

Among the Shadows

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“What do you want to eat, Calusa?”

Cal frowned at the man asking the question. Dressed in green shirt and khaki pants Mr. Forest Service looked like some kind of malignant elf. He had beady little eyes and a beard that was grayer than the fuzzy tufts of hair left on his head. Besides that, his hearing was gone – she’d told him at least five times to call her Cal. She dropped her gaze and stared at the menu, ignoring Mr. Service’s stare.

He cleared his throat. “All right, then. Jason?”

“Bacon and eggs sunny side up, Mr. Brody,” the kid on Cal’s left said. He smiled at Cal and continued, “a large glass of orange juice and some water, please.”

Puhleese! Cal tried to shut out the tantalizing aroma of bacon as she looked around, pretending indifference while her stomach growled louder and louder. Their little group of twelve filled most of the seats in the tiny cafe. A few men sat at the counter, reading the paper and chatting in low voices. She shook her head. Hicks, all of them. From the red-faced round bellied sap in suspenders leering at the young waitress to the tall, skinny guy sitting off at the end of the counter by himself.

She stopped, her breath catching in her throat as the man at the end of the counter turned and looked at her. Cal felt a shiver race up her spine. Never had she seen eyes so sad.

The kid sitting at Cal’s right nudged her in the ribs, and she glanced at his round face, trying to remember his name.

“Pretty gross, huh?” He pointed a pimply chin towards the counter as the tall man stood, threw a couple of bills on the counter, and left. The man turned, light reflecting off smooth, shiny skin that puckered and pulled along the left side of his face and down his neck, widening as it entered the collar of his work shirt.

“Got burned in a big fire about twenty years ago. His kid turned chicken and ran away, leaving his old man to die. But they say the old man got his revenge. The kid was never seen again.”

Cal automatically reached up, gripping the locket around her neck. She knew what it was like to be deserted; left alone in a world where no one cared. Her grandmother had been the only one who had understood Cal. She'd died last summer; this locket was all Cal had left.

She forced herself to drop the necklace, to stop thinking. She rolled her eyes. "Get real," she said. Now she remembered the boy's name. Herbert. Didn't he realize his pimples were more disgusting than that poor man's scars? She watched out of the corner of her eye as Herbert slipped an ice cube down the shirt of the girl on the other side of him. The girl wriggled and squealed. God, she was spending the summer with a group of babies.

The other kids sitting around the table laughed and joked. Cal had forgotten most of their names, but it didn't matter – they were all strangers. She swallowed the lump in her throat and stared back down at the menu. Her stomach growled again; she hadn't eaten last night, not after some slime bag put a snake in her day pack. They'd all thought it so funny when she'd screamed and dropped the pack. Cal took a few breaths, trying to slow her pulse. She could have had snake-a-phobia for all they knew, but no one had bothered to ask, not even Mr. Elf sitting at the head of the table. He looked like he was the Pope or something, granting each of them blessings as they ordered their meals. And now he was looking at her again.

"I'll have French toast," Cal said before he could open his mouth. "And coffee." She raised her chin, ready for a confrontation as he raised an eyebrow. But he didn't say anything and Cal's small feeling of triumph faded. She scrunched down into her chair. How had she ever let her parents talk her into this gig? *You need to get outside, get some fresh air, enjoy the world*, her parents said. They never listened, too locked in their busy business lives to care when she tried to tell them about her adventures.

Every night she traveled around the world, jumping from one city to another, chatting with friends from different countries. And when she wasn't surfing the web, she was improving her mind, reading whatever she could lay her hands on, especially if it had to do with computers or science fiction. Even fantasy, as long as it wasn't that elf and dragon stuff.

Cal took a sip of ice water, letting the cold liquid wash down the lump in her throat. She hadn't realized how much she would miss home – her computer, her books. A reasonable life where kids were still warm in their beds, sleeping until the sun inched its way over the rooftops. None of this eating breakfast while the sun was so low it could shine in the windows and blind you.

Most of the kids were through eating by the time Cal's French toast arrived. She took a couple of bites, pushing the half-eaten slices around in a puddle of syrup before draining her coffee cup and shuddering as the bitter liquid ran down her throat. The other kids shouted and shoved and kidded each other out the door. Cal followed, adding her day pack to the pile growing in the rear of the van. The green limousine, she'd dubbed it. She grabbed the first empty seat, settled back, and stared out the window, ignoring the girl next to her. A gust of wind blew into Cal's face, carrying with it the scent of mown grass and an indefinable stench. "God, what's that smell?"

"That's just the cows," the girl next to her said. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Cal stared at the girl. Wonderful wasn't the word Cal had in mind. She looked back outside. There were no cows in sight, just a dinghy little town with no stoplight. She shook her head as the van pulled out of the parking lot and headed across the valley. Then Cal saw cows, thousands of them – black, brown, white, red – four legged polka dots scattered across fields so green they looked like they'd been cut and pasted from a magazine ad.

Miles of fields passed by before they turned onto a dirt road, leaving behind the grass-guzzling cows. The air blasting against Cal's face smelled of hot vanilla and pine cleaner as they drove through a forest full of green trees. Finally, the van ground to a halt and the kids tumbled out.

"Hey, Calooooosa!" Herbert hollered. "Here's your pack." He shoved Cal's day pack toward her, dropping it just as she reached out her hand. He grinned, the mounds on his chin stretching their white peaks wide, and reached back in for another bag.

Cal clenched her teeth and picked up the pack. She checked inside, tilting her journal up on edge and restacking her books before shoving her clothes back on top. Mom and Dad had declared her laptop off limits for the summer, but they hadn't banned her books and had actually encouraged her journal. Cal sighed as she dug her camera out and slipped it in the outside pocket.

The other kids were already headed up the path by the time Cal finished getting her pack on. She shrugged her shoulders, wincing as the straps cut across her collar bone. A squirrel scolded overhead and Cal scowled up at it. She had a sudden picture of a horde of squirrels plotting in the branches of the trees, laying in wait for her to come along so they could fling their prickly bombs at her. She found herself weaving up the path, avoiding walking beneath the trees as

much as possible. This is silly, Cal told herself. She marched forward in a straight line, striving to catch up with the group as they disappeared around a pile of rock.