for daring to be a freshman. Manor has only the most basic comforts of the past century (including a snack machine, because I need five-year-old chocolate way more than reliable heating and plumbing). From what Eliot told me, the upperclassmen shun Manor because it lacks air conditioning in the summer, but I didn't care enough to make a fuss about it.

The first thing I did after I dropping off a box of assorted novels (Authors O-Z) was to twirl on my heels in the main common room like a secular dervish. The building is a renovated manor house (thus the name) that was once the donor's personal respite. From what I read, even his wife kept away. Creeeeepiness abounds! The common room is lousy with period furniture, though they don't reek of beer or bodily fluid, just dust.

I closed my eyes and ran my fingers over the stone walls, hoping I would catch a flicker of what was here before. He might have stood in this spot, touched this wall. Did the walls remember him?

I'm guessing... no. Because they are made of forgetful rocks.

If the individual rooms had been a tenth as amazing as the main hall, I would have been ecstatic. Except the rooms are one *elevanth* as beautiful, no different than the rooms you would find in any dorm at any college. It's cruel to refurbish something authentic to look so generic, to rip out everything that made it unique and fascinating and cover it all with the same dull white plaster. Stupid plaster of conformity, all uneven and bumpy.

My room is both stark and small, even with the high ceiling. I can't imagine sharing with another person, though I will, judging by the two tiny beds, like the school is peopled by six foot five waifs. Maybe I can just push them together and have one reasonable bed.

If I'm going to be forced into this level of intimacy with another person, I want say in the matter. No one has seen me in my underwear since I was old enough to lock the door. Technically, I guess I did have say in whom my roommate would be. I was supposed to fill out this survey so the college could match me with my "ideal" roommate. It asked reasonable questions about a smoking preference (all dorms are supposedly non-smoking), but also what kind of flower I'd want to be. I let my mom fill it out. She is almost a therapist, so I would hope she would know her only daughter enough to not screw me over.

One of the weirdest parts about my room was this cracked, wall-length mirror under my bed. There was enough other trash left by the previous occupants that it seemed reasonable that a whole mirror had been forgotten. Doesn't the school have enough money for my tuition to clean the room before I get it? Okay, not *my* tuition (I'm not paying any), but the point stands.

I touched her fingers, the me in the mirror who fell through the looking glass, and told her (or she told me) that I was going to be okay, that I could do this, but Mirror Shane did not look convinced. She started biting her bottom lip. She's just lousy at subtlety.

I jumped a little when I saw the red dropping upward from Mirror Shane's fingers. I looked at my hand, the reflection following suit, and saw I cut my finger on some invisible sliver. I wiped the wound clean with a bit of tissue my mother had given me. Mom was much more upset that I was "leaving the nest" than I could be. Still, I accepted the tissues from her with what I hope was a reassuring smile, not wanting mom to cry more. On the way to college, my mom kept chirping up with these platitudes about how this was a new chapter and all the gibberish moms are supposed to say. A few she only got halfway through before I could hear the tears in her voice. "Every cloud has a silver..." "College a place where girls become..." She wouldn't even look at me, not even at stoplights. Her eyes stayed straight on the road the whole time. I wanted to write, just to give my hands something to do. I couldn't even fake sleep, since I don't think she could deal with my leaving her any more than was absolutely necessary.

When we stopped at a light just before the college, this huge black bird landed in front of the car. I expected it to peck at the ground or fly away. Instead, it did a little dance and just stared through the windshield at me. Like, really stared at me. The light changed and my mom hit the accelerator fast, I don't think she saw it. I had to scream and pull the wheel to stop her from hitting the stupid bird.

I'm going to explore the campus later. It seemed more productive than trying to fit my life into a thirteen-by-six space. At worst, it would mean I'd stop being pestered by all the other freshmen. One had even pushed open my door with a huge camera and took my picture before I could ask him what he was doing. I yelled down the hall after him, but he vanished into the crowd.

The lottery process that put me here seems to be more than a little rigged; I doubt any of these people stifling early onset homesickness has a single college credit under their belts. I am not homesick.

