



Shadow Girl

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7.5 billion years ago, a pulse of coruscating cosmic radiation erupted from the WMAP super void and shot through our universe at the speed of light. That invisible wave of trans-dimensional energy washed over the Earth on October 16th, 2010. Hardly anyone noticed. Most people continued to go about their lives as usual, oblivious and unharmed. But a few people, for reasons not fully understood, underwent startling transformations. This is one of their stories.

Marie Neman, 10th grader, walked the halls of Jefferson High School on her way to world history class. As usual, she was alone and somewhat afraid of the group of girls standing near the classroom door. Tammy Watts and her friends stood there every day chatting stupidly with each other and with their other friends that arrived for class.

As Marie approached, she watched the four girls cackling and gesticulating like a gang of harpies guarding a cave entrance in that video game she had been playing so much lately—Shadelands Online. The harpies' friends, trolls from the football team and goblins from the Pep Club, were allowed to pass unharmed, but Marie wasn't on a sports team or a member of a popular club. She wasn't one of their friends, and she wouldn't be allowed to pass unharmed. Marie knew they would attack as soon as she was within range. They always attacked.

Tammy's eyes lit up with sadistic joy when she saw Marie coming. "Hey look, it's Miss Piggy!" she jeered and her three friends laughed like scornful witches. "Hey! Didn't you wear that shirt last Monday?" Not giving Marie a chance to reply, Tammy continued, "Ugh! Why don't you buy some new clothes, you scab? I'm so sick of looking at your ugly wardrobe! It's nothing but a bunch of stupid tee shirts!"

Tammy's friends, Karen, Jill, and Bethany, were all like her: skinny, preppy, pretty, popular—powerful. Marie was none of those things. She was fat, poor, weak, and powerless: unable to defend herself. Meek and outnumbered, she was also caught dead to rights. She had indeed worn that same shirt last Monday. What could she say? She knew it was better to not antagonize them or offer any kind of response. The best thing to do was to ignore them and keep going. So she scurried past the group of wicked harpies and into the classroom stone-faced but boiling inside.

As Marie went to her desk, she scanned the room for one of the few friends she had at school, Lois Johnson. She quickly spotted her blonde, bespectacled friend and went to her desk. Like Marie, Lois was also a frequent target of the popular girls. And like Marie, she also enjoyed playing the online video game Shadelands.

"Hey girl." Marie waved as she approached Lois' desk.

"Hey." Lois smiled. "So how long did you stay on last night?" she asked as Marie sat down in an adjacent desk.

"About an hour or so after you left."

"Sorry, I just had to get that English paper done for Mr. Wells."

"It's cool. I met up with some guy and we did Torvak's Lair." The girls continued to discuss the game until the warning bell rang, signaling an imminent late bell and the commencement of class. The students that had not yet taken their seats groaned and started shuffling toward them.

"Ugh. Well, see ya." Marie smiled as she stood and headed for her assigned seat.

"See ya." Lois smiled back.

Class started, attendance was checked, and soon Mr. Griffin was asking questions about last night's reading assignment. But he soon broke off from his lecture to reprimand a student. "Why are you talking when I'm talking, Miss Watts?" All attention turned to Tammy.

"Sorry, Mr. Griffin." Tammy smiled sheepishly. Her friends and fans snickered under their breath, entertained by her feigned innocent tone and elegant disruption of class. Marie rolled her eyes.

"Did you hear what I was saying?" Mr. Griffin asked.

Tammy looked dumb as a mule as she tried to remember what he was just talking about, "Umm, you were talking about Greece?" She guessed at length.

"That's right, I was. I was talking about the Greek philosophers, actually. I was about to say that your textbook mentions eight of them by name. Can you tell me any of those names?"

"Um... Socrates?"

"Yes. And?"

"Um..." Tammy performed for her audience, making an exaggerated, strained face as if she were concentrating very hard.

"Don't hurt yourself," Marie whispered.

"Did you read the assignment last night, Tammy?" Mr. Griffin asked.

"Um... no, sir." Tammy smiled again in her trademark sheepish, disarming way that Marie found so pathetic.

Mr. Griffin wasn't amused either, but he didn't want to harass her. Tammy was the kind of student that would run to her parents if she thought he was picking on her. He knew his point had been made, so he moved on and addressed the entire class. "Who else can tell me the name of at least one Greek philosopher from last night's reading?"

About half the students in the class raised their hands. Marie Neman wasn't one of them. She had done the reading assignment and she could remember several of the philosophers Mr. Griffin was asking about, but she didn't like drawing attention to herself or speaking up in class, so she kept her hand down and let other students provide the answers.

Mr. Griffin gestured toward Thomas Fields, a red-headed boy sitting to Marie's left. "Yes, Mr. Fields."

