

“Kiai!” Everyone in the courtyard yelled together as they went through their sequences, like a fine-tuned machine. Light blasts flashed at regular intervals in the room, some with more power than others. All six of us were trying to do our very best because only two of us could go on the front line of the hunt tonight. Master Reijo was walking around the room and he would move one of our arms up, someone else’s foot backwards until he was satisfied with our stances.

Master Reijo announced the groups for tonight's hunt, and I prayed I was finally good enough. “Ikki, Bryce you’ll be in the front line with me. Willie, Joey, Sven, back us up. Khen, clean up anyone who gets past.” I groaned. Clean-up was the worst, because nobody ever got past Master Reijo. Nevertheless, I went in for a bite to eat with the others, it was never smart to hunt on an empty stomach. As night drew near we got ready for the hunt - all of us were eager except me.

“It sucks, doesn’t it, getting clean-up all the time.” said Sven, presumably trying to be helpful or nice. He wasn’t.

“Shut up, Sven.” I snapped bitterly.

“Well, you’re in a good mood.” He said sarcastically. He left to converse with Joey, who was, as always, in a much better mood.

“Well, time to go.” Said Master Reijo, having finished the strategy discussion with our front-liners. Willie had eaten some coffee beans straight and was hopping around like a monkey on a sugar rush.

I had been watching for a while and laid a wonderful trap. The silly humans started to head out while I followed them from the rear. Oh, this would be fun. Oh yes, oh yes.

We heard the Shadowbeast before we saw it. The creature was stomping and snorting, making its territory known to all who dared approach. Bryce made the first move;

shaping his light around his arms and holding them together, making the light look like a cannon.

He muttered a kind of rune chant, drawing the spell on his palm with his fingers. The Shadowbeast was charging, now that it recognized Bryce as a threat. Light jumped out of his cannon like lightning and it flew straight towards the Shadowbeast, forcing it to run to the side. It dodged the blast but was still going towards Bryce. As the blast hit a tree, another blast erupted from the cannon, and another, and another. Now the Shadowbeast was running in circles in order to dodge all of the blasts.

A large spear of light pulverized the Shadowbeast, causing it to stay on the ground and Ikki landed behind it, sleek as a cat. Master Reijo stepped before it and recited a prayer "... may you find the world above and may your soul be free." We closed our eyes in recognition for the unfortunate soul. I heard a hacking sound then the noise of something falling to the ground, hard. My eyes opened. I saw Master Reijo on the ground, with his hand clutching his chest and his eyes rolled back, showing the milky whites. I saw the shadow of a tree behind him bent in the shape of a hand with a sharp claw.

I was frozen for half a second before my voice came back to me. "You..." I said in a undertone "Aaargh!" I lunged at the shadow trying to destroy it with my light. The shadow disappeared.

"Tut, tut, we can't have you doing that now, little boy." I turned around to see a gaunt white man in all black with a scar on his cheek and blazing red-purple eyes. A cane appeared in his hand and he tapped it on the ground. Causing a huge shadow to rush out of the cane toward me. I noticed the other mages were deathly white and pallid. All of the others fell to the ground like tin soldiers as the darkness swept towards me. Fear took over and I ran as fast as I could, away from the shadows. As I looked over my shoulder I saw the man, he was carried by the shadows like attendants, carrying their king.

"Hya, ha ha!" He laughed, turning his head towards the sky. "It's been so long since they sang that song." He started singing a song while his 'skin' fell to his feet revealing a core of

feelings: malice, and hatred. "Run, for Garth is a' coming; run, so you don't die; run, for Garth is a' coming; run, for you cannot hide." I was not impressed by this song, but as he became a core of blazing red it chilled me to the soul. The red was the color of blood and it felt like it was slicing my very existence. I froze.

"Scared, little boy." Garth leered, now simply a blood red shadow. "I knew you'd break." My blood ran cold and I stood like a statue, bolted to the ground. I tried to move, but I couldn't. The shadow moved ever closer, accelerating, a predator that knows its prey is caught. That's when it hit me, Garth, for that must be his name, was one of the last remaining shades, the nobles of the shadow worlds. I never had a chance.

Garth stopped. The wave of shadows disintegrated seconds before reaching me. "Lucky you," spat Garth. "It looks like the little boy has a temporary savior."

"Come quick" said someone with a drawl in their voice. I backed away from Garth slowly. Then, realizing I could move again, I turned around and ran towards the mysterious source of help. I saw a shimmering hound, standing next to a hut that was just outside of the thicket that we had been hunting in. Its legs were splayed and its teeth were bared, staring viciously at Garth.

"Fine," said Garth. "I'll leave, but their souls will disappear, boy, if you don't come back to the thicket before these seven-days are gone. I'll be waiting for you." As he left he flicked his wrist as if to say that we, the dog and I, were as insignificant as particles of dust, and not at all in the way of his plan. However, his expression gave away that he was angry that I didn't die.

Why won't the boy just die! I have to force him to leave so that I can kill him. Then I'll be able to start casting the realm-expansion spell. I need not worry about old Mowl. My soul sucker parasite should do the trick.

"So, how do you propose that we defeat Garth?" Mowl asked. I was sitting across the table from an older man with gray hair, and a large white scar across his left cheek. Seconds

before this man, Mowl, had been a shimmering hound that saved me from the ancient shade. Then he had walked inside, changed into a human, put on some clothes, and asked if I would like to have a bite to eat. "You need training, Khen. That is your name, isn't it?" After I gave him confirmation he continued. "Well, without training you won't even be able to get within five feet of him without him stabbing you. "

"What do you mean, I got that close to him before and I'm not dead, am I?" I asked, gesturing throughout to show, that, by all means I was definitely alive.