Okay, maybe the tiniest bit, but I can't keep blaming Eliot. This past year didn't touch me because I didn't let it touch me. Aside from school and swim team, I've been like a ghost. But I've got to socialize and give up on this Emily Dickinson routine before I end up in an attic. I like the sun far too much to be a shut-in, even if it doesn't favor my freckles. Maybe Annandale will be better. I could get to like a world that doesn't involve school dances and ringing bells.

## Chapter 2: Shane

It began more than a year ago, over a stack of storybooks Shane studied to discover what attributes made one princessly—this wasn't technically a word, but she felt there should be equity in adjectives if not in life. Her straw-colored pigtails did not qualify her to be Rapunzel and could not be spun to gold, she was too active to be Sleeping Beauty, too outspoken to be Cinderella, too keen on tall fellows to be Snow White. She held little carriage with sleeping upon legumes to display her regal daintiness and imagined that the only result would be a mushy, green stain on the underside of her mattress. Her eyes met the criteria only of the evil ice queen.

She did not see the boy and his pushcart, loaded down with misplaced books—only some her fault—until he stood nearly atop her. Though she made a practice of never getting in anybody's way and a more careful practice of avoiding attraction to anyone her age (or at least *in* her age; she encouraged herself toward crushes on James Dean and young Ernest Hemingway), this boy and his rusting cart snuck up on her.

He stood slightly taller than her, though a glance through the almanac later told her she was barely above average in height and below average in weight. His unfocused hazel eyes stared behind thick-rimmed glasses. He wore a little facial hair, an attribute Shane never considered attractive. Yet, on him, the goatee did not mar his boyishness. His hair was a little long, but she did not think it was intentionally so, more like he had been meaning to get a haircut and it persisted in slipping his mind. She considered herself one of the few who found absentmindedness alluring.

He looked torn out of a daydream. “N... no problem,” he stuttered and, looking down at the mound of mixed-up children's books this girl had created in the middle of the 598s, mumbled, “fairy tales are good.”

Shane blushed scarlet, an ability she never had occasion to learn she possessed. “L... these are for a project?”

She hoped and feared he would inquire as to her research in the summer, but he did not. He looked at her and, in the reflection of his square framed glasses, she saw herself. Not the young girl she once was or the misshapen goblin that had so often greeted her in mirrors. While she was busy learning about chrysalises, she became woo-worthy. The boy pushed his cart away.

Of course, she thought to herself, I'm not a princess. I'm the ugly duckling.

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While Shane's visits to the library did not ebb, the direction veered. She would collect a stack of books and hide in a corner, watching the boy—Eliot—over the tops of anthropology primers. She studied him, his behavior and habits, hoping to witness something that would break the thrall. Maybe he would linger too long in the human anatomy section, perhaps he would read a magazine on hunting, or he could even be stupid and rude. She delighted that he disappointed.

Eliot was hardly oblivious to this girl sneaking glances, her icy eyes warming his cheeks as he rescued figure study books from the public restroom. He knew all the regular patrons, if only to avoid their belligerence at pocket change fines. Shane never issued a cross word and he could only remember having heard her speak above a whisper when his cart threatened to plow her under. But he liked that whisper enough to be hungry for more.

Shane had seen him before, but he was only one of the thousands of faces that composed the human wallpaper of her high school memories. She never paid much attention to other people, having long since decided they would not pay attention to her.

After a week of this mutual coyness—looking at the other for the electric charge of averting their gaze—Eliot swallowed his pride despite a dry mouth and approached. “Shane-“ he

had looked her up in the library's computer, he would later explain, “-the library is closing in a few minutes and...”

“I know, Eliot, I'll put my things away...” She was not being obtuse. She simply didn't wish to make it seem too easy for him. Or too difficult, which is why she had answered his use of her name in turn. If the guiltily read romance novels Shane's mother gave her when sick taught Shane anything—and they only barely had—it was that a man did not appreciate any girl who swooned too easily into his arms. She also learned that male genitalia was often described in the cloaking of weaponry, but that didn't seem applicable yet.

“WouldYouLikeToGoToTheDinerWithMe?” he asked in one breathless word, then deflated.

Though she thought herself prepared, she blinked at the edges of his glasses, seeking to steady herself. As he backed away, looking as though she were about to spring up at him and cackle, she accepted his proposal by entangling her fingers in his and having him pull her up from the floor.

