

Shadows

By Lauren Martens

I fumble with the brand-new, shiny combination to my locker, then force the metal door shut. The bang echoes uncomfortably through the halls of my new school, but is soon drowned out by the shrill sound of the late bell. I yank a crumpled sheet of paper out of the pocket of my jeans and sweep my hair out of my eyes as I squint at the letters.

“First period... Math. In... Room 21,” I mutter as I start speed walking in the direction I hope my class is in. It wouldn’t make a good first impression to be late to my first class of school in nearly five years, especially after the *months* of begging and wheedling my father to let me go to public school instead of being home-schooled. I’m sure I’m ready for this; but there’s no way I’m going home and telling him I can’t do it after all. The late bell stops ringing just as I skid through the door of room 21. My new math teacher is already doing attendance, but I’m lucky to have a last name that starts with ‘T’. I should be safe.

No one spares me a second glance as I shuffle timidly to the back of the class and take a seat in the last row. Finally, the teacher calls out my name. “Krystal Tindell-Harper?”

“Here!” I yelp, knocking over two of my books. The loose-leaf pages I neglected to fasten into my binder scatter under my desk, and I scramble to gather them up.

A voice breaks through my inner grumblings. “Hey. This is yours, right?”

I twist my head so fast a jolt of pain shoots through my neck. “Yeah,” I answer, rubbing my neck with one hand while accepting one of my pencils with the other. The girl on the other end of the pencil has very short black hair with hot pink dye staining the tips of her bangs. One of her large brown eyes is a good deal lighter than the other, and the darker one matches her skin. She’s wearing a light yellow sweatshirt underneath a dark blue jean jacket, and she’s scrunched the sleeves up above her elbows.

“I’m Anna,” she says.

“Krystal,” I reply cautiously. She seems nice enough, but I don’t have much to go on other than she helped the new kid pick up some pencils and has awesome hair.

She frowns at me after I stare a bit too long. “What’re you looking at?”

“Nothing. Sorry.”

I can tell she isn’t convinced, but at least she pretends to be and changes the subject. “Are you usually this clumsy in school?”

My face heats up. Not only is the answer ‘yes,’ but I now have to give the whole home-schooling spiel.

I climb to my feet and sit in my chair. “Well, I haven’t actually been in a school since I was, like, ten. But I’m always clumsy, even at home.”

She lowers her voice to a whisper as the teacher starts droning about class rules. “So you’ve been home-schooled? How come?” She seems actually, genuinely interested.

“Oh.” *Get it over with. She’ll find out eventually.* “My... my sister. She went missing, when I was nine, and, I, uh, just couldn’t really socialize at all after that. So my dad home-schooled me. Until now.”

“Oh, wow, sorry,” Anna says.

“Nah, it’s ok. Really, it’s just me being a weirdo for not getting over her yet, heh.”

“So your dad taught you? Is he a teacher?”

“He used to be, yeah. Now he does other things I don’t really get,” I answer.

“What does your mom do?”

My throat goes dry. “Oh. Uh, she... left. After my sister disappeared. I don’t actually know where she is or anything right now.”

“Damn, that’s rough,” Anna says.

“No, it’s ok. It was a long time ago, I guess. Trying to, actually experience a bit of middle school before it’s too late.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what was her name?” Anna tilts her head to the side.

I answer her with a small smile. “Maia.”

She looks at me sharply. “What?”

“Her name was Maia,” I repeat.

“Uh, did she look like you?”

I shrug. “She was lighter, and her hair was curlier, but yeah,” I respond, trying to not get caught up in memories.

“Maia...” Anna echoes. “That’s a nice name. Wow, sorry, again.”

“Oh, ha, thanks,” I say with a smile. I hastily scribble some numbers in my notebook as the teacher walks by my desk. Neither of us speak for the rest of the class, but when the bell rings, Anna turns to me and says,

“Hey, we have French next, right?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I reply with a glance at my schedule.

“*Parlez-vous français?*”

I’m pretty sure she asked me if I know French. “Uh, *pas beaucoup*,” I say with a grimace at my awful accent.

