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## **SHADOWSELF**

*By Ty Drago*

Liam Reese sensed the Shadowself's approach before he heard it. This was typical, as the entity rarely made much noise. So tenuous was its substance that its movement usually left only the faintest rustling, like the skitter of rats or the smooth, deadly shuffle of a viper.

Liam immediately cursed and rolled over frantically in bed, reaching for the light switch. As his hand worked the lamp, that familiar, hungry presence touched him, wrapping its thin, cold fingers around his wrist. He yelped like a frightened puppy and hit the switch. Instantly, light flooded his small bedroom.

The Shadowself hovered over him for an instant before retreating, throwing up its hands before its face and emitting a low, contemptuous moan. Liam scrambled off the far side of the bed and stood with his back against the cool, plaster wall, watching it.

Damn! It had almost had him! He should never have slept with the light off, but it had been so long since it had come calling. Liam had dared, in some small corner of his mind, to imagine that his long ordeal might finally be over.

"You were hard to find this time." it whispered in its raspy voice.

"Not hard enough," Liam replied flatly. "Get out of here."

The Shadowself hovered in the center of the room, its gray, wispy feet floating just above the threadbare carpet. It regarded him with its blank, pupilless eyes, and then its mouth spread open in an easy smile. Through the gap in its face where teeth should have been, Liam could see the wall behind it.

"I'll be back again, you know."

When Liam didn't reply, it chuckled softly, the sound emerging as a hoarse wheeze. Then it moved quietly back toward the door. The Shadowself ignored the knob, as it had no use for such things, and merely slipped, virtually silent, through the crack between the door and its frame.

Liam remained where he was, his heart pounding. He'd tried to put up a brave front, as he'd learned long ago that the Shadowself thrived on his fear. But he sensed with disheartening certainty that his act had fooled no one. He'd come close tonight, closer than he had since the beginning. The Shadowself, Liam knew, had a single, formidable advantage. Liam had to keep getting lucky, over and over, indefinitely — but the Shadowself needed to be lucky only once.

How long had he managed to allude it this time?

Almost two years.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and rubbed his face with trembling hands. He'd have to run, of course — just drop everything and go. Right now.

He glanced longingly at the bedside lamp, the cheap, single-bulb junkyard reject that had saved his life tonight. He was loath to leave it, to abandon the safety of its comforting glow for the wily and treacherous night. But Liam knew from bitter experience that, once the Shadowself had found him, it was more dangerous to stay put.

Once — in Dallas? Chicago? — the Shadowself had cornered him in a bus terminal. Liam had sat on a bench beneath a lamplight all night, aware of the creature's hungry presence just beyond the surrounding edges of darkness. As the hours had passed, Liam had felt increasingly drowsy, as though the strength were being slowly drained from him. Finally, as sleep had been about to overcome him, he'd seen the lamplight over his head begin to struggle for life, flashing on and off as it might in a thunderstorm. Liam's reflexes, and the timely arrival of a subway train, had saved him. As the shadows had closed in around him, he'd forced himself to move, darting across the platform and into a lit railroad car, leaving the Shadowself to glare helplessly at him from the platform.

A lesson had been well learned that night: once he was found — he ran.

Liam rose and went to the closet. On the shelf mounted above his meager collection of clothes was an old suitcase. As he drew it down he noticed, with a certain grim humor, that a layer of dust had settled over the luggage since he'd first taken this ramshackle apartment on the Jersey coast. Liam glanced dourly around the dirty, one-bedroom efficiency and found, with some surprise, that he would miss it.

It took him five minutes to dress and ten to pack. His watch read just after midnight on the sixteenth of the November. He'd taken a month-to-month lease, but without thirty days

notice, his pig of a landlord would certainly keep his deposit. Well, let him, Liam thought. He sure as hell couldn't risk waiting around here for the first of the month.

He scribbled a quick note of apology and left his keys on the bedside table. Then, giving a final, furtive look at this last in a long string of “homes,” Liam Reese slipped quietly out into the night. The walkway outside was well lit, and his truck was parked under a street lamp. Nevertheless, he crossed the distance at a run, tossed his luggage into the bed of the pickup and climbed into the cab, slamming and locking the door.