At the diner, she ordered a hot chocolate and nothing more, as the idea of eating in front of a boy felt frighteningly intimate. Opening her mouth to take a bite seemed forward. Chewing? Obscene. Mutual mastication was out of the question. Whenever she read accounts of women eating like birds in the presence of men, she considered this a sign of an eating disorder brought on by the systematic denigration of women in society. She realized with chagrin that it might have been that they were too *twitterpated* to have much of a stomach. Blessed with the metabolism of a hummingbird, Shane was not one to turn down the prospect of diner food and milkshakes.

Eliot was afflicted equally but oppositely, gorging in order to fill the space between words.

Mercifully, Eliot eventually thought to ask Shane about her favorite book. The awkward first date distance between them lifted like a curtain and, they both felt, their time on the stage could begin. Shane rambled on for ten minutes, defining and revising her favorites by genre and author. Eliot leaned his face on his upturned hands and said nothing; she asked herself any questions he might have. Far from this being presumptuous, he grew fonder of her for granting him uninterrupted insight. Girls on campus chatted about what they read—his ex, Ashlei did it without pause when she found out he worked in a library over the summer—but it never seemed that they enjoyed reading. Shane read without reason, for the pleasure of it.

That night, walking her home after teasing one another as to the quality of their childhood literary crushes—she on Jesse Tuck from *Tuck Everlasting*, he on Nancy Drew in her eponymous books—he kissed her. It was not the first kiss she ever received in her seventeen years on this earth. (That long ago kiss had been fumbling, lingering in a grape bubblegum odor just below her nose.)

He pulled away and blinked at her, as though he had just woken up from a dream of waking. Then, under the yellow streetlights, she was almost certain he reddened and grew pale in rapid succession.

“You'll be back tomorrow?” he ventured.

Shane smirked and gave him a peck on the cheek to assure him she would.

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During the days, Shane would cloister herself in some nook of the library, waiting for him to find her reading a dog-eared copy of Franny and Zooey or a book on ikebana. Daily, they played this patient game of hide-and-seek as Eliot worked less diligently.

The flirtatiously warm days of July vacated for their August neighbors, Shane and Eliot varying their schedules only to visit the lake Friday afternoons for a swim. It was secluded from passersby and, though it had been the winking secret spot of teenagers since Shane's grandparents were old enough to sneak around, was out of vogue.

As Shane lay on the grass of the lakeside, her head in Eliot's lap, she asked him, "What do you get out of working at the library?"

"Pennies over minimum wage and groupies." His eyes felt far away from Shane, sorting through the overcast sky for a glint of sunlight.

"I beg your pardon!"

He returned to her and smirked. "What did you think you were?"

Shane sat up and gave her best attempt at aggravation, but fell short of a child's pout. "Mildly offended, but answer the question for real."

"I guess I like giving order to chaos."

Relaxing back onto his lap she said, "That's kind of noble."

"Plus, I have CDO."

"What's that?"

"It's like obsessive compulsive disorder, only it's alphabetical."

Shane groaned and pushed him, relaxing again on his lap.

Smoothing back her hair to kiss her forehead, he asked, "What are you up to next weekend?"

"We're never together on the weekend!" she responded, delighted. She was not averse to spending time with him instead of the brats she babysat. He was a little moody at times, but she had hope they would continue dating once he returned to college and, though she would be mortified to admit it to anyone, when she joined him there upon graduation. With a pang of guilt, she continued, "but next week I am going on vacation with my mom."

He turned his head away from her to look at the wind ripple the surface of the lake. The circles intersected and collapsed. "Oh, it's no big deal. I'm having a party at my house and some of my friends were going to be there. I wanted them to meet my girlfriend." From his tone, it did not sound like it was no big deal. In fact, he sounded as though he had just seen The Pokey Little Puppy meet the business end of The Little Engine That Could.

"I would love to go and you know it," she reprimanded him with a kiss. "I'll be back Sunday night and you had better tell me all about the party then, or I shall be forced to be cross with you, Mr. Kaspar." She over-dramatized for effect, but this felt to her like their first fight, the only one they would have the chance to have.