"Of course you're not, he was toying with you. Shades almost never just kill their prey, because they like playing games. But now that you've evaded him once, he'll surely try to kill you the next time you meet him."

"So, what are you suggesting? You think I should learn from you?"

"Yes, and I think you should know the whole truth about Garth." Mowl said, then he started the story. "About 100 years ago I was young at the age of 16 and the shades were just-

"You're 116 years old?!" I blurted out, unable to help myself.

"Yes, yes, all in good time. Anyway the shades were just coming back and I was learning from the esteemed Master Hamsen, one of the best in the land. One night we were on a hunt and we saw two shades, an old one, Tyaret, and one of the newest, Garth. He, Tyaret, was teaching Garth how to use his powers. That night we found out. The Shades were preparing the rest of the Shadow-realm for war.

We attacked them to stop Garth from descending to become a full-fledged shade, but by the time we killed Tyaret, Garth had descended. He stole the soul of my master. Then, although we all tried to kill him to restore Master Hamsen. He escaped.

After that there was a bitter war between us and the Shadowbeasts. Garth was one of the main terrorizers of the land. We both numbered high in the hundreds at the time and the war took a high toll on both of us. Eventually we won, but there was almost no one left. Many of the Shadowbeasts escaped, along with a small handful of shades. Reijo, your master, took

the burden of raising the next generation.

Now, Khen as I have grown old my magic has become weaker and I cannot even hope of destroying Garth. However, you have a chance. Will you take on this duty?"

I was astounded about what Mowl had told me. If it was all true then I could restore the souls to master Reijo and all my friends! "Yes, I'll try to the best of my abilities." I said after some thought.

"Good, to training!"

Over the next few days we trained, hard. Eventually I learned how to construct a soul-shield that would protect me from Garth. At least enough for me to have a chance against him. But on the fifth day something went wrong.

"Urk..." Mowl fell to the ground clutching his chest, in much a similar position to Master Reijo. "He got me, Khen, you have to go, get him before he gets you. Now!" I ran into the thicket, it was the only place left to me.

"So, you've finally returned, Boy..." Garth sneered, accentuating 'Boy' as if it were the most vile insult. "I'm glad I can get rid of the last variable in my plan. Of course, you didn't have anywhere else to go." He made a black hole, into his realm, inside of a dead tree. He stepped in.

The dark void swirled inside the blackened husk of the dead tree and, knowing it was the only way, I stepped inside after Garth. "So, everyone makes mistakes." Said the gnarled, twisted voice that I now knew all too well. I was surrounded by darkness. I whirled around, looking for Garth. I activated my soul-shield. Garth stepped out of the darkness behind me. As I turned I saw Garth was now only a dark red, bloody shadow with black, obsidian eyes. Garth shaped himself into the form of a wolf with large, scythe-like claws. He stood up on his hind legs and advanced towards me, a red glimmer of hate flickering in his eyes.

I threw a thin dagger of light at him, to slow his approach and make an opening, but

instead of dodging he crouched, ready to pounce. *"You can't hurt me in my realm"* Garth hissed. It all went so fast from there. The dagger seemed to twist in the air, whistling harmlessly into the darkness. He leapt, grabbing me by the collar of my shirt and holding me in the air like a spectacle, an oddity for all to see. I saw a glint of green and white in the distance, like my dagger had opened a rip in the realm and allowed me to see the thicket. Actually, that might be it. I formulated my plan, because if a dagger that small could make a hole in the realm what would a big blast do? It was my last chance. *"You've been such a nuisance to me, so what should I cut off first?"* Garth mused menacingly.

I started charging an explosion of light behind my back while pretending to writhe helplessly to escape his grasp. *"I'll start with your arm..."* He said, the red glow of his eyes growing stronger. His claw began cutting into my arm like it was butter and I couldn't hold the blast any longer. It burst. Time felt like it was slowing down. *"You know it won't hurt me,"* He muttered, as if arguing with himself. *"He's not strong enough."* *"Gyaaaaaa!"* I screamed. My body felt like it was going to explode and I would die, much, much more painfully than even Garth had planned. The realm cracked, and I closed my eyes, ready to die.

"AHHHHHHHHHHH-" I was screaming.

"Shut up Khen, we caught you, and don't let us regret it." I opened my eyes to see everyone next to me.

Bryce, Ikki, Willie, Joey, Sven and, of course, Master Reijo. *"When did you come?"* I asked.

"When you broke the realm our souls were set free, so it was just a matter of Reijo walking a few feet and catching you." said someone with a drawl in his voice. I looked behind myself to see Mowl walking up.

I tried to get out of the bed and instantly wished I hadn't. *"Ouch!"* My back hurt when I moved.

“Ha, ha,” Willie cackled. “That’ll stop him from getting too cocky!”

“Youuuu!” I was angry and I took a swipe at him.

“Whoops, missed me.” He said, jumping out of my reach.

“Hey guys, cut it out!” Joey stepped in. “You should know better Willie, and Khen get some rest.” Joey helped me settle back into our nursing bed. As I drifted off to sleep I thought about all of my problems and came to one conclusion... now all I had to worry about was my back.