Fifteen minutes later he was heading down Route Nine. The radio was thrumming some old fifties tune. There was a full moon, and the night was bright. Nevertheless, Liam nervously, instinctively eyed each patch of darkness between the street lamps. The Shadowself could be anywhere, he knew. The night was its element.

Ten or twelve miles down the highway from his apartment house he spotted what he'd been looking for. It was an all-night bar, boasting the name MARTY'S in large, neon letters over the door. When he'd first come to town, Liam had been something of a regular here, since he was generally safer around crowds than alone. But, over the past few months, as his sense of security had increased, he'd stopped in less and less often. He had secrets to keep.

Tonight, however, he needed both the liquor and the sanctuary. In the morning, when the Shadowself had again receded back into whatever pit it rose from, Liam would set out on his way. South this time, he thought as he parked the truck as close to the well-lit doorway as he could. Maybe this time he'd head south.

It was past midnight on a Tuesday morning, and there weren't more than a half-dozen patrons, all occupying stools at the bar. The barman, a tall, lanky fellow whose name Liam recalled as Abe, was involved in a conversation with a darkly dressed man near the far wall. Liam selected a stool near the juke box, but far enough away from the others to grant him at least a hope of privacy.

"Well, Liam," Abe said as he approached. "Haven't seen you here in a while!"

"Been busy," Liam replied. "Put a head on it, will you? And keep them coming."

Abe shoved a glass mug under the beer tap. "You still working over at Hanney's garage?"

Liam shook his head. "Got dropped last May. I'm up in Wildwood Crest now, beach clean-up." It occurred to him suddenly that he'd have to call his boss and quit. Well, a phone call from the road tomorrow morning would serve well enough.

"Tough times," Abe said.

"Yeah," Liam replied.

Abe left him to his silence.

It took several minutes before Liam felt the beer have its usual, calming effect on him. In many respects, MARTY'S was the ideal place for him to come. Here there was enough company to keep it at bay, and little enough light to hide that which needed hiding.

Five years, he thought. Five years since his life had changed. Ended, he corrected himself, for what he'd endured since then could hardly be called living. Since that first dreadful

night, Liam Reese had been forced to walk a tightrope. Light — particularly sunlight — had become both his sanctuary and his curse.

"You look like you could use a friend."

Liam looked up into the face of a young woman. "Just passing time," he replied evenly. "Until morning."

The girl nodded. She wasn't beautiful, not in the classical sense. She wore too much make-up and tried to carry herself with a sophistication beyond her years. To Liam, she didn't look a day older than nineteen. "This is the place to do it," she said, gesturing at the sleepy bar around them. "Not much happening tonight ... a good place to kill the clock." After a moment, she sat down on the stool beside him. "My name's Brenda."

"Liam," he said. They shook hands. Her fingers were smooth and pale, her nails polished a deep red. "Listen, Brenda," he said softly. "The truth of the matter is I don't have all that much cash on me. And what I've got I need for traveling."

She frowned. "Is it that obvious?"

"Not really," he lied.

She bit her lip for a moment thoughtfully, and then shrugged. "So ... you got no money. That's fine with me. I saw you over here and thought: now there's a decent looking john. But the truth is I wouldn't be here if I was seriously cruising. I mean ... just look at the clientele." She laughed softly. Liam liked the laugh. "I just got home from a weekend up in Atlantic City, you know? There was a big convention of podiatrists there. Made enough money to last the week at least."

"Maybe I ought to charge you," Liam quipped and she laughed again.

"I do like you. You need somebody to talk to?"

Liam regarded her for several moments, disguising his inspection with a long swallow of beer. Hookers were relatively common in these shore town bars. A lot of the young girls ended up living down here and catching the bus into Wildwood or Atlantic City in the evenings. He felt a curious affection for Brenda, perhaps born of their mutual lifestyle. There were both wanderers — and outcasts.

"Okay," he said. "Let's get a table."

They settled at one of the small round tables near the bar, as Liam didn't feel comfortable enough to stray too far from the others. He bought Brenda a beer and, for a few minutes, they chatted about the weather, the tourist trade, and the high price of booze. Then, as they settled over their respective drinks, Brenda asked, "You're heading out of town?"

