

The Shadows Among Us

By Tessa McLeod

“Miss Miller? Miss Miller are you paying attention?” Mr. Smith’s high annoying voice filters through the classroom. “*Miss Miller!*” His voice reaching a higher octave, “Would you care to join our class discussion?” At the moment he was standing at the front of my grade 10 science class.

“No.” I say bluntly, only partly realizing what had just left my mouth. I was too busy trying to decipher the abnormal markings on my arm. They appeared on my right arm only this morning. The swirling black marks twisted around my bicep and down to the middle of my forearm. They contrasted fiercely with my pale skin. They would have looked like a tattoo if the markings had not been raised. Like a black ink had been injected, it pushed upward under my skin.

“Excuse me ?” His tone warning everyone of the thin line I was walking. But while he had been talking the decorative lines on my arm had begun to *move*. Twisting and wiggling across my arm. And I could *feel them* stir under my skin. I swallow the bile that is rising in my mouth. The lines shift slowly, melding into the shape of a large tree. Somewhere under all the fear, the tree seems familiar.

As if responding to my need, the bell rings. Rushing out the class, I forget all my things at my desk. I can hear Mr. Smith bellowing after me but I pay no attention. It doesn’t matter. I need air, desperately, it feels as if the walls are pushing in on me and the oxygen in the room is disappearing. Running for the front doors I thrust them open. Clear of the suffocating building, I take in a much needed deep breath. Filling my lungs to the fullest capacity. Spinning around I aim myself towards the road that

leads away from the school. As I run out of the school something large catches my eye. Halting I turn my head in it's direction. And stop dead.

Standing out past the football field is the large oak that's imprinted on the inside of my forearm. Underneath the large boughs stands a boy dressed in black holding something in his hand. His head rotates and zones in on my face, a startled gasp passes my lips.

I do the only thing I can think of. Run. I break into a sprint down the sidewalk, turning the corner sharply, and head down a dark alley. All sounds are lost in the frantic thumping of my heartbeat and my hurried footsteps. I turn to glance back, trying to gauge how close he is. But the gravel alley is empty. Something about that scares me more than if he was standing in front of me. I pick up my pace, fear fueling my steps. I look up from my feet only to run straight into him. My chin collides with his shoulder. Pain bursts behind my eyes. Numbly, I realize that he has a dagger strapped against his thigh. He reaches out to steady my wobbling figure. Hands grasp my arms, his thumb brushes up against the raised black markings. His intelligent green eyes widen at the sight of them. His mouth forms a silent, perfect 'O'. I hear him whisper, in shock, just as the black begins to claim my vision, and my knees start to give out.

“You're one of us.”

Pain burns in my chest, hurting as I gasp for breath. Sitting up too fast, black still clings to the edges of my vision. That's when everything comes rushing back to me, the lines on my arm, the tree, and the boy. And finally the whispered words before I blacked out. It was enough to leave me dazed.

Glancing around my new surroundings, I notice I am in a small room with two windows opposite the couch I am laying on. Two bookshelves stand at attention beside the windows. To the left of the couch is the door. I shudder to think of who or *what* may come through that door. Suddenly the handle rattles, and the door swings inward as if inviting the person into the room. It is the boy in black. I scramble off the couch and search for anything to use as a weapon against him. A letter opener sits on a table. Grabbing it I thrust it out in front of me and stand to face him.

“Where am I?” I demand, surprised that my voice held strong.

He holds his arms up in defence. “I’m not going to hurt you.” I raise an eyebrow and gesture towards the various weapons strapped across his body. “Protection,” is his only response.

“Where am I?” I repeat with a sharper tone.

“In one of our safe houses.”

“Our? Who is our?” My voice raises dangerously with every word. He seemingly ignores my question and instead asks one of his own.

“Do you even know what you are?” His green eyes stare holes into my head. “No of course you don’t,” he mumbles to himself turning away.

He plops down on the couch, totally at ease. “When did you get the markings on your arm?” he glances up at me. His wavy black hair hangs over his forehead.

“This morning,” I grudgingly answer. He nods to himself, as if he had known what my answer was going to be. Even though this guy did just chase me, it didn’t change the fact that I wanted to know what was happening to me.

“You’re- we’re called Shadows. We have powers. Each of us have different powers.” He lets that sink in for a moment before he continues, “The only way to know if you are a Shadow is if the Mark appears on your skin.” He pulls up his left pant leg. On his calf are the same type of lines that I have on my arm. His are more angles and less soft, swirling lines like mine. I stared at them. They wriggle under his skin slowly, almost imperceptibly.

“There are more like me?” I whisper in shock, looking up into his face to see if he was giving me false hope.

“I’m a Shadow too,” he chuckles darkly to himself. He stands up and thrusts his hand out toward me. “Welcome to the club newbie. I’m Nick.”

My fear towards him slowly dissolves as he speaks. As he was explaining I returned the letter opener to its place on the table. I grasp his hand and shake it, “Alexa Miller.”

All of a sudden, the windows explode inward. Bullets rip through the white curtains and bury themselves in to the wall behind us. My breath catches in my throat. The tiny, compact, metal bullets seem to rip and tear through everything.

“Alexa! Duck!”