“Same,” Anna says with a laugh, and we head into the hall.

“Hey, Anna!”

I twist around at the shout. A redheaded boy wearing a bright blue hoodie and grey jeans dodges through the clump of kids in our direction, waving wildly at Anna, a huge smile pasted on his face. A taller boy with dark brown hair and a black T-shirt follows behind him like a shadow, but his face displays only disinterest while Anna and the first boy high-five.

“William! Good to see you,” Anna says warmly, and then turns to the taller boy. “Hi, Jacob. How’s it going?”

“Nice to see you too,” answers William just as Jacob replies with, “Good.”

I snort at the unintentional overlap. Unfortunately, Jacob doesn’t find it as funny as I do, and he gives me a sharp look that sends a shiver down my spine.

“Who’s this, Anna?” William turns towards me and offers his hand to me without his wide beam faltering, and I shake it gladly.

“Oh! Guys, this is my new friend Krystal. Krystal, this is William and this is his twin brother, Jacob. They both live next door to me, we’ve known each other since we were babies,” Anna says.

“Nice to meet you, Krystal,” says William.

“Nice to meet you, too,” I say back.

Jacob doesn’t even grace me with a nod as he puts a hand on William’s shoulder and pulls his brother back a few paces. William sighs, but doesn’t resist as he’s tugged backwards.

“Hey, chill out, Jacob. It’s fine.”

Jacob frowns before leaning down and whispering something in William’s ear. I can’t hear what he says, but William’s face falls after he finishes and he nods slowly. Anna scowls.

“See you at lunch?” William says as Jacob drags him away.

After being late for French, suffering through Social Studies, sitting in a confused stupor throughout Science, eating lunch with Anna, Jacob, and William, and getting through the rest of my day, it's a relief to finally hear the dismissal bell. I follow my classmates into the hallways, make my way to my plain locker and remove my backpack from its hook. Luckily for me, there's no homework.

I wave quickly to Anna, who passes me as we leave the school. I start stepping down the stairs, with half a mind to dig out the granola bar in my pocket, but then I hear a pair of angry, familiar voices coming faintly from behind me.

“Jacob, I'm not a child! I can make my own friends!”

“What if she's with-”

“Not here. Too many people.”

I slow my steps as their footsteps near, and try to spot the two brothers from the corner of my eye. I wonder if they were talking about me. I hope Jacob isn't as unfriendly as he seems, because I think William is very nice, and I'd like to make more than one friend today.

In my peripheral vision, I see William leading an exasperated-looking Jacob down a small pathway I recognize from this morning. Well then, if I'm just walking home, I'm not really following them, am I?

I trail the two down the road until I see them stop by an old bench. I quickly slip behind a tree as the brothers turn and Jacob starts talking again.

“You can't just trust everyone! What if she's like Elise?”

Who's Elise?

“If that happens, we can do the same thing as last time,” William says.

Last time?

“That was a living HELL, William! I'm not letting you do that again!”

Do *what* again?

“And what do you suppose I do? Spend my last year in this world before I have to stay with my dad with Anna as my only friend? You're not doing a very good job of being one.”

Wait what-

“It’s not my job to be friends with you, William, it’s to keep you safe. You know that. If that means boring you and not letting you socialize with *humans*, so be it,” Jacob growls.

“Just because I’m the Prince doesn’t mean I’m not also a grade-nine student, *Jayko*. Let me have this year. Please,” William says with a slight pout.

Prince? What are they talking about?

“Wyllith…”

Who?

“It only happened once, because my guard was down. It won’t be this time.”

“Fine. But you… you be careful, alright?”

“Don’t worry so much! It’s just middle school,” William says with a smile. He steps away from Jacob as he awkwardly brushes his hair out of his eyes. “And… I’m sorry for yelling.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Jacob answers gruffly, averting his gaze from his brother.

These brothers are *cute*. I reel in my inner fangirl just in time; they’re headed back my way. I manage an uncomfortable shuffle around the tree, hoping they won’t see me.