Liam nodded.

"Where to?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. South, I think. Maybe take the ferry to Maryland and head down into Virginia."

She nodded, as though this sounded like a fine idea. "Trouble ... huh?"

"Always," he said.

"Cops?"

Liam shook his head. "No. More personal than that."

"I've been busted twice," Brenda said softly. "Both times I got fined two hundred bucks and a quick roll with the police chief and a couple of his guys. Other than that I stay clean. No drugs. No AIDS."

"I told you Brenda," Liam said gently. "I don't have the cash to spare."

"No, no ... I'm just talking," she said quickly. "You seem easy to talk to."

"Do I?"

"What are you running from, Liam?"

He smiled humorlessly and downed the rest of his beer. Then he waved at Abe, who obediently fetched him a fresh one. "You wouldn't believe me," he told Brenda.

She shrugged. "I knew a guy once who was running from his old man, who was a cop. The guy was gay and apparently Pop had decided not to suffer "the humiliation," and so had tried to have his own son killed. The poor kid barely got out of town with his life. So try me, Liam. You'd be surprised what I can believe."

Liam looked over his beer at her. Should he tell her? How long had it been since he'd told anyone? A year? Yeah, that kid in the beach-front saloon; the gas pumper who'd seemed so interested and then had laughed at him and called him a "freakin' loon." It had been then as it was now: he'd had a couple of beers in him, gnawing away at his common sense.

"If I tell you," he said. "You'll think I'm crazy."

"Maybe," Brenda agreed. "But where's the harm in that?"

Liam nodded, as if this made perfect sense. Then he set down his beer and leaned close to the girl. "I'm running because I'm afraid," he said softly.

"Who isn't? What are you afraid of?"

He smiled again, that same, humorless smile. "My own shadow."

"Don't sound so crazy to me."

"You haven't heard it all yet," Liam said. "What if I told you that my shadow really is out to get me?"

Brenda chewed on this for a few moments. "Okay," she admitted. "That does sound a little nuts. What makes you think your shadow's out to get you?"

"Know anything about a shadow, Brenda?"

She chuckled, as though amused by the question. "A shadow? Hell ... I'm an expert! It's what shows up behind you if you stand in front of a light. Let's see ..." The painted nail of her forefinger tapped her bottom lip. "... it moves when you move ... gets shorter in the morning and longer in the afternoon. Oh! ... and it doesn't come out at all on rainy days. That about cover it?"

Liam smiled. "The Egyptians believed a shadow was the antithesis of a man; a demon that took a man's image. Later on, the Germans gave the idea a name: Doppelganger ... meaning "ghost double'." Brenda didn't respond, but only watched him with the feigned interest of a professional listener. She patronizing me, Liam thought, and found he didn't mind. It was good to tell the story once in a while, just to release a little tension. Besides, after tonight, he'd never see this girl again.

"If it sounds like I know what I'm talking about," he continued. "It's because I do. Five years ago, I was Doctor. Liam Reese, a professor of anthropology at Harvard University."

Brenda's eyebrows rose. "No kidding?"

He frowned and took another swallow of beer. "No kidding. Wrote a dozen books and about a thousand papers on the nature and history of man. Even made the cover of *The Anthropology Review*. Ever hear of that?" When she shook her head, he waved the point away. "It doesn't matter. Well, one day in my researches I came across an grimoire ... a book of magic. Beautiful old thing, discovered in the basement of a church in Belgium. It wasn't so much a spell book as a text book ... an instruction manual for student wizards, I suppose ... hand-written and about eleven hundred years old.

"In it was a discussion of shadows, a mixture of the African and Eastern European concepts. 'Shadowselfs,' as the book called them, were said to contain the vaguest images of our own darker halves — always following us, always struggling for control. The devil on our shoulders, so to speak. The book outlined a complicated means for communicating with one's Shadowself."

Liam paused and sipped his brew. Brenda was studying him with what now looked like genuine attention. "So..." he continued. "I spent the next several weeks going over that procedure, memorizing and re-memorizing it. God! the paper I was going to write!