During the week leading up to their respective trip and party, Shane tried to make her future absence up to Eliot. At first he sulked, but by Wednesday he was happier than Shane had ever seen him. He also had begun to cheat at their game of hide-and-seek, making even less of an effort to pretend finding Shane was legitimate work.

"I'll be quitting soon enough," he reasoned when she suggested he try to do more actual work and less obvious kissing, "so I don't see why I should. I've got to build up a supply of Shane in my blood. You wouldn't want me to go through Shane withdrawal, would you? I hear it's horrible. Cold sweats. Babies crawling on the ceiling. Explosive blinking. Hair where there was no hair before."

She restrained an escaping giggle and brushed his cheek, grown stubbly. "We could go a week without seeing one another," she assured him without conviction.

"True, but I always have the *option* of seeing you."

Shane could not argue. Being in a car hundreds of miles away from Eliot seemed a world different from being across town from him. Her lips realized this and began craving his, particularly the bottom one.

Ten minutes before closing on Friday, Eliot found her sitting cross-legged in the Social Problems section. He pulled her up by one arm and knocked over half a shelf.

“I have a going away present for you,” he smiled, his hands hidden behind his back.

Shane grinned twice as broadly as he did. She so enjoyed surprise presents, or imagined she would if she could rely upon them coming regularly. “What is it?”

He pulled a ring off of his pinky and handed it to her. She slid it on, finding that it only fit on her middle finger. She balled her hand into a fist and relaxed it. The silver ankh spanned from hand to her first knuckle. It was his prized possession, though he did not pay attention to any of the meaning of the symbol. To him, it had been a fortuitous find inside a hole he knocked in his dorm room while fencing with a broom against his roommate. As he did not get charged for fixing the wall, it must be lucky.

“To remember me by,” Eliot added, pushing shaggy hair from his forehead. It made Shane want to shove him to the floor and ravish him.

She doubted she'd think of anything else on her trip but she accepted it with a lingering kiss, interrupted only by the hag for whom Eliot would cease to work in a matter of minutes.

He didn't walk her home that night because he said he had to get supplies ready for the party. It had been so long since Shane had walked home alone that the route felt alien. The late setting sun cast her shadow as a long, gaunt creature on the street before her and she wished that the streetlights would flicker on to banish it back to Neverland. She twisted the ankh around her finger until she was home.



### Chapter 3: The Garden

Shane wrote Eliot's college stories in her diary in hopes of making him her guide. She hated that she couldn't remember more, that she had taken for granted that she would hear his anecdotes always. What she remembered best was Blythewood Garden and its statue. To hear him go on, Blythewood was a little corner of Eden that floated up during the Flood, presided over by its alabaster Eve. If he had described living women with half the passion he directed toward one made of stone, Shane would have had to fight off his suitors with a stick.

Shane was wrong. Not about bludgeoning other women with a club—she wouldn't have minded—but for thinking Eliot exaggerated. His absence, though as sharp as a hatpin, did not stop the flowers from bursting with color. Autumn crept into the trees around the walled garden, the tips of their leaves catching aflame, but the plants within were as if in a hot house. She saw a black bird—far too large, Shane thought—alight upon the boughs of an overhanging willow. It croaked encouragement at her, but she couldn't find that reassuring. The bird stood on one leg, then the other, anxious to see her next move.

She walked down the hill, eschewing the stone steps for grass. Closing her eyelids, she tried to keep Eliot tight in her mind. He walked down this hill a hundred times. He rolled more than once. If she thought about him as though he were here, then maybe he would be. Maybe it could at least feel that way for a breath.

Her eyes opened to kaleidoscopic eruptions, but no Eliot. The statue gazed blindly at the ground as though goading Shane to move closer. It looked like a mourning lover from a distance, though one no taller than a toddler.

Shane stopped as the statue came into focus. She decided to put the garden off for another day.

###

Returning to her room, she intended to finish unpacking. While the room remained nude on Shane's side, the other side wore the hues of a deep bruise. Next to the only window hung a skillful rendering of a dark girl, hugging her knees and naked but for a pair of glimmering dragonfly wings.

There was no roommate. This was for the best as it gave Shane a chance to snoop. Aside from a glut of purple and black pleather clothes that looked uncomfortable, she was amused to see that her roommate wore pink undergarments embroidered with unicorns and fairies.