“Did you hear something, William?”

I wince and curse in my head as I step on a very crunchy pinecone.

“No, must’ve just been the wind. Come on, Jacob,” answers William with a shrug.

“Dad? I’m home,” I say, listening for a response as I step into our cluttered house. As I walk past the fridge, I spot a yellow Post-It note covered in my dad’s loopy handwriting

“Dear Krystal,” it starts. I groan at what this must mean. “I’m sorry to say that I have a lot of work and I can’t be home for your first day of school - congrats, by the way - but I’ll be back late tonight. There’s food in the fridge, thanks for understanding.”

I crumple the yellow square of disappointment into a ball. If Maia were here … but no. I can’t think about her.

Flopping onto the couch, I attempt to amuse myself by burning through a few manga books and rereading my favourite parts of *The Hobbit*, and scroll boredly through Instagram for an hour before I decide to call it a night and head up to bed.

It's been a weird day.

“KRYSTAL! HELP ME!”

I race through an endless forest of twisted dark trees that cut into the glowing crimson sky with their black claws, panting and sweating like I've run a marathon. I can still hear the echoes of her voice bouncing off the inky trunks, and a part of me knows I'm too late, just like the first time, and every time after that.

“Maia! I'm coming,” I holler into the darkness.

“Krystaaaaaaaal!”

The trees around me melt away and become glass shards, and I slide towards a gaping hole in the centre of the broken glass ring.

I try to scream, but the noise is trapped in my throat as I tumble into the void. I think I see two figures reaching out to me before my vision goes white.

Suddenly, I'm standing in front of a bedroom door. Maia's door, from before she vanished. Two voices speak behind it, but I can't move towards the door to open it. Or move my body at all...

“Maia, right?” a voice says.

“Yes.”

That's Maia's voice! That's my sister!

“...Krystal's your sister, then?”

“Yes.”

“How stable are you?”

“...no?”

“Ok, we'll stick to 'yes' or 'no',” the second voice decides.

I can almost recognize that voice...

“Are you with Ellisea?”

“No.”

“Are you lying?”

“No.”

“Ha. Uh, that’s maybe not the best question,” sighs the second voice.

“Aneyn! It’s closing! We have to go,” shouts another slightly familiar voice from behind me.
“Agh!”

I turn quickly to see Jacob, of all people, skidding to a stop in front of me, his hand holding a long gold rod that emits a faint yellow glow. A dark brown cloak streams behind him over a yellow shirt. I gape at him. “Jacob?”

“Aneyn! Get over here!” he barks.

The door bangs open to reveal Anna wielding an ice-blue rod and the same shirt and cloak as Jacob. She wears a dark pink bracelet on the hand that grasps-

Maia. Standing right in front of me for the first time in six years, looking exactly the same as the last time I saw her.

“Krystal?” Anna darts forwards and knocks me to the floor with a swift kick to my knee.

I cry out in pain. What is she doing?

“Stay down. Jayko, how did she get past you and Wyllyth?”

“I don’t know! He’s back at the portal. We really need to go,” Jacob says urgently. He gestures towards me with an impatient huff. “Just... get rid of her. If she doesn’t come to school tomorrow, we’ll know she’s a Shadow.”

“Jayko! We can’t just kill her. There are laws,” Anna says with a scowl.

“Wyllyth’s father *makes* the laws, and we really need to get out of here before they get in!”

I’m hardly listening to their conversation; the only thing I have eyes or ears for is Maia. She stares at me with her wide blue eyes as we drink each other in.

I know this is a dream, but it’s the first time I’ve ever actually met her face to face since the day she went missing.

“K.... Krystal,” she murmurs.

Anna looks at Maia sharply. “Maia, did you just say- Hey!”

I scramble to my feet, shove past Anna and embrace Maia in a bear hug.

“JAYKO! THEY’RE COMING,” cries yet another voice from down the seemingly endless hallway. “I CAN’T HOLD THEM OFF MUCH LONG - AGH!”