But I stand frozen in shock and horror. An acute pain webs through my arm. I glance down and see blood blossom, like a delicate flower unfurling its petals. I don't know how much damage the bullet has done, but I know one thing for sure - I need to get out of the line of fire. But before I can move a step, the room goes deathly quiet.

Everything slows down and the bullets have stopped moving in mid-air. Nick reaches up and flicks away the bullet headed for his chest. He moves around the room with ease, picking the stationary bullets from the air. My jaw drops with shock. *This* is Nick's power, he can stop time in its tracks. But after a few moments I can see the toll it is taking on him. His shoulders tighten under his black shirt, and sweat beads down his forehead. Through his black pants I can see his Mark glow a bright gold. There are too many bullets and I can tell Nick won't be able to hold his concentration for much longer. He shoves me behind the couch and sits beside me as his hold on time starts to slip.

But instead of bullets, four men the size of fridges come barreling through the broken windows. All with guns trained out in front of them. I grab onto Nick's hand.

This is the end. I know deep down in my very being that there is no way we are getting out of this alive. I pull all my dreams and hopes together repeating them to myself in my mind and wait for the end to come. I grasp harder onto Nick's hand and clench my eyes together, and wait for the inevitable.

And wait. I can hear the men calling to each other as they search the room. Why is it taking so long for them to find us? It isn't as if the room is all that big. I slowly open my eyes and glance over at Nick. I gasp when I can't see Nick. But I can still *feel* him holding onto my hand, tightly. That's when I

realized that I couldn't see myself either. An intense pain had started to build under the skin on my arm. Could Nick have another power? Or... is this mine? I tap Nick on what I think is his shoulder.

I lean closer to him and whisper, "I think we're invisible. They don't know we're here." I felt him stand up next to me, tugging on my arm to follow. Three of the men are still searching the room. One is barking orders into a walkie talkie.

"Sir, they aren't here, we searched the whole building, they must have escaped," one of the men says to the tall man holding the walkie talkie.

"How did they escape? We had the house surrounded! You imbecile!" He growls back aiming his gun at the other man's chest. "Give me one reason not to end your life."

The man puts his arms up to defend himself. The thundering blast from the gun is deafening. The bullet tears a hole through his chest. The wounded man stares at the bubbling blood in wonder. Then he falls forward onto his face.

"Anyone else have anything to say to me? I didn't think so. Now you find them or else you get the same fate as him." I stare in shock at the man's body, slowly oozing blood out onto the gray carpet.

Nick tugs my arm again and pulls me in the direction of the windows. Silently we slip out into the air, free of the metallic scent of blood. We run down the street until we reach an old pickup truck. Nick let go of my hand and instantly he pops back into sight. He starts the engine as I hop in.

My hands are shaking and my mind is fuzzy, I can't think straight. My arm is pounding. All I can see is the man being shot down. Over and over again. How his eyes had widened and his hands went up to touch the hole that had pierced his heart. A single tear trickles down my cheek. Hastily, I wipe it away. Tears never help anything. I inspect my arm. There is a hole where the bullet entered. The blood has stopped flowing. I turn my arm over, and on the other side is an identical hole where the bullet had left. I let out a breath of relief and look towards Nick. He glances at my arm and begins shuffling through a bag behind his seat. He pulls out a pack of wipes.

“Who are they? Why were they shooting at us?” I ask as I take a wipe and clean the blood from my skin.

“They are part of a secret organization run by the government. They call themselves Scorpio. Their whole institution exists to get rid of us. They are brutal, even to their own men. The man who murdered the other one is named Balor Leviathan. And he has been hunting us since his daughter was killed by a rogue Shadow twenty years ago.” He looks and sounds absolutely drained.

“Why?” I ask, as my voice wobbles slightly.

“He wants to avenge his daughter's death. But the government put Scorpio in place because they are afraid of *children*.” He is riled up. “They are afraid that if we aren't *dealt with* that we will grow brains and finally get rid of them.” He lets out a huff of air. “If only it was that easy... Hold on.” He mutters, turning a corner sharply.

The rusty, old, black, pickup truck that had been our escape vehicle rolls to a stop. We are seated in front of an old farmhouse somewhere outside of the city. Nick turns the ignition off and clambers out of the truck. The door makes a wumpthing sound as he slams it shut. He motions for me to follow suit.

The house is old and the white paint is peeling from years of wear and tear. The windows are heavily covered. In all honesty the house isn't much to look at, but you can tell that once upon a time it was loved very much. A set of little handprints decorates the side of the cement stairs, with the year 1943 etched beside them. Nick opens the green door and ushers me in. I am definitely not expecting what is inside.

Kids. Lots of kids.

Kids of all ages crowd into the small, furnished living room. And they all seem like they are in a hurry. High tech equipment covers one of the walls, with teens hovering over the screens and keyboards. Everybody seems to have their own job.

The youngest one seems to be about seven. She has curly blonde hair that has been scooped up into a ponytail. She is levitating weapons onto a lined table. I take a closer look around the room. Everyone is using their powers. One boy is continually shifting into animals. One minute he is a beautiful blue Kingfisher, flitting around the roof, and the next he was morphing into a Siberian cat, jumping from table to table.

“What is this place?” I ask in awe turning to Nick. He grins.

“This,” he spreads his arms wide “is Paradox, a safe haven for those that are here against all reasoning. This is home.”