"Plato," Thomas offered and several other hands in the room went down.

"Good. Who else? Yes, Jenna?" Mr. Griffin called.

Jenna McArthur, who sat in the back of the class, answered, "Aristotle," and several more hands went down.

"Good, that's three. Who else?" Mr. Griffin coaxed.

Now that all the easy answers had been given, only three students were left with hands raised.

"Yes, James," Mr. Griffin called on Jimmy Burke who sat on the other side of the room from Marie.

"Pythagoras," Jimmy said, and with that, the two other students with hands raised put them down.

There were now no students with their hands raised and Mr. Griffin looked dismayed. "Now come on, guys," he cajoled, "the textbook mentions eight different Greek philosophers. If you read the homework you should be able to tell me at least five of them."

No one raised their hand.

Mr. Griffin knew there were students in the class that knew the answer, they just didn't want to speak up.

"Marie," he said, "can you name another Greek philosopher from the textbook?"

Marie's heart lurched. She hated being called on in class. But even more than that, she hated the stupid students like Tammy Watts that didn't do their homework and couldn't keep quite in class.

"Diogenes," Marie said.

"Good," Mr. Griffin said and continued with his lecture.

*

After history class, Marie and Lois regrouped and resumed their conversation about the video game as they gathered their books and headed out of the room with the other students. In the hall, Tammy was standing with her usual group of friends talking with some trolls and goblins. When Marie and Lois walked by them, Tammy said loud enough for everyone to hear, "God I hate it when those two lesbians walk by, it always smells like fish!" This was hilarious to all her friends.

Lois and Marie handled this situation the same way they always did. They ignored her and kept walking. "God I hate her," Marie confided, not so loud that Tammy could hear. "I wish she would die."

"Yeah, I hate her too." Lois agreed. "She's so stupid and insecure about herself she has to belittle other people to feel good."

"Well, forget about her," Marie said after a moment. "Are we still on for playing this afternoon?"

"Absolutely!" Lois smiled.

"Cool. I'll see you at the Troll's Den around 4."

With that, the two friends waved goodbye and went to their separate classes.

*

The Troll's Den was a cheap, rough bar in the wharf district of Bastion Hill, a large coastal town in the Kingdom of Kothington. There was a mix of local ruffians,

transient pirates, and wandering adventurers milling around in the common room. Some were sitting on uneven furniture that had been broken in bar fights and fixed with makeshift repairs. Others were standing near the hearth, chatting about local rumors. Behind the constant murmur of conversations in the room, a troupe of minstrels played a piping, up-tempo arrangement with a flute, lyre, and drums.

The Shadowblade appeared in the corner, materializing out of thin air. The powerful, elven huntress was small and lean. Her shapely body was only four feet ten inches tall, but she was strong enough to bend steel. The sun had tanned her skin to a deep russet and bleached her hair to platinum blonde. She wore an exotic, tight-fitting, black leather outfit. Two large, rune-covered scimitars, glowing with magic, were strapped to her back. A billowing cloak hung from her shoulder the shade of twilight gloom.

It was not yet time for her rendezvous with Lyrah and so the Shadowblade decided to find some excitement before meeting her friend. She slipped out the front door of the Troll's Den before anyone noticed her and made her way through the dusty, winding streets of Bastion Hill like a panther, sleek and dangerous. She stopped at a street merchant and sold a few trinkets she had recently found on the quest to Tovak's Lair. She then headed to the Warden's Gate, passing through it and into the Wild Lands. She took the path to the west knowing that it snaked up the hillside for about a half mile where it intersected another path from the east. There was a clearing at that intersection where outlaws often gathered to socialize, gamble, trade, and impose arbitrary "tolls" on anyone passing by. No matter how many times someone from the town cleared them out, it was not long before another group of bandits moved into the spot and started harassing travelers. She gambled that a group would be there now, and she would be able to make some quick cash and do the town a favor at the same time.

Her hunch was right. As she rounded a corner in the path, she spotted a group of six bandits drinking, talking, laughing, and not even paying attention to their surroundings. A malevolent grin crept across the Shadowblade's lips. She had just enough time to set upon them with a furious assault, loot their valuables, and get back to town before her rendezvous with Lyrah.

*

Back at the Troll's Den, Lyrah appeared near the hearth. A human priestess of Ard, she was clad in white robes and carried a gnarled, oaken staff. She was young and beautiful with blonde hair and blue eyes. Lyrah looked around for her companion, the elusive huntress known as the Shadowblade, but she was not in the tavern.

Lois Johnson, sitting at her computer, clicked a few icons on her screen, searching for her friend. Opening a menu and selecting the option "Team," she then clicked "Send."

To be continued...

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