



# Shadowforde

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"What're you waiting for? Do it, Willem!"

"I'm gonna."

"What's the matter? You scared?"

"No—are you?"

"So go on, then."

"Why don't you, you're so brave?"

Dirk, Tiras, and me were crouched in the bushes. We were still boys—Dirk was oldest, and he was only eleven—but that's old enough to feel invincible.

And plenty young enough to be stupid.

From our hiding place, we whispered and elbowed each other as we watched the strangest man in our village, probably any village. His name was Shadowforde, and he'd lived in Wolfbane longer than anyone could remember. My gramps said he was here when he was a boy. He was the oldest person I'd ever seen. He was ancient.

But that was just part of what made him so peculiar.

Some time, something terrible must have happened to him, because his head was...wrong. Like someone had grabbed the top of it in one hand and his chin in the other and pulled, until his skull stretched out of shape. And that wasn't all. His fingers were long and thin, like spider legs. When he closed his fists they rolled into his palms like string.

Oh, and he was missing two fingers on one hand. People probably never would've noticed except he sometimes sucked on the stumps, like a baby, 'til the skin glistened. My mother caught me laughing about it once, and she stopped me up short. She never tolerated a single cross word about him. None of the grown-ups did. My friends and I couldn't understand it. There were other people in the village, like Myra, who always wore a mask when she went outside, or the triplets, these creepy girls who were never apart. Sometimes people would whisper and stare.

But Shadowforde was different. I asked my mother about it once, that time she got so mad at me for laughing. She knelt down and put her face right near mine, and she said, "You just leave that poor man alone, you hear? Shadowforde is a blessing, and we owe him more than you can ever know. If he ever needs anything, you tell me straight away."

Her words were as big a mystery as he was. How could anyone owe Shadowforde anything, this strange, silent man who spent his days wandering the village in a shabby blue cloak, clutching an ugly old box?

I guess some lessons have to be learned the hard way.



"Just do it!" Tiras said. "I bet he won't even notice."

I don't remember whose idea it was, but we'd decided to take a peek in his box.

Our parents would have hid all three of us if they knew what we were planning. Only a few people in Wolfbane, including Mayor Sassafra, even tried to speak with the old man. No one touched him or his things. No one ever saw him open the box, and no one knew what was in it.

A few weeks ago, Shadowforde had drawn strange shapes on the lid, but they looked like scribbles. My little sister could do better.

Still, our curiosity burned inside of us.



So there we were, stalking the old man and looking for our chance. We were near the edge of town, and Shadowforde was sitting against a tree. He sucked on his stumps, dozing.

I had volunteered. I was the youngest, small for my size, and fast. But that wasn't really the reason. I was always wanting to prove myself. We were poor, and even though my father said it didn't matter, I knew he was lying. Dirk was the smith's son, and strong from helping in his father's forge. His future was already made, and he knew it. Tiras didn't think about the future. He was mostly interested in having fun.

But then, he also wasn't very smart.

I watched the old man closely.

His eyes closed.

Quiet as a cat, I slipped towards him.

Nothing. His weird long chin drooped to his chest.

I could hardly breathe, and the sound of my pounding heart filled my ears as I crouched next to the box sitting on the ground beside Shadowforde.

I didn't think about my friends. I didn't think about my mother. It was as if my entire being was focused on that hunk of wood.

Now that I was near it, I could see that what we all thought was one drawing was actually several. Some seemed familiar: there was a sketch of what looked like a bird of fire, and another that looked like a shooting star. I couldn't quite make out the others, although I thought I saw the hilt of a sword in one.

The scribbles suddenly looked a lot more deliberate. Was it some kind of writing?

I glanced at the old man. His chest rose and fell slowly.

Carefully, so carefully, I reached out and grasped the edge of the lid.

Wham! His hand came down hard and fast on the box. I fell backward, but before I could scramble away his other hand caught me by the wrist. I couldn't believe his grip. There was no struggle, no contest of strength—I simply could not move my arm.

Then his face was inches from mine. I'd never seen Shadowforde look at anyone, and now he was looking right at me. But he didn't seem angry. He looked...sad.

I didn't know why, of course.

Not then.

He stared into my eyes--I don't know how long. I was frozen. It was like nothing that ever happened to me before. Like I was seeing something new for the very first time. I swear I stopped breathing.

Then it was over. He looked down at the box and back at me. Unrolling one long finger, he pointed at the picture of the shooting star. Then he glanced up at me again, to make sure I noticed. He tapped the drawing. I didn't know what he wanted, but I nodded to show him I saw.

And then, just like that, he let me go.

I raced back to my friends, who were already up and running away themselves. I caught one glimpse of Shadowforde picking up the box, but then I was gone into the trees.

I don't know what I expected, but the sky didn't fall, and my parents didn't find out what I'd done—what I tried to do. Still, something was strange in the village. All of us kids noticed it. People were serious, talking in whispers. Mayor Sassafras, a usually cheerful woman who also worked as a miller, seemed to be everywhere.

And she looked worried.

One sunny afternoon, maybe three days after I tried to look in the box, Tiras and I were playing catch near the town well. The market was getting busier as villagers stopped to purchase food for supper. Suddenly there was a noise in the distance, like thunder, though the skies were clear. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked the same way. Then there were several loud "thumps," like trees falling.

