

THE NINTH CHOSEN
SHADOW^{THE}
PRISON

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The Ninth Chosen: The Shadow Prison

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1

A Chosen Life

“If I’m right, and this is another night of useless reconnaissance, we’re getting real cheeseburgers tomorrow for dinner. Not squirrel meat on the crunchy crap you call a bun that you *think* passes for a cheeseburger.” Macy paused in the middle of strapping her weapons belt around her waist to look at Bastian—her guardian and mentor—in the eye.

“I cannot believe you would drive one hundred miles for a slice of meat on bread. I do not see the point.” Bastian leaned out the window of the parked sixty-two Ford to hand her a canteen.

She attached the canteen to the bottom of her small backpack and shook her head. “You’re over a thousand years old and yet you still haven’t learned to appreciate the genius behind a juicy cheeseburger.”

Bastian sighed. “Some things are completely unnecessary.”

She grinned as he tossed a pair of binoculars at her head much harder than you would expect such an ancient-looking man to be able to. She caught them one handed and bit her lip to hold back a laugh.

Bastian ran a gnarled hand over his thick white beard. “Either way, you must succeed tonight and your chances do not look good.” His strange sapphire eyes, that on first glance would appear almost-human if it weren’t for the color, were dilating and shifting, the black pupil growing and shrinking with each turn in his thoughts. *Watching.*

“Hey, that’s cheating! No looking ahead. You’re not my Watcher right now, remember? You’re supposed to be just some crazy old guy out for a drive in the middle of the Nevada desert, alone.”

Bastian shot her a glare for the sarcastic tone and she bit her lip. He wasn’t in the mood to joke. She met his eyes, recognized the look, and turned her attention to her pack.

She started going over the contents aloud to keep him from bringing up what she knew was on his mind. “Three Glockshaw bombs, just in case. Small pouch of jerky—but I’m banking on that cheeseburger so I’m not eating it unless I get really hungry—”

“Macy.” Bastian’s tone twisted her insides so she talked louder.

“One canteen. Spare knife—”

“Macy.” He opened the door to the truck and nearly fell in his attempt to get out.

She rushed over and helped him out, handing him his cane to use for balance instead of the rusty door. She kept her eyes down when he placed his hand on her shoulder.

“*LaUnahi*.” Her gut clenched when he called her that pet name, *my little bird*. He knew what it did to her resolve.

“Bastian, don’t. Okay? I get it. I need to take this serious. You’re not always going to be around, blah, blah, blah. I don’t see why we have to keep talking about it.”

He reached a gnarled hand out and gently pulled her chin up until she looked at him. It was the last thing she should have done. To look into his aging face, to see the wrinkles, the thinning white hair, the ailing body, to hear his ragged breathing, it made the truth all too unavoidable.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, ignoring his warm fingers on her chin. “You promised. You’re not going anywhere until after I turn eighteen. You can’t leave me to face my Transcendence alone. How many times have you told me that when my human body fully connects with my Kuna—my *gift*—everything is going to change? What if the connection kills me?” She forced down the anger, the frustration with her Watcher. Didn’t he understand how much she still needed his guidance, his calming influence? The gifts of fire wielders like her, called the Kunamin, were greatly affected by their emotions and she still hadn’t gained as much control as she knew she’d need before she transcended in less than two years.

“Macy, you are stronger than you think. But, as much as I want to be there to help you through your Transcendence, I do not have control over my time. None of us do. No matter how powerful we may think we are.”

She spoke through her teeth. “Fine. Let’s just go over the mission, okay?” *I’m through discussing this!*

Bastian’s eyes narrowed with the venom in her thoughts, but he didn’t respond as he normally would. She turned her focus to the mission ahead,

hiding the pain in her thoughts and feelings until all she felt was the growing excitement she always experienced before a mission.

She heard Bastian's low sigh as she pushed him out of her head. She'd gotten good at controlling her thoughts over the years, but she'd never learned to stifle the guilt she felt for hiding things from her Watcher. Bastian loved her and only wanted what was best for her, but she didn't need to be coddled.

"You will be observing the group of Dark creatures I felt move into the area." Bastian followed her lead and turned the conversation to the job ahead. "Based on the slowing of their movements I expect they will have set up camp. The Guardians need us to discover what they are doing before we destroy them." He paused and met her eye. "Just watch, Macy. Do *not* destroy. We cannot let them know we are on to them. We need to be able to observe over a period of time. The Dark is up to something, something elusive."

"The Dark is always elusive, Bastian."

His eyes shifted. "This feels different. Rehearsed."

Prickles rose on Macy's arms. "Okay, so stay hidden and observe. Don't kill anything. Shouldn't be too hard." *But boring.* "What am I watching?"

Bastian tilted his head and frowned.

"Oh, right. My mission. No help from you." She closed her eyes and placed her palms together allowing the heat of her Kuna, her single elemental gift from the Light, to flow into her fingertips but held the warmth there, relishing its calming presence, its warmth. She didn't need to actually create fire or endure the weakness it brought to her physical body quite yet. The gentle scent of eucalyptus and roses swirled in reassuring wisps around her head.