“Wyllith!” Jacob spins around to face the hallway, and looks to receive Anna’s firm nod before sprinting back down the corridor. His rod shines brighter for a moment as he turns a corner and is out of my sight.

But none of it matters. I have Maia back.

“Listen up, Krystal. How did you get here?” Anna asks.

I ignore her and keep hugging my sister. Anna jabs me with her rod to get my attention. “I was dreaming,” I tell her after releasing Maia reluctantly. “A nightmare, actually. I was looking for Maia.”

“And what happened?”

“Suddenly, the dream changed, and I was being pulled towards a big gap. When I fell in, I ended up here.”

“You... you managed to use a portal? But you’re a human! How did you survive?”

I blink at her, bewildered. “You’re a human, too.”

“No, I’m not,” Anna says. She looks down the hall where Jacob disappeared, and it’s then that I hear the sounds of battle. It’s something right out of a video game. “Listen, I don’t have time to explain it all. But Jacob and myself are all mere Shadows of our human selves. We became this way because we were lost in our dreams. Now I serve under the King to prevent this from happening to others. Jacob is charged with protecting William, who is the son of the King of Shadows.”

This is the strangest dream I’ve ever had. “So... how did I get here? Why is Maia here?”

Maia tugs my arm gently, and takes a shaky breath before speaking, to Anna’s obvious surprise. “Krystal, I don’t know why you are here. But it’s been six years since I ... Well. As you dream of me less, I start to become more and more like Aneyn and Jayko. I heard a rumour that a group of the King’s Shadows worked to get Lost Dreamers like myself out of their dreams ... so I called out and took a chance.”

I grip her pale hand tighter as I process her words. “So... if we can get you out of your dream, you can come back?”

Anna opens her mouth to explain, surely, but Maia holds up her hand and steps away from me. “No, Krystal. When I am freed from my dream, I can finally move on.”

“Then... isn’t it better if you become a Shadow? Anna, Jacob, and William all go to school with me! You can be with Dad and me again! We can... we...” I trail off at the look on Anna’s face.

“No one wants to be a Shadow, Krystal,” Anna says. “It’s very dangerous. The only reason I have my job is because there’s a huge group of rebel Shadows working to bring more Lost Dreamers to their

ranks. If Maia were to become a Shadow, she would have to take a side. She'd have to *kill* humans to recruit for a meaningless war, or fight for her life to stop it. No Shadow, on either side, lasts long. On top of all of that, she'd have to keep watch, constantly, in the human world, for signs of the enemy. That was what I was doing when I met you."

"Is this... real? Or am I still dreaming?"

"This became real when you fell through the gap. You're in the Shadow Realm now, Krystal," Anna says. "Now you two need to stay somewhere safe. And I need to go fight."

I crouch behind what seems to be a clear pane of glass in the corner of this dream-version of my living room, though Anna assured me that only Maia and I could see through it to the battle. Anna had given me instructions before racing away to assist Jacob and William:

Don't make a single noise, unless:

If engaged in combat, call for help.

And if *any* of the three die, run as fast as you can out of the house and hide in the forest.

Maia's small hand slips into mine as I watch the fight with wide eyes, hardly believing what I'm witnessing. Anna leaps in and out of reach of four Shadows, her blue rod flashing as she swings at them again and again, carefully darting back each time one of their swings gets too close. A few times, she's not quick enough - bloody fabric clings to her shoulder and left thigh, even if three unconscious figures lie at her feet.

Meanwhile, William is surrounded by a fierce group of sword-wielding Shadows. I wince every time a glimmering blade swipes at William; sure it will add another gash to his body. Jacob is trying to get to him, but each time he makes progress getting through the wall, a new wave appears from the gaping black hole in the centre of my living room and forces him to engage them before moving onwards.

They're hopelessly outnumbered. My new friends are losing this battle.

Suddenly, a hush falls over the chaotic room. The entire army of Shadows take a step backwards as the hole bursts with an eerie violet glow. A girl, no older than me, strides out of the portal and frowns at the Shadows surrounding William. They quickly move away from him.

