

JOSHUA KHAN

SHADOW MAGIC



"I DEFY YOU NOT TO LOVE THIS STORY"
RICK RIORDAN

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ONE

“**H**ow much for this boy?” asked the man, prodding Thorn hard in the chest.

Thorn grimaced, but did nothing.

The slave master, Lukas, wiggled all his fingers.

The man frowned. “Ten? Captain Pike sells his boys for five.”

Lukas, born ogre-ugly but turned hideous by the large scar across his face, laughed. “Pike sells them half-starved and diseased.” He tugged Thorn forward by his manacles. “Have a good look at him, Master Shann,” he said. “Twelve summers and already taller than many men. Straight limbs and a sound chest. And look at these.” Lukas twisted Thorn’s wrist to turn his palm up. “Good old-fashioned farmer’s hands. I swear by the Six, you put him in the fields, and you’ll get ten years out of him. Maybe fifteen.”

Thorn pulled himself free. They talked as if he was some animal.

The customer, Master Shann, prodded him again. “Open your mouth, boy.”

Thorn clamped his mouth shut.

Lukas cuffed the back of his head. “Open your mouth.”

Thorn didn’t.

“Is he simpleminded?” asked Shann. “I have no use for simpleminded boys.”

Thorn should have punched him for that. Shann needed punching. He was big and round and squashy-faced, with a bulbous nose crowded with hairy warts. But hitting a customer would only earn him another beating – the third this week – so Thorn kept his fist clenched and by his side. It wasn’t easy.

“Or is he mute? Is that it? I have no use for mute boys, either. Speak, boy. Say something.”

Speak? All right.

“Fat. Stupid. Oaf,” said Thorn.

Shann blinked.

Thorn spoke some more. “Smelly. Foul. Toad.”

The beady, puffy eyes almost vanished into Shann’s doughy face. “I have even less use for *surlly* boys.” He swept around and marched off.

The slave master grabbed Thorn’s hair and pulled him so they were face-to-face. “I’ll deal with you later.” Then he shoved him off his feet before chasing after his would-be customer. “Wait, Master Shann! Wait!”

He was in for a beating later tonight. Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad. Even Lukas knew that bruised slaves didn’t fetch the best prices.

A shadow crossed over him.



“That was unwise, my young friend.”

Thorn looked up to see Merrick, a minstrel the slavers had captured a week after him. Merrick folded his long, skinny legs and sat down beside Thorn.

“I don’t care. I ain’t no slave.”

Merrick shook the manacles around his own wrists. “These aren’t bracelets we wear.”

Seagulls squawked overhead, and limp green flags hung off the flagpoles. Fishermen sold their day’s catch from the quayside, farmers herded sheep and goats along the narrow alleys into pens, and bony dogs searched the rubbish. The air stank of unwashed animals, rotting fish, and too many sweating people, and the sea breeze did nothing to relieve it.

But the foulest smell came from the slaves. Disgorged from the ships’ hulls after weeks, sometimes months, of crowded travel, they were now lined up along the platforms. Men, women, and children.

Plenty of little ones. They didn’t run as fast, so were bagged first.

“It shouldn’t be allowed, stealing people from their homes.” Thorn looked down at the clutch of small children. Most had slumped into quiet despair; others still gazed around, searching the crowds, perhaps hoping their parents might appear and save them.

“It *isn’t* allowed,” answered Merrick. “The Great Houses certainly don’t have slavery. But we’re a long way from them and the protection they might offer.” He brushed dirt off his motley. The patched costume might have been bright once, but life on the road had faded the brilliant colours to a dull and lifeless grey. “I bet you never thought you’d end

up here when you ran away from home.”

Thorn touched the carved acorn amulet hanging around his neck. “I didn’t run away.”

“No? So what was it, then?”

“It ain’t none of your business.”

The less Merrick knew about Thorn’s crime, the better. The minstrel couldn’t keep his mouth shut; after all, it was his job to tell stories.

And if any of them knew why he’d left home, they’d stretch his neck with a rope.

“Did you commit some dastardly offence?” Merrick winked. “That’s it, isn’t it? You stole the heart of a fair-faced princess, but her evil father, the baron, had her promised to some weak-chinned son of an earl. She’s in her tower right now, pining for you.”

“Of course not!”

“What a shame. That would have made a good tale,” he said. “So, tell me, why are you here?”

“I don’t even know where ‘here’ is.”

“You are in Cutlass,” declared Merrick, sweeping out his arms. “The largest port along the Sword Coast. A place where you can buy anything, and I do mean *anything*. Home to slavers and pirates and gentlemen of little virtue.”