Bastian whispered softly, deepening her focus. "Feel for the malicious tremors of the Dark within the Balance, the world around you. Sense the way it affects your thoughts, your emotions, your instincts. It is this that you must rely on. Your eyes can deceive you. Your life force cannot."

Her breathing slowed, her crystal Radia shard that hung around her neck—the mark of her power and purpose—began to glow softly, and the sounds of crickets singing in the coming night disappeared. She could feel the subtle pulse and sway within the Balance that encased the world—the gentle, quiet warmth of the Light, the repulsive evil of the Dark, each repelling the other.

She spoke with her eyes still closed. “It feels like a small group . . .” She squeezed her eyes tighter. “Not small. Weak. Kreydawn miners?” She opened one eye to see Bastian nod approvingly and shut her eyes again. “One, maybe two Suppressor leaders.” She bit her lip. There was something else, something elusive as Bastian suggested, but she couldn’t get a mark on it.

She opened her eyes and held back a grin. She was right, she could tell by the satisfied smirk on Bastian’s face.

“Very good.” He leaned against the rusty blue fender and rubbed his temple with a shaky hand.

“So, you know I was just kidding about not looking ahead right? And you were kidding about me not succeeding . . . right?” Macy tried for nonchalance but Bastian didn’t have much of a sense of humor. It was always hard to tell if he was joking or not.

He looked at her and his blue eyes held no trace of humor. “I do not know. I can see you arrive. I can see you watching the movements of the enemy, but my vision stops there. You must be wary Macy. This is to be only a reconnaissance mission, but my heart tells me there is more to it. Be suspicious of hidden guards. I would not be surprised if they do not have Raksasha nearby just in case.”

Macy snorted. “Bastian, I’m not afraid of Raksasha. I’ll sense them a mile off.”

“Not if you are preoccupied as the night falls or if they are being shielded somehow.” He gazed over her shoulder, his eyes fixed on the horizon where the sun had nearly set. “Even courage can become fear if it is misused *LaUnahi*. Caution and respect for the enemy’s knowledge is not fear, it is true courage and acceptance that we do not know everything. You may be far more powerful and intelligent than the Raksasha, but never underestimate the cleverness and tactics of the Dark. Unless you think like the Dark, you can never truly understand what they may or may not be capable of.”

He looked back into her eyes and the lines on his face softened. “Go now, while there is still a little light. You must reach the encampment before the sun sets and they awaken. I will stay here and *watch*. Come for me in the morning.”

Macy nodded once, tugged her backpack over her shoulders, shoved a purple sucker in her mouth, and turned toward the horizon feeling Bas-

tian's eyes on her until she descended the small hill into the thick, scrubby underbrush.

The air cooled considerably as the sun dropped lower and lower until nothing remained but a vibrant red line that slashed across the sky like smeared blood.

She shrugged off the morbid thought and focused on what she felt ahead. The vibes were getting stronger. She slowed her pace and lowered her stance. "*To' Konsh'la.*" She whispered and the desert sounds became almost deafening. She could hear the beating of tiny wings of flies as they buzzed around her head. It was amazing how, once intensified, cricket song turned into a brutal crescendo of noise and the slither of scales over sand sounded like nails on a chalkboard—until you learned to tune it out and focus on the sounds that really mattered, like the low grunts and clanks she could hear about a half mile ahead.

The sun crept lower and the creatures that thrived in darkness began to stir. She belly crawled to the top of a long sandy knoll and peered over the edge. Below, encased in shadow cast by stone boulders and makeshift camouflaged lean-tos, her quarry started to awaken. It was a sickening sight.

Kreydawn, mindless slaves of the Dark, had no thoughts of their own. As far as she could figure the only thing they knew to do without being told was eat, but she even wondered about that. Suppressors, tall ugly creatures, pushed their thoughts into the Kreydawn's tiny brains and told them what to do.

Right now about twenty Kreydawn were scavenging, plucking scorpions and other insects from the sand and popping them in their disgusting mouths. Their eyes were black and beady, their skin translucent, chalky. Each Kreydawn head had a row of five stubby horns that stuck out of their forehead in a perfect line. The one nearest Macy had the tip broken off the horn above his right eye.

Only one Suppressor stalked among them—his black cowl hiding his hideous mouthless face—stepping on their fingers and toes without caring. The Kreydawn didn't seem to notice. Slowly one by one the Kreydawn stood and followed the Suppressor out of the camp. Macy shadowed at a crouch along the top of the hill; about a hundred yards away from the camp they paused.

Macy found her vantage point in a thick, tall cluster of prickly sagebrush and shimmied her body lower in the sand, allowing it to cover most

of her body. She pushed her pack into the brush, covered the edges with sand, and buried her sucker stick. At the base of the sage she cleared a large enough gap to see everything the Kreydawn were doing.