And then the screaming started.

Large boulders came crashing down all around us. I saw people I'd known my whole life crushed in an instant. Old man Brogan staggered by me in confusion, blood pouring from an open wound on his head. I lost sight of Tiras as everyone panicked. Frantic animals took flight, overturning carts and trampling the fallen. But the screams and wails of the injured and dying were drowned out by a horrifying new sound.

The thundering hoofbeats of cavalry.

I ran. There was no thought. I raced for my family's cottage on the other side of the village. I saw Mr. Filmore and a few others rush past me with pitchforks and axes, but I ignored them. My only thought was of home.

As I turned a corner a group of almost a dozen soldiers on horseback burst onto the road in front of me. They were laughing, swords and lances covered in blood and bits of hair. One of the riders saw me, and I remember he said something to the other men, something I couldn't hear.

Then he hurled a spear straight at me.

As I threw up my arms hopelessly to protect myself, the shaft exploded in mid-air in a shower of splinters. Wood and metal rained down on me.

And then Shadowforde was there.

The old man stumbled next to me, bent over almost double. His skin was covered in angry red burns, and I could see his side was bleeding. He thrust his box into my hands, and then turned to face the soldiers.

"That's him!" one of them cried. "Captain promises a hundred gold to them that brings him in alive!" They spurred their horses and barreled towards us.

Shadowforde stood his full height. He stretched his hands out in the air and suddenly the ground under the horses opened up. No—that's not quite right. The ground seemed to rise up around them, like water splashing when a rock is thrown in a pond. Waves of earth crested over the men and horses, and then came crashing down. In an instant, all of them were gone, vanished into the soil.

The air was suddenly still.

The old man collapsed at my feet.

"There he is!" someone yelled behind me.

It was the mayor, surrounded by several people from the village. "What happened?" she demanded. "We were moving him, and suddenly he ran off."

"He...he saved me," I stammered.

"Is he still alive?" a man asked. It was Mr. Glavin, the baker, but now he was holding an enormous sword.

"Yes," Mayor Sassafras said, kneeling next to him. "We've got to move him."

Just then another group of soldiers appeared, this time on foot. I saw the fear and determination in my neighbors' faces as they moved to stand in front of Shadowforde.

"The box!" I yelled. "Use the box!" I pushed it towards the mayor.

"What do you mean?"

"He showed me! Open it and use the shooting star, or...or whatever it is! That's what he was telling me!"

"Remember! The king wants the freak alive!" a voice hollered from down the road.

Mayor Sassafras looked at the box and then threw it open. Inside were several smaller boxes, one for each drawing. She grabbed the one I pointed to, and inside were several small stones.

"What now?!" she asked desperately.

I thought of what I'd seen Shadowforde do. I knew I'd been wrong about him. We all were. He was special, probably one of the most special people who ever lived.

And the king wanted him.

"Throw the stones!"

The attackers were already almost on us when the mayor stumbled to her feet and hurled the stones at them. They were only a few pebbles, but they flew from her hand at an impossible speed. And they multiplied, until a hail of stones was streaking through the air, striking every soldier. They gasped in pain and surprise as they fell, struck dead by a weapon they barely saw.

We had no time to be shocked. "Hurry," she said. "We can hide in the grain cellar." The men picked him up. "Come with us," Mayor Sassafras said to me.

"My parents..."

"We'll find them later, I promise. But it's not safe here. Let's go."

I don't know how long we cowered in the dark, listening anxiously to Shadowforde's labored breathing, and the sounds of screaming. Finally, I said softly, "What is he?"

In the blackness, I heard the mayor's tired voice whisper, "No one knows. But he's looked after this village for generations. When I was a girl, there was a drought. Crops withered in the ground. One day Shadowforde went out into the fields, and he...just raised his arms, and suddenly the sky above him filled with clouds. The rains came back. He almost died, then."

Another low voice came out of the darkness. "Three winters ago, my girl got terribly sick. Nothing anyone could do. My wife took her to Shadowforde, and he healed her. Never said a word."

"He's always protected us," the mayor said, "and we've always kept him a secret. But now King Haveron wants him, and..." her voice broke. "I don't know what we're going to do."

At last all grew still, and Mr. Glavin crept out to take a look. He returned a few minutes later.

"They're gone," he said. Then I heard him mumble to the mayor, "It's horrible."

"Wait with Shadowforde," she answered. Then, to all of us, "Let's do what we can to help."

The Wolfbane I knew, the village where I'd lived my whole life, was gone. The homes the soldiers had set ablaze cast a flickering glow in the dusk. There were bodies everywhere, and in the fading light I could see people tending to the wounded. We made our way to the center of town, where other survivors gathered.

"Willem!" my mother shouted when she saw me. Her clothing was singed, her face streaked with soot. My dad was with her, although one arm was bandaged and hanging limply at his side. She almost crushed me in her embrace. "I was so scared."

I felt the tears I'd been holding back for hours flood my eyes. "Shadowforde saved me. He saved me."

I felt her nodding as she clutched me to her. "He always saves us," she said. Then she pulled away and looked me in the eye, serious again, just like that very first time we talked about the strange old man.

"But now we have to save him."