Shane turned from her personal invasion and noticed with awkward comfort that her roommate nailed a three-foot, ceramic ankh above Shane's bed, covering a triangular scar in the plaster.

#### Chapter 4: The Witch and Her Wardrobe

Shane unpacked the last of her books, exiling fairytales to the plastic bin under her bed.

Shane flounced onto her bare mattress and yelped at the nip of a spring. This noise was her introduction as her new roommate, Roselyn, poured into a lace blouse that would have befitted the princess at a renaissance festival and tight blue jeans, pushed the door ajar and stuck her head in as though she expected and preferred copulating dogs. She looked every inch the model for the fairy painting hung on the wall, more so for the confusion she wore.

The illicit scent of sage lingered in the air, the only tangible remnant of the spell Roselyn had done to bring her the perfect roommate. She did not wish to rely on the mundane survey when there was a chance to use witchcraft. Why shouldn't she use every means at her disposal, natural and otherwise? It seemed that the Powers That Be gave Roselyn a geek instead of someone spiritually empowered. She reminded herself to have a petulant conversation with her patron-goddess-of-the-week. Well... if she took her hair out of those pigtails and wore a billowy dress instead of just a t-shirt and jeans, she could pass for an attractive girl. And a bit of mascara and blush wouldn't kill her. Just something to take attention away from her nose, complimentary colors to strip away the shadows under her eyes, some foundation to make up for a lack of sunlight. And it would do her a world of good to find the proper conditioner. Roselyn felt there existed few problems a woman could have that wouldn't be solved with the proper application of oils and unguents. Though Shane would never make it as a true Daughter of the Goddess, at least she didn't decorate her side of the room obtrusively or, in fact, at all. She even left the ankh in place over her bed. Quite a lot could be said by Roselyn for someone that did not intrude upon her evolving style (which evolved back into the depths of the sea), though little would ever be.

Shane rose from the bed and extended the hand unoccupied with rubbing her emerging bruise. "Hi, I'm Shane," she said.

Roselyn peered down at Shane's hand, took it in her own, and shook it. Then she kissed it, a gesture that struck even Roselyn as extreme. Shane recoiled.

"I'm Roselyn," she said, trying to enunciate each letter, *Roe-Zell-Lion*. "I'm a witch." Roselyn felt it paid to get that out of the way, though the same could not often be said for those to whom she introduced herself.

Off Shane's lack of shock, Roselyn silently swore to burn candles to her patron goddess for a whole week. Shane seemed to have excellent vibrations, accepting and curious.

"That's... nice. I've read a bit about witches," Shane replied.

Roselyn appraised Shane as she would an interesting rock, saying nothing. However, Roselyn was the sort much enamored of rocks.

"Are you a freshman?" Shane asked after a moment of awkward silence where Roselyn hoped someone would say something. She seemed about to ask Roselyn's sign just to further the conversation, but that was unnecessary. While Shane lingered over "Slow: Children Playing", Roselyn warned of dangerous curves ahead.

Roselyn blinked, eyelids shadowed. "Oh no, I am an old soul. I used to be Cleopatra." Shane froze, teeth slightly parted, as she tried to summon a response. Roselyn then giggled. Her persona as a witch only lasted as long as her attention stayed focused. She was an artist unceasingly, though, and that is the aspect of her that couldn't stand keeping Shane uncomfortable.

Shane tittered in turn, though Roselyn didn't think she got the joke. "Sorry, Wiccan humor. Anybody who is anybody claims to have been Cleopatra. There must have been a gaggle

of Cleopatras in ancient Egypt, all with their own Marc Anthony.” She smoothed out her blouse and continued, “Yeah, I am a freshman. And,” she added before remembering to retain a sense of mystery, the painter again wanting to divulge, “I’ve never lived away from home before, even though it’s only a town away. And, I’m really kind of scared... I never had a roommate, only my little brother down the hall. So...” It was fine to show strangers your underwear, but never your fear.

Shane sighed and seemed to relax into this co-occupancy. “Yeah, I’m the same. No roommates, just my mom. I know I just met you and this is a weird thing to say, but I’m glad we ended up roommates. I could do a lot worse.”

“Do you know anyone on campus?” Knowing people, even by proxy, gave one the pleasure of selectivity.