Large wooden carts scattered the area, covered with heavy tarps. Stacks of shovels and picks rested beside tall piles of sand. One of the carts was exposed and it held what looked like large gray rocks.

She rolled her eyes. Looked like she was right. Nothing important. She was so getting that cheeseburger.

Her eyes followed the synchronized movements of the Kreydawn. Their arms lifted and dug at exactly the same pace. She blew out a low breath. Kreydawn were so easy to kill it was almost embarrassing. If only Suppressors could talk it would make this boring mission worthwhile. She could jump in, kill the Kreydawn, and force the Suppressor to talk, no need to watch. But Suppressor thoughts could only be retrieved by their Dark masters, as Bastian had said only darkness could understand darkness. So, unless she got lucky and a Dark captain just happened to show up and she was able to take *him* down, her tempting idea would never work anyway.

She sighed and propped her chin on her hand. It was going to be a long night.

Boredom was not welcome as a Chosen one. She *enjoyed* the fight against the Dark. She relished the adrenaline rush that flowed through her as she destroyed those creatures that thrived on death and carnage. Her gift of wielding fire thrilled and exhilarated her. Not everyone could create a firebomb in the palm of their hands and manipulate it to destroy a dozen creatures at once. She smirked at the memory of the first time she'd controlled her flame enough to melt through a wall of Raksasha. The demonic blood-trackers hadn't stood a chance.

She blew a strand of blond hair out of her eye. Too bad using her Kuna could be so physically draining. It was so freaking fun!

Boredom also caused other problems. Too much time to think. She glared at a lizard perched on the sand beside her arm. Bastian did it on purpose, he knew bringing up his impending demise right before her dull mission would make her think about it. He could be so sneaky.

She flicked sand at the lizard and watched it scamper away, wishing her thoughts would leave with it. Bastian had been with her for the last ten years, since her sixth birthday. As her Watcher he could sense her

thoughts, get glimpses of her future, and guide her in her destiny as a chosen protector for mankind. But he was more than that, more than she wanted to admit aloud. She had few memories of her parents. She'd spent the last ten years suppressing any thoughts of them or her human life. Bastian was all she knew.

She wasn't *really* afraid of transcending to the height of her gifts. The idea of connecting to them fully, no longer being as drained by using her Kuna or enhancing her physical strength, was extremely appealing. She'd only brought it up to make him feel guilty. She believed herself ready to face fighting the Dark on her own. Bastian had taught her well, she didn't fear the Dark anymore.

A subtle breeze ruffled her hair and a chill she knew wasn't from the wind tried to force its way along her spine. There was one creature of darkness she feared. One she never allowed herself to think about. One that hadn't been seen since the night she'd been chosen. She squeezed her eyes shut and forced the thought from her mind. With her eyes closed she became aware of two things.

One, the sun had set.

Two, she wasn't alone.

Crap! She'd gotten distracted just like Bastian said. She would never live it down.

She felt before she heard the approach of Raksasha. Their vibrations were intent. They'd caught her scent.

She twisted out of the sand, her knife already clutched in her fist. She would have to kill them silently, no Kuna. The Suppressors couldn't find out she was there or their masters would know a Chosen was in the area.

She felt at least two Raksasha flank her little hill. She couldn't feel any more, but as Bastian said, they could be masked. She'd have to be quick.

The top of the first Raksasha's head appeared and Macy readied her knife. "*Mig'nata.*" She whispered and felt strength surge to her arms. As soon as she saw his yellow eyes glowing deep within the sockets of his black, leathery, skull-like face, she snapped her wrist forward in one lithe movement, and after a brief whistle, her knife reappeared—lodged between the Raksasha's eyes. The creature fell back onto the sand with a soft thud.

Her feet barely shifted the sand as she ran nimbly forward, feeling for the direction of the other Raksasha. She'd just pulled her knife from the

creature's skull when she felt the second jump up behind her.

Macy twisted in the air and tossed her knife the same moment the Raksasha threw his spear. It grazed her right arm just before her knife embedded in the center of his forehead. She ran over, pulled her knife out of the creature's head, and cleaned it in the sand.

She waited, crouched down, beside the dead Raksasha for fifteen minutes before she was sure there were no more creatures surrounding the area. She quickly buried the Raksasha—ignoring the satisfied groans echoing beneath of the carcass-eating Night Demons for their promised feast—and went back to her hiding place to wrap her bleeding arm and finish out her watch for the night.

The shallow cut had mostly stopped bleeding by the time the sun began to peek back over the horizon and hardly stung at all. Bastian wouldn't be happy, she was sure he'd *seen* her fight, but at least she hadn't failed, necessarily. She was right—the Kreydawn were only being their usual boring selves—and she'd only killed two measly Raksasha, creatures the world could definitely do without anyway.

She turned east and headed back to the truck to face her Watcher. He owed her a cheeseburger.

Hundreds of miles away a teenage boy bolted upright in his bed clutching his right arm.