"Well, I won't bore you with the actual spell. Suffice it to say that the timing and verbiage, the burning of incense and the drawing of the glyphs and runes had to be perfect, and the first three times I tried it, I failed. But on the fourth, I did not. That night, I watched as my shadow ... cast against the wall of my study by candles I'd lit inside a pentagram ... moved of its own accord ..."

Liam closed his eyes, his narrative trailing away. This was the first time he allowed himself to think, really think, about that night since — well — since the boy in that beach-front bar a year ago. It came back to him how unnerved he'd been after that retelling, and suddenly wondered if this bearing of his soul had been such a good idea after all.

"What happened then?" Brenda asked.

He looked at her. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

She reached across the table and patted his hand. "Completely nuts. But that doesn't make the story any less interesting. Your shadow ... were you able to talk to it?"

"Oh yes," Liam whispered. "It had a lot to say."

"Who are you?" he'd asked it. The Shadowself had stood within arm's reach, a shadow among others of its kind, its eyes as dark as coal.

"I am Liam Reese." it had said, its voice a harsh rasp, like cloth tearing.

"No," Liam had said, too excited to be frightened. "I am Liam Reese. You are my shadow."

"I am your Shadowself. I am your finish."

"Where do you come from?"

The Shadowself had told him, as the night closed in around Liam's tiny Cambridge home, of the dark places of the mind where urges resided, urges so vile, so destructive, that we dared not admit them even to ourselves. "I am those urges," the Shadowself had said in a low voice. "I am that part of you which longs to see them fulfilled. And now I shall be set free ..."

Gray, wispy fingers had reached for him then and, at their touch, Liam had felt something sluice through his body that was akin to death. A biting chill and a terrible, unutterable blankness, as though Oblivion, itself, had just tried to embrace him. He'd screamed, overcome by a sudden, wild panic that baffled his reason and yet seemed, to some distant, ancient part of his being, familiar.

At the last moment, he'd found the strength to break free. He'd escaped, fleeing from the house with only twenty dollars in his pocket and clothes he wore.

"I went to my sister's," Liam told Brenda. "The Shadowself found me the very next night. I don't know how. It attacked me while I lay awake in the guest room, and I barely got away. After that, I took a room in a hotel. That time a week went by before it caught up with me. After that, I knew I had to run ... and keep running."

He finished off the beer and motioned to Abe for another round.

"What does it want?" Brenda asked.

"I've never been quite sure. I think it wants to control me, just as the old legends say. I think it wants to get hold of me, to get ... inside ... me somehow. Right now, I believe it's trapped in its shadow existence. Only by finding and possessing me can it be truly free."

Abe brought the beers and, for a few minutes, the two of them settled into an uncomfortable silence. Brenda studied him thoughtfully. Liam nursed his beer. Finally, it was the girl who spoke, her voice a soft, nervous whisper. "That's crazy."

Liam only nodded.

"I sorry ... but you really should get some help."

He shrugged.

"I mean ... if you could prove it ..."

He looked up at her. "I can prove it," he said. "But even if I do, you won't believe. You don't dare believe. Because, believing me is acknowledging the existence of your own Shadowself, locked up somewhere inside your soul."

"How can you prove it?" Brenda asked. She looked paler, vaguely fearful.

"Forget it," Liam told her flatly.

Brenda leaned across the table suddenly, taking one of his hands in both of her. She squeezed it. "You're right," she said gently. "Your story does scare me, mostly because you don't look nuts. You look like someone whose been alone for a long time. I know that look ... and I know the feeling behind it. Please, if you can prove what you said ... then do it!"

Liam met her eyes and was silent for a long moment. Finally, he sighed resignedly and said, "Look at the tabletop."

The girl blinked and looked down, still clasping Liam's hand in hers. He watched her face. It was several seconds before what she saw there registered. But, when it did, Liam felt her fingernails dig into his flesh as what little color remained in her face drained away.

On the tabletop, cast there by the lamp above their heads, was Brenda's shadow — two small, long-fingered hands, gently clasping nothing.

"You don't have a shadow," Brenda breathed.

"Yes, I do," Liam said. "It's my shadow that I'm running from."

Brenda virtually threw Liam's hand back at him, recoiling in her chair. There she sat, staring at him with horror-stricken eyes. Liam felt a familiar stab of pain at the revulsion in her expression, but he absorbed it easily enough. After five years, he was used to it.