“I used to,” Shane confessed, “but... he isn’t here anymore, so you are the first person.”

Roselyn smirked. “You could do a lot worse, Shane. I’ll have you know I rule in no small way. And thanks for leaving the ankh up.”

Shane looked to it as she answered, “No problem.”

## Chapter 5: Guys You Used to Know

“You can't equate video games with art.” Virgil possessed the nervous twitch of someone who expected a blow at any moment and, in their absence, reacted as though most any unkind word could wound him.

Jake turned from the screen and sneered in a way Virgil felt in his spleen, scratching another pockmark onto his face. He looked as though he had a growth spurt only a week ago, skin tight and muscles stretched thin and hard. “These games *are* art. People spent a hell of a lot more time creating this... this interactive medium. There is an individual role, rather than someone telling you what to think. *I* learn what *I* want.”

“What are you learning right now? How to disembowel an elf? You think that's going to be useful?”

This argument no longer needed an antecedent, one party would refresh it and the other would fill his role as adversary. Were they to know one another one hundred years—it had been a fiftieth of that—they would discuss this on their deathbeds while scratching their catheter tubes. While Virgil backed down when conflict arose, he had too much pride and took too much pleasure from these heated exchanges to be anything less than adamant. Far from an art buff, he assumed whatever position Jake desired of him.

Jake lapsed into silence, the only sound coming from the flamethrower his character wielded. Virgil returned to his book, more focused but less absorbed.

Owen shoved the door of the common room open, making sure that it slammed. “There is a matter that may demand our attention,” he said. Effect was everything, he'd told Virgil once. Make people think it was their idea and they always did what you wanted.

Owen was not small, but he had the features of a fox in stalk, the lines of concentration carving through what might otherwise be a youthful face. At his temples, the hair had begun to gray, furthering the perception that this was an ancient man in the body of a boy.

Jake and Virgil barely stirred from ignoring one another. Jake murmured, his voice dull, “A matter... like... what?”

“A matter related to a certain departed friend of *yours*, Jake.”

Virgil had spent this last year trying without success to forget, trying not to mention the rotting elephant in the middle of the room. Even now, the thoughts released snakes of queasy melancholy from his gut.

He sat rigid. “What do you mean? You don't even mention...” He stopped speaking, unable to quite fill in what should go at this point in his accusation, but almost certain it was fiercer than an ellipsis.

Owen, having provoked his associates, relaxed onto the orange sofa in their common room, rubbing his palms on the crow's feet etching the corners of his eyes. “It—she, actually—is something that may or may not have to be dealt with. It may just be coincidence...” Owen trailed off as though the silence bowdlerized, but it sounded far uglier. “This university enjoys a certain reputation, doesn't it? Maybe she had applied before... matters occurred.”

“Where'd you see her?” asked Jake, curling back into his chair in front of his computer, swaddled in a blanket of violence and pornography.

“I didn't, exactly,” said Owen. “An associate of mine let this slip. But her actions were such that there might be reason for concern.” Owen's sentences tended to drift into the prolix when he needed to mask his thoughts. It was unnecessary; Owen hid his thoughts as though he spent several lifetimes perfecting the art, though it had only been the past year, as he drifted

farther from the person Virgil had once known. It was a year that had taken an obvious toll from him, giving him prematurely thinning hair and a need to abandon his contact lenses for bifocals.

Jake paced, wiping his own rectangular glasses on his t-shirt. "What kind of concern? She's just a girl, right? What can one girl do against us?"

Owen's arm flew at him, connecting with Jake's stomach with a resonant thud. "She could do worse and you would be caught as unaware. Have you learned nothing about women at college? No female is 'just a girl'. They only make you think they are while it conveniences them."

Virgil had enough of this, but was wary of getting within an arm's length of Owen to check on his fallen friend. "So, do we assume that this girl knows?"

Owen's legs twitched. He held up his forefinger in warning. "We assume nothing. We know what assumptions can do, don't we? The next move is hers."

###

From Shane's diary:

It isn't like I believe in magic. I leave belief to the believers. It can be dangerous to think there is some sky daddy, that we can talk to ourselves and intermediary steps in and patch us up. If there were a god, I have to think he or she or it likes people who stand on their own feet and don't waste energy with things like prayer. One of those ancient Greeks, Pliny or Plato or one of the Pl's, said that magic was a parasite that grew fat on science. If there is a god, science is the language she speaks.