"Prince Wyllith," she says coolly.

"Ellisea," he answers with a grimace. "Couldn't get enough of us two years ago?"

"You're an idiot. You were barely strong enough to drive me out of the human world then, and you're trying to fight me again? How stupid can you get?" she says.

I bristle at her words, a mirror image of Jacob who is still blocked by the enemy Shadows.

Anna shoves past her four attackers and starts moving towards Ellisea, but before William holds up a hand to stop her. “Don’t, Aneyn. She just wants a reaction.”

“Yeah?” Anna shoots back. “Well I’m going to give one to her. You listen to me, Ellisea. I can’t believe you dare to show your face to us after what you did! I thought we were friends, and you *betrayed all of us!*”

Ellisea smiles. “That’s nice, Aneyn. When did you get the notion that I cared about your opinion of me?”

I bite my lip to stop myself from shouting at her, but William doesn’t give me the opportunity before he speaks again. “Why are you here? You don’t need thirty Shadows to stop the three of us.”

“Ha!” She leers at William before twisting away to face me, and my blood goes cold as she answers William. “What makes you think I’m here for you? I want Maia for my army. I’ve seen her powers.”

No. No no no, big nope. I instinctively move in front of Maia. “Don’t worry, I won’t let her take you,” I breathe.

"Oh, Krystal," Maia says as Ellisea gives a small nod. "Why do you think you're the one in control here?"

I whirl around just in time to see my little sister hold out her hand to grasp a shimmering black knife that appears from nowhere, and swing it at me. I dive at the last second to dodge her strike.

"Maia! What are you doing?"

"Saving myself! No one else will!" she says with a glazed look in her eyes. Her shoulders shake slightly as she thrusts the blade towards me again, but I’m able to knock it aside. Her heart's not in this.

"What are you talking about? We’re trying to help you!" I say.

“Ellisea says she can get me back to the real world, as a *real human*,” she screams. “*I want to be alive again! I want to be real!*”

“I want you to be real, too! But I can’t help you *if you kill me*,” I shout, dodging out of the way of another weak swing.

Maia’s hand falls to her side as she looks at me, a few glittering tears gleaming in her eyes. “Kill you? I’d never kill you,” she says. “You’re not a Shadow, and you’re not Lost, either. You’ll just wake up.”

“Then ... why are you doing this?”

“Because Ellisea told me to.” Her free hand starts to twitch, and I scoot backwards as icy blue scales start appearing on her arm. The scales spread to cover her face, and her entire body begins change into ... something else.

“What’s happening to you?” I stand shakily to my feet, as a huge blue dragon looms over me.
Maia?

“She’s under my control now,” Ellisea sneers behind me. “She’ll do whatever I say, you know.”

I look back at my friends. In the seconds I was talking to Maia, Ellisea’s Shadows surrounded them, with swords at their backs and no way out.

“Did you do this to her?” The shiny scales cover up the last few patches of her skin.

“Me? No, no. This is merely her Shadow power, not unlike the power each and every Shadow has deep within them. Hers is just far, far stronger than any of ours. And I want it,” Ellisea explains with a cold grin. “I just had to wait until it was ready to come out.”

“Y-Yeah? Well, um, if you want to get her... you, you’re going to have to go through me, first,” I say, taking a step towards Ellisea.

“Oh, very brave. Too bad it doesn’t matter. You, get rid of her,” Ellisea says with a gesture towards one of the Shadows blocking Anna.

“No! She won’t be able to dream again, it’s against the law,” shouts Anna as the enemy walks calmly closer to me.

What? I don’t get a chance to respond before Ellisea retorts. “Since when have I cared about the law? The King’s a fool, just like you, Aneyn.”