"I can't work in the daytime anymore," he told her evenly. "Except on rainy days. People notice. Sometimes it takes awhile before they really grasp what's missing, but eventually they always do. Then they're terrified. So for the past few years I've worked only evening shifts ... so I don't frighten anyone. I'm not a vampire, Brenda, or a ghost. I'm a man ... a man without a shadow."

Was there pity in the girl's eyes, intermixed with the revulsion? Liam wasn't sure.

"There's your proof. I'm sorry Brenda," he said. "I'm sorry for the dreams you'll have ..." His voice trailed off as movement near the entrance caught his attention.

Something had slid under the crack beneath the door. As Liam watched, it slithered silently into a nearby shadowy alcove, and regarded him with cold, blank eyes.

It had found him this quickly!

Liam's heartbeat leapt into overdrive. "I have to get out of here," he said, abruptly rising from the table.

"What? What's wrong?" Brenda asked hesitantly.

"Nothing," Liam said, throwing a ten dollar bill onto the tabletop. "I just have to go. Thanks for listening." His eyes remained locked on the Shadowself, which continued to watch him passively from its dark corner. It would never attack him here, in front of people. Liam was sure of that. But it could certainly work on him, lull him to sleep and then wait until some or all

of the patrons left before blinking out the table lamp. He had to figure a way to get to his truck. There was no sneaking around the thing. It's tracking skills were too finely honed. In this case, only defense was offense.

"Is ... it ... here?" Brenda breathed, sudden, terrible comprehension dawning on her face.

"It's here, isn't it?"

Liam didn't look at her, didn't dare take his eyes off the thing. He nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Where?" she asked, climbing unsteadily to her feet and scanning the room.

"Never mind," he told her sharply. "Go back to your life, Brenda. I'm sorry I frightened you." Without another word he walked past her and up to the bar, flagging down Abe as he did so. "Do you have a flashlight back there anywhere?"

"Sure," Abe produced a short wand of red plastic. "What's the problem?"

"How much you want for it?"

Abe blinked. "The flashlight? You want to buy it?"

Liam nodded.

"Look, how about I just loan it to you?"

Liam leaned close to the bartender. "Look Abe," he said softly. "I'm leaving town tonight. Once I walk out that door, I'm gone for good. So loaning me the flashlight isn't going to do it."

Something in Liam's face made Abe swallow uncomfortably. "Okay," he muttered. "It can't be worth more than six bucks."

"I'll give you ten." Liam handed the barman a bill. Then he picked up the flashlight and tested it. Its light was strong and steady. "Goodbye Abe," he said. "Take care of yourself." Then he walked purposefully across the bar toward the door.

"Liam!" Brenda called after him. He ignored her.

The Shadowself regarded him hungrily from the alcove as he approached. Without a word, Liam shone the beam of the flashlight into the shadows, driving them and their occupant back. The thing moaned loudly and angrily, drawing stares from some of the bar's patrons and a terrified gasp from Brenda.

Liam glanced once more around MARTY'S, and then stepped out into the night.

His heart was still pounding as he neared his truck. Just get inside, he told himself. Lock the doors and go. South, he thought again, and the idea vaguely pleased him. Virginia — or maybe one of the Carolinas.

He reached the door and fumbled for the keys, but juggling his key ring, the flashlight and the three beers he'd drunk suddenly proved too much. The keys tumbled from his grasp. Instinctively he reached down for them.

From the dark place beneath the truck, a shadow hand emerged and clutched his wrist.

Liam screamed and recoiled. The flashlight dropped to the asphalt and popped open, spilling its batteries across the pavement.

The Shadowself oozed out from the under the truck and rose before him like a specter — a vast wall of darkness. Liam flailed wildly, but it held him fast by one hand, and seized his throat with the other. Its touch was cold, and Liam thought that he could almost smell the

thing's black, relentless hunger. Beer and bile rose in his throat, only to be driven back as the dark fingers tightened on his neck.

“Free...” the Shadowself rasped.