“Gentlemen of little virtue? Like you?”

Merrick raised an eyebrow. “Ah, so there is a wit under that thatch of straw you call hair.”

“I ain’t stupid.”

“I don’t know what you are, young Thorn. Shall we see?” He squeezed Thorn’s bicep.

“Hey!”



“You’re strong, but then, farmers’ boys usually are. You still have all your own teeth and that’s a bonus, but you’re utterly lacking in charm and, if you don’t mind me saying so, not particularly attractive. Can you sing? Dance? No? Come now, you must be good at something.”

“I’m good at lots of things,” said Thorn. Then he muttered to himself, “Just *bad* things.”

Yeah, like spilling blood.

Merrick shook his head. “If you’re not careful, Lukas will sell you to the mines. And you don’t want to end up there, believe me.”

“I ain’t going down no mine, and I ain’t going to be no slave. Dad said it’s better to be hungry and free than a fat slave.”

“Fathers, like most men, say stupid things.”

“Don’t you say that!” snapped Thorn. “You don’t know nothing about my dad!”

His dad was worth a hundred Merricks! All the minstrel could do was play the lute, sing badly, and tell stupid stories. Thorn’s dad could do anything. He’d taught Thorn how to—

No. Don’t think about that. That’s what got you here in the first place.

Merrick raised his hands in surrender. “I apologize, my young, irascible friend. I’m sure your father is a paragon of wisdom.”

Typical Merrick. An insult hidden in a compliment. His tongue was more twisted than a viper’s.

Other buyers walked along the line. One or two stopped to look at Thorn, but he glared back at them and they moved swiftly on. It looked like nobody wanted surly boys.

But one man wasn't scared off.

A swordsman. Thorn recognized the sort; he'd met enough on the road. And he knew to keep well away from them.

The swordsman sat easy on his saddle, elbows resting on the pommel while his horse, a huge black stallion, pulled at weeds growing beside a trough.

He wasn't rich, judging by the plain tunic, muddy cloak, and his worn boots. The sword didn't look like anything special, but it *did* look well used.

And he had dark, dead eyes. Eyes that had seen too much.

The swordsman flicked his reins. The horse tugged the last of the weeds free, and rider and horse sank back into the crowd.

"What about you, Merrick? Ain't you scared of ending up down a mine?"

Merrick waved his long fine fingers. "What barbarian would waste such talented digits on digging rocks? I, who have performed for each of the six Great Houses? I have danced in the mirrored chambers of the Prism Palace and sung in the grim halls of Castle Gloom to—"

"You've met the Shadows?" interrupted Thorn. "The lords of death?"

"I think they prefer the term 'necromancer,' but yes, I am acquainted with the rulers of Gehenna."

Necromancer. Another one of Merrick's fancy words. But fancy words didn't make things any different. Everyone knew what the Shadows were. Dark sorcerers who raised the dead from their graves and had zombies for servants.



“And you came back *alive*?” Thorn checked Merrick’s neck. Was that a pair of bite marks or just eager fleas? “Did any of ’em drink your blood? Ain’t Lord Shadow a vampire?”

“Lord Iblis Shadow walked in the sun the last time I was there. Not that the country of Gehenna gets much sun.” Merrick rubbed his arms vigorously. “Give me the gardens of the south any day.”

How many nights had Thorn’s dad told him and his brothers and sisters tales about the Shadow family and Castle Gloom, their citadel without windows? How the living and dead danced together at their great balls and feasted on blood and corpses . . .

Thorn remembered the warning his parents had given them all. He must have heard it a thousand times: *Be good or the Shadows will have you for dinner.*

A child screamed.

“Who’s that?” Thorn turned towards the noise.

The second scream was louder and longer.

“The twins,” said Merrick.

Thorn jumped up, but Merrick gripped his arm. “This is not our affair,” the minstrel warned.

Master Shann began dragging Tam away. The boy was six, the same age as Thorn’s youngest brother. Tam was crying and reaching desperately for his sister, Annie. The girl sat crumpled in the mud, her own face screwed up in misery.

Thorn’s blood boiled as he watched Lukas laughing at Tam’s feeble attempts to break free. Thorn had looked after the twins since the day they’d all been caught; he felt responsible for them now.

“Do not get involved.” Merrick tightened his hold. “You’ll only get in more trouble.”

For a second, just a second, Thorn stopped. There’d been nothing but trouble since the day he’d left home. Maybe Merrick was right. He should sit this out. Let Shann drag the boy off. Leave the sister sobbing in the dirt. That’s what some would do.

Yeab, some. Not me.