

Where the Shadows Lie

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It existed in the world of a dream in a dream, in the land where the shadows lie. Ruth had been dimly aware of a pulling sensation, a dark wind slashing about her before she was deposited in the doorway. All she could pick out from the gloom surrounding her was a colossal black door set into an ornate grey arch. Behind her she somehow knew nothing existed, and to retreat was therefore unimaginable. As she lingered in the doorway, something shifted, and the door was suddenly open, though the shadows that were draped about the archway revealed nothing else save the plunging waltz of music.

“Hello?” Ruth called. There was a hissing, grating noise, and the doors swung out wider, tendrils of smoke curling along the ground, ushering Ruth inside. Then the shadow collapsed inwards, and all Ruth could hear was the boom of the doors as they shut behind her. The music leaped, the groan of the cellos loud and unbearable. Ruth swept blindly with her hands, her heart squeezed by the pressure of the smokey shadow. Suddenly a jolt of ice went through her as she felt the smooth slide of gloved hands clasp her fingers.

“Who are you?” Ruth cried as the hand pulled her out of the shadow, the sudden haze of dim candles blinding her after the darkness. She was spun around and then brought to a halt, and the music cut off. The smoke fled to the corners of the room, and Ruth suddenly could see an expanse of black and white tiles, low dripping chandeliers, and a swarm of people in dark formal attire, all standing perfectly still.

As soon as Ruth began to fight the clasp of the gloves, a piano took up the waltz again and her feet were dragged reluctantly into the steps of the dance. The smooth ripples of smoke crept forward once more, polishing out the rest of the room. As each instrument slid back into its part of the music, Ruth felt her resolve slip, until, weightless and numb, she swept over the tiles like cold winter air. The music became thicker, pulling her mind further into the hall. Nothing broke the melody of the music, not even a breath.

Time held no meaning, for the black expanse out the tall windows grew no lighter, and the dancers kept the rhythm, the girl’s feet never tiring. With each bar of the music the gloves gripped tighter, the candles smoldered above, and the music reined like a king upon his throne.

Finally, the girl's eyes fell closed as she surrendered to the music. The melody became breathless and wild, and the shadows grinned. Their whispers mounted and became roars, and their hands, pallid and thin, reached out. Just as they touched her, the doors blew open with a crack, and the music stopped.

The smoke fled to the corners of the room as the shadows debated this new arrival. Two had never come at the same time before. As they argued in sibilant voices, Ruth awoke to the boy's cries.

"Hello! Hello! Anyone there?"

Ruth tried to speak but could not draw her breath. Her eyes were milky white and unseeing. As she struggled the shadows grew, for their decision was made.

Ben was still dazed from his flight through the cosmos, his ears ringing. Something nagged at the back of his mind, a snatch of an image that begged not to be ignored.

"Where am I?" he whispered. He took a tentative step forward as the haze began to clear and from the gloom a dozen hands reached towards him. Underneath the ghostly gloves sharp bony hands protruded, followed by leering faces grinning wickedly. Ben tried to back away as the strange creatures leaned forward, but all he managed was a few steps before he hit the back of the doors. Then, three things happened at once.

The first was that the shadows leapt forward in a mad dash, their hands latching onto him, scratching and suffocating. Though Ben tried to draw a breath, all the air in the cold room seemed to have vanished.

The next was the nagging thought. Like lightning illuminating the sky on a dark night, Ben remembered the words engraved above the door. La Danse Macabre. They were etched crudely, and the words burnt deep into his eyes, but he could not work out what they meant.

And the last was another hand reaching forward, but this hand was fleshed and pink. It belonged to a girl, her eyes wild and mouth agape. The creatures peeled away from her like oil in water.

For a fragment of time the world was silent and suspended. Ben felt detached, watching the scene with calm serenity. Colour began to dance across his vision in intricate swirls, and the sounds became foggy and far away. Just as the hall began to spin into a swirl of black, he was released.

"Move! They won't leave for long!" Ruth pleaded, tugging at the boy's hands. He shook his head and stood up, like one waking from a deep sleep.

"Where did they go? Who are you?" he asked, looking quickly around the room.

"They just disappeared. But they'll be back," Ruth said with certainty. "I'm Ruth."

For the first time she really looked at the boy and saw his clothing. His shirt and pants were stained dark red, and at his neck a deep wound bubbled feebly.

“What happened to you?” she gasped.

“I can’t remember,” he answered dismissively. “All I know is that I’m called Ben. We should go.”

Silently they crept across the hall to one of the sets of doors leading out of the room. The waltz lingered menacingly, but Ruth felt no conviction to dance, perhaps due to the absence of the creatures.

“What door?” she whispered. Ben shrugged and pulled open the one closest to them. No shadows waited in the corners here, only dark marks on the floor. Ruth ran forward to look.

“It’s words. ‘Don’t go looking for the orchestra. Don’t go too deep into the shadows,’” Ruth read slowly. “I cannot get out. I cannot get out. I am one of them now.”

Ben watched his new companion read the letters, looking at the inky mark blossoming around her neck like a collar. His mind was busily whirring, but he did not speak.

“We should try another door,” Ruth cried desperately. Ben nodded and followed her out.

The tell-tale gloom had begun to collect around the corners of the room again. Ben shivered and raced to a gap in the darkness, pulling open another set of doors. Instantly they were blinded by bright light and a new slow song echoing, but this music had the tinny echo of recorded music.

“Don’t look at the screen!” he gasped, not sure what made him say this, but still shielding his eyes. Ruth obediently copied him and they carefully scanned the gloomy theatre. Every chair was occupied save two closest to them, begging to be filled.

Silently, he and Ruth backed away.

Back in the hall, the walls leaned inwards and the floor rippled. Ruth felt dizzy as she tried to orient herself and find another door.

“I think it’s an illusion. It doesn’t want us to escape!” she gasped, walking unsteadily across the floor. Somehow only two doors existed on each side of the room now. She and Ben turned to the one next to the theatre door. The handle began to turn almost before she touched it.

“Stop, look at the floor,” Ben cried. From underneath the door a pool of scarlet blood seeped. Silently, they turned away and raced to the other side, but now no doors existed at all.

“We’re trapped!” Ruth yelled, turning around uselessly.

“Wait, Ruth,” Ben said softly. His mind had become clear. Ruth looked at him, the bruise around her neck rippling. “I think we have to finish the dance to escape.”

As if his words were the answer, the spinning stopped. Ruth took his hands, and they stood, waiting. The music began again, and from the gloom the shadow creatures slunk, taking up their positions.

As the pair fell into the rhythm of the dance, the music and the hall began to fade.

“We’re dead, aren’t we?” Ruth whispered. Ben nodded silently.

“How did you know?” she asked.

“I think I knew,” he said slowly, “from the moment I set foot in this hall.”

“Me too.”

Then the hall had faded completely, or perhaps they were fading, and all about them was deep black. All they could feel was the grip of the other’s hands. And then, not even that, for they were nothing.

In the hall, the music started again for the beginning of the ball. As another soul landed on the doorstep, the shadows began to dance.