So why did I do the spell? Because Roselyn asked me and, for all of her weirdness, I can see us becoming friends. It would be a lot easier for me, I'm not going to get out of this room assignment. Given the other people in our dorm (like Dog Fur Girl), I know I'm lucky.

I did tell her how I felt. She was upfront and so I returned the favor. She told me Wiccans don't try to convert people. Still, I didn't want to have to sit through "thees" and "thous" spouted from a mouth that should be abusing the word "like". Religion should not be any more ridiculous than it needs to be.

After I confessed all of this, while she was digging through her plastic trunk, she asked me in cavernous words, "You believe in psychology, right?"

I told her I didn't think that psychology was something that required my belief in it to be true. It is a lot closer to science than witchcraft, though I guess there are those that would disagree.

"In that case," Roselyn said, removing a plastic baggie full of cotton, "just consider this tapping into the Jungian Collective Unconscious to make us feel that the room is *ours* and safe. Drive away those nasty manifestations of fear and doubt because who needs them?"

"Is that what we are doing?" I was a little surprised Roselyn had enough of a grasp on psychology to spout off like that. That isn't to say that what she said makes total sense to me, but I guess I'm just not used to other people being smart. One of the benefits of college.

She has got these dark brown eyes like you wouldn't believe and when she looks at you, you can swear she is seeing something you are trying to hide. I bet it is all that eyeshadow. So she was staring into me, and then she said, as chipper as can be, "Childhood is this time of magic and monsters; hoping for one and fearing the other... The worst part of being a kid is discovering which one exists... So, I chose to believe in magic, okay?"

I watched her as she removed the cotton from the plastic bag she held and produce a brown egg covered in writing. She handled it like it was the most fragile thing she had ever touched and then laid it down in an iron pot—a cauldron, I guess, since she thinks she's a

witch—no bigger than a measuring cup. Where do you even get something like that? Is there a whole occult market I am missing?

After lighting the candles one by one with a punk of incense, she motioned for me to join her on the floor. She had put down a large mat with a spiraling Celtic design, but the cold seeped through. It likely does not help that my ass is lacking in insulation against the elements. I get cold in a sauna.

“Do you always keep your eggs in there?” I asked. This seemed a pungent question to get out of the way.

“Shh,” she replied, “this is just for this ritual. I planned this out weeks ago. Don't worry.”

There wasn't chanting. We just sat on the floor and stared at the egg. The incense must have made me a little dizzy, because the egg looked wavy for a moment, like I was seeing it through heat. Then Roselyn picked the egg back up and held it out to me. I started to take it from her. Her fingers latched onto my hand and she squeezed. The eggshell shattered, but my hand remained yolk-free because the egg had been hollow. Tricky girl.

Roselyn broke the eggshell finer and finer in her hand until it was little more than a powder. She sprinkled what remained into the cauldron and placed smoldering incense on it. It pulsed a deep red, gray smoke rising up a mixture of sulfur and sage.

“To new beginnings,” Roselyn said, her face serene and beautiful.

“To new beginnings.”

That night, I had all of these dreams. I don't remember them all, but I know I had them. It is the nature of dreams that nobody gets to really remember them, especially the good ones. I remember talking to myself, like I had two bodies. I was trying to tell myself something, how it isn't about girls at all. And there were these two birds, big black ones like crows. And they just kept watching me, like I was supposed to be doing something.

I woke up all sweaty and out of breath. I blame the incense. I'm probably allergic to magic smoke.

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After a year of coasting rather than living, destroyed by her boyfriend Eliot's death, Shane Valentine matriculates into his college. She begins to build a new life as a college freshman, only to have it stolen from her one night, when she is trying to drown her sorrows at the bottom of a daiquiri.

She wakes the next day in a strange apartment with three scars she can't remember and a bloody shirt. On her walk of shame in stolen clothes, she realizes that no one aside from her roommate Roselyn, a Wiccan with epilepsy, remembers her. Unfortunately three occultists are after her to fix the mistake they made and they remember her too well.

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