The Shadow stops just in front of me, his face revealed to me. My breath catches in my throat at his stringy brown hair and bagged brown eyes, taking in how boney his hands are even as he holds a wickedly sharp blade in it. These soldiers aren’t being taken care of. This could be Maia if I don’t do anything. His sword flashes in the fading purple glow as it swings down at me and I lift my arms over my head in a feeble shield-

But nothing hits me. I crack open my eyes, and gasp at the scene before me. Gone is my wrecked living room, replaced by a large field with a young boy chasing a younger girl around a field. The boy has the same features as the Shadow who swung at me. Then, out of nowhere, a shaded, sinister version of Ellisea appears in the field, and drags the girl away without a word to the boy.

The vision fades, and I blink twice at the room of stunned Shadows. The man who would’ve killed me steps back with a cry, his blade clattering on the ground. “What... what was that?”

“What are you doing, idiot? Don’t stop,” Ellisea says impatiently.

“H-how did you do that?” The man touches his face hesitantly, as if reassuring himself that he isn’t in his memory anymore. “I haven’t thought about her in years...”

“I’m not sure,” I reply, looking at my hands to see if they’re different now. They’re not. “Are you ok?”

“Yes. And I... I think that was exactly what I needed to do *this*,” he says, turning back towards Ellisea. “Ellisea! I’m tired of being your slave! I know you’ll kill me for this, but I’m not going to hurt this girl, and I won’t help you hurt her friends. They’ve done nothing to deserve this.”

“Very well, then,” Ellisea responds with hardly a blink. “You know the consequence for disobeying.” She strides towards us, a smoky staff forming in her left hand. The Shadow only sighs in defeat as she nears.

I don’t even realize I’ve moved until I’m standing in front of the Shadow, in the same position as before. I blink, and a memory is displayed, just like last time.

A young Ellisea stands motionless in the middle of a dark room, her back facing me. As I watch with wide eyes, the room changes around her as she grows, showing two little girls playing with her, then a dollhouse, then a party, then her hands linked with two others and then, finally, a red car driving down a shadowed road before everything fades back to black.

“So this is your power,” the real Ellisea says. Her skin has gone pale. “You can see my memories... and make me relive them. How... peculiar.”

“What happened to you?” I ask, keeping my hands in front of me.

“My sisters died when I was thirteen. As you can relate, I was ... crushed. They were everything to me. It was a dark night, and the oldest was driving us home from a movie. Do you know why I am doing this? Why I am trying so hard to eradicate Shadows who do not bow to me from this world?”

I shake my head. I had no idea she had lost her sisters like I lost Maia.

“One of the King’s warriors saw us driving that night. The war between those who served the King and those who wanted a better ruler was just at its beginning, and rumour had it that the assassin who had killed the King’s wife had escaped to the human world. I’ll never know for sure, but I guess the assassin looked an awful lot like my oldest sister.”

I know what this is leading up to.

“He didn’t ask any questions, just shattered the windshield with a spear through my sister’s skull. That was *before* killing non-Shadows was illegal, mind you,” Ellisea says, a bitter tone in her voice. “The car couldn’t drive itself, of course. We crashed into a building, and my other sister was killed instantly. I went into a coma, and that’s how I became a Shadow.”

My heart fills with something unexpected. Pity. “So that’s why...?” I manage to say.

She drops her rod. “I’m not going to fight you guys anymore. I just...”

“You...?”

“I just want to be with them again,” she says. “I’m tired of all this fighting. I thought that ... if I had enough people with me ... that the King would bring them back.”

Wait, what? “Can he do that?”

“That’s his power. He finds Lost Dreamers and sends them back. That’s why he makes Aneyn and Jayko and Wyllith go out and find Lost Dreamers so he can free them,” Ellisea says quietly. “I... I know my sisters aren’t here. They’re not Lost. But a part of me just *hoped*... you understand, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“They’d be disgusted in me if they were still alive. I’ve killed people, Krystal. Who’d ever forgive me? I just have to keep going, push through. We’re not so different, you and I,” she says.

I know she’s right. “I’d forgive you,” I say. “You can come back with me. We can stop this, stop this war. Together.” I smile weakly, offering her my hand.

She takes it slowly, and we exit the past to a future where we can free Maia, my friends can heal, the War can end, and I don’t *have* to move on.

The police find Maia in the woods by my house the very next morning.