It spun Liam around, slamming him against the truck, its dark, pupiless eyes boring into him. Liam felt its coldness permeate him, consume him. It seemed as if frost was forming on his face and arm, deadening all sensation, all thoughts of struggle. His vision darkened as something hideously alien — and yet, horrifying familiar — intruded on his thoughts, his feelings, his soul.

“I am your finish,” the Shadowself announced, its voice edged with triumph.

Then a slender arm closed around the thing's head. Liam heard a grunt of effort, followed by a cry of revulsion. In the frozen wilderness of his mind, the sounds seemed distant, but somehow important.

"Liam!" Brenda screamed. "Run!"

The grip that held him fell away, and Liam felt life giving warmth flood this body. He dropped to his knees and looked up, his vision blurred, his mind still choked with shadows.

Brenda was riding the Shadowself, her legs wrapped around its torso and her hands clawing wildly at its face. The thing was grappling with her, wailing with rage. "No ..." Liam whispered. "Get away from it ..."

"Run!" she screamed at him again. Then the Shadowself's hands found her, cold fingers digging into her flesh. She screamed in pain as it yanked her off, throwing her to the ground. The girl tried to skitter away, but a moment later a shadowy hand seized her ankle.

The Shadowself grinned its empty, toothless grin as it drew the girl closer.

Beside the truck, Liam's trembling fingers found the flashlight. He clumsily slid the batteries back into their cylinder and began trying desperately to tighten the cap.

Brenda looked up at what stood over her, her expression twisting with terror. Another scream rose in her throat.

Liam raised the flashlight and bathed her with light. The Shadowself recoiled in agony, squealing like a stuck pig. It released the girl and staggered back, throwing its arms in front of its face. Brenda jumped to her feet and ran toward Liam.

As the girl passed before the flashlight beam, Liam saw something move behind her, cast there by the light. The Shadowself saw it too, and lunged toward it suddenly, its long, cold finger grasping —

"No!" Liam screamed.

The Shadowself somehow seized Brenda's shadow, drawing it back with tremendous strength. Brenda suddenly stopped, her limbs frozen, her eyes wide in surprise. Then, as the Shadowself began to slowly reel in its prize, Brenda began to stagger backward toward it, her face a mask of terror at this new, impossible threat.

Keeping the flashlight steady, Liam reached for her. Sobbing, she stretching one hand desperately out toward him. Long-nailed fingers caught his sleeve, and he seized her wrist. He pulled with all his strength, until the stretching drew a cry of agony from the girl. The Shadowself met Liam's eyes, fixing him with its usual, cold malevolence. Liam grimaced with effort, and twisted around, shining the flashlight directly into the thing's face.

Abruptly, the impasse ended, and Brenda tumbled forward into Liam's arms, still sobbing and clinging to him like a child.

"Oh God ..." Liam breathed. "Oh God ... no ..."

Brenda turned.

There were now two Shadowselves standing across the lot, watching them with empty eyes. Liam felt Brenda's hands tightened on his shoulder.

"Oh sweat Mary ..." the girl whispered. "Is that me?"

"Get in the truck," Liam told her, handing her the keys he'd recovered from the pavement.

"Now!"

Brenda whimpered softly and obeyed, unlocking the door with trembling hands and slipping wordlessly into the cab.

Liam kept the light on the Shadowselves and took a tentative step forward. One of them, the one which bore his shape, acknowledged him.

"Next time," it rasped.

"We'll see," Liam said.

"I am not alone ... anymore."

"I know," he replied passively. "Neither am I." Then he backed up to the truck and climbed in.

He didn't switch off the flashlight until the pickup rolled out onto Route 9. Beside him, Brenda sat nearly motionless, a pale silhouette against the night. Outside the window, street

lamps passed in rapid succession, each one momentarily illuminating the cab, casting yellow light across the girl's features, but no shadow upon the seat behind her.

Liam swallowed hard as he looked at her. He wanted to say something, but could think of nothing that wouldn't sound foolishly inadequate. It was she who finally broke the silence.

"I'm scared, Liam," she said, her tone even.

"Me too," Liam replied gently.

"So ... which way did you say you were headed?"

Liam reached over and put a hand on Brenda's shoulder. The girl clasped it and squeezed. A single tear danced slowly down her cheek.

"South," Liam said, trying to smile. "I'm headed south."