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The Seeker and the Shade

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dedication to come

Buhr
Shade Territory
Ashtun
Blackwood
Connie's Village
N
NE
E
SE
S
SW
W
NW

Plateau
Hesketh
Cawthorn
Dunholt
Main Road
Check Point
Field Hospital
Capital
Jasper's House

They were the last two to be ticked off the list.

Connie Grayson, the girl with the pale, angular face and dark hair. She had the look of somebody resigned to an unlucky fate; both determined and terrified.

The boy was different. He sauntered over from the private car park, hands in his pockets, and if he was tense, his languid expression didn't give anything away. He cut in front of the girl as if she wasn't there, ignoring her sharp glare.

'Jasper Howard,' he said.

The administrator ticked his name and pointed. 'Please board.'

'I'm with them,' the boy said, promptly heading to a truck further down the row to hop in beside a couple of grinning boys who made room.

The instructor switched his attention to the girl, but she was already walking to the first truck in wordless obedience.

He sighed and snapped the file shut. Every year the intake was different, and yet somehow, every year, they seemed exactly the same.

He gave the signal to send them into the dark.

1·*Connie*

The lights held the darkness back.

Never had Connie felt more grateful for them. She huddled on the bench of the jolting truck with a dozen others, and each time they came to another of those blazing oath lanterns, their tight, anxious faces gleamed with gold and relief shuddered through them.

The space *between* the lanterns was the unbearable part. That moment where the glow fell away – not quite full darkness, but on the shadowy edges, right before the next one – that was what made Connie's stomach flip cold. Like falling, every single time.

At one point, she made the mistake of turning to look through the greasy glass at the passing forest. The trees were spidery outlines, twisted and fossilised, and beyond them gaped deep, obsidian black. She jerked her head back, panic scalding her.

Best not to think too much about what they were driving through.

She'd been near the Shade often enough. The village she'd grown up in was at the edge of the trees, beside the shifting, twilight boundary. Connie knew all too well the exact moment that natural shadows turned more sinister.

That was different, though. If that was like playing in shallow water, this was akin to plunging into the ocean. Connie drew in a breath. Yes, it was actually true. Right now, she was shut inside a battered truck with a bunch of terrified kids hurtling down a dirt path, with only sporadic lanterns to keep the ravenous Shade at bay.

'You OK?' said the boy on her left.

He had a mop of ginger hair and pale, freckled skin. His smile was tentative, friendly.

'Yeah, I've just—' She broke off. *I've just never been this far inside the Shade before.* None of them had, she would bet on it, but it still felt like a foolish thing to confess. Speaking it aloud would seem like weakness, which was the last thing Connie needed.

'This truck, right?' he supplied. 'Terrifying.'

The truck was the least terrifying component of the situation. They both knew it. She gave him a slight smile. 'I'm Connie.'

'I'm Tristan and this is Becca,' he said.

Becca, the dark-haired girl on his other side, assessed Connie with a lively gaze. What did she see? Probably not much in the way of competition.

'Where're you from?' Tristan asked. Another blazing

oath lantern passed by, and as the light fell away, his fingers rubbed at a keepsake round his neck. Perhaps it was helping him stay calm.

'A village west of here. You probably wouldn't have heard of it.'

'All right, Connie from the unknown village. You here to be a caster or seeker?'

'Caster. You too?'

'Yep,' he had a wry smile, 'so's Becca.'

Connie might have guessed from the look of them. Seekers tended towards a certain type, like that tall, entitled boy who'd shoved in front of her at check-in. She would make a hard bet he was going for seeker.

Becca flashed a hard smile. 'Guess that makes us rivals.'

'We don't need to compete against each other,' said Tristan.

'Don't we? The best pairings only happen to the best casters, right?'

'That's definitely not how it works.'

Connie wanted to ask how exactly it did work – but instinct told her this might fall into the category of questions that made her look clueless. Instead she asked, 'How d'you two know each other?'

'Training camp,' Becca said.

'Over the summer. It was kind of a weird place.'

'It was seriously insane.' Becca snorted.

'Yeah, it was like a combat—'

Without warning, the truck swerved. Flung from her seat, Connie collided hard with a tangle of elbows and flailing knees as the truck screeched to a halt. She pulled herself upright in the dazed, sudden stillness, tasting blood on her teeth.

Tristan panted next to her, clutching his keepsake. He opened his mouth, but never had the chance to speak, because the gold light folded away.

Away, as in, *darkness* descended, swift as a blanket thrown over them.

Connie felt her chest constrict. Panicked shouts broke out as everybody made the same frantic assessment. The oath lantern had gone out. The truck had stopped, and the oath lantern had gone out.

'Should we not just—'

'What the hell did they—'

'Hey!' A tall boy hammered on the partition to the driver's compartment. 'What's happening? What's going on?'

'*Shut up!*'

The shout silenced them. The quiet was full of thudding heartbeats and held breath. The source of the shout was a girl by the back doors. Connie could make her out in the residual illumination. The girl flung the back doors open, to shrieks of protest. But Connie agreed – better to be out in the open than trapped inside.

The passengers emptied onto the dirt road, Connie among them. A chilling, damp mist edged the air. She moved

away from the others, slow and careful. They were in the twilight zone. The last light they'd passed looked like a forlorn star some distance away. Either side of the grey ribbon of the road the forest leaned in. Dead trees with skeletal branches.

Even as Connie stared, she could pick it out. *The Shade*. It was back there, lurking within the ordinary darkness. It wasn't darker, exactly, just colder and deeper. Like glass.

The posts that held the oath lanterns were the width of tree trunks. Connie studied the outline of the one which had been extinguished, a short distance ahead. The ideal course of action would be to relight it, but likely nobody knew how, since that was what they were on their way to learn. Connie was struck by the huge, vast wildness surrounding them. Their group was a handful of pebbles lost within it.

Connie had no weapons. The best she could think of was the lighter in the bag under her seat – a present from Lara, her sister. Normal flames were no use. Lara had meant it as a kind of metaphor, like *be the light*, or something. That seemed like a painful joke now.

She refocused on the arguing group.

'This is a test!' This was the girl who'd opened the back, her long hair curling down her back. 'The escort just left. Why would they do that? It doesn't make any sense, unless they did it deliberately.'

A few unconvinced glances were exchanged.

'If we stay calm, we'll be fine.'

She held up a small lantern. An oath lantern. Connie recognised the telltale intricate shape. It was like the small ones that dotted her village back home, about a fifth of the size of the one in the post. It was a proper oath lantern in the same way that Connie's lighter was a proper weapon. As in, not really.

But the girl was confident. 'I've lit a lantern before. I just need somebody to help me.'

'I'll do it,' Becca called out.

They bent over the lantern together and began to recite the vows. Connie had never actually witnessed this being done before. She stared in wonder as reluctantly, hesitantly, a flame grew within the glass. The fragile yellow light lit their faces, set in concentration. A collective hush went through the watching group. Connie felt her stomach shift.

'Woah,' Tristan breathed.

The girl's eyes glittered with triumph. The light wasn't strong, but it cast a small circle of safety. 'Stay close to me,' she said, tossing her hair over one shoulder. 'All we need to do is walk back to the last light.'

'It's not safe.' Connie spoke without thinking, and was subsequently surprised when they all turned to look at her.

'Safer than staying put and getting killed,' Becca said.

'No, I mean, it's a good plan, but the Shade is already back there, and that light isn't strong enough to hold back the Shade.'

The girl swung her lantern. Yellow washed over the

stricken audience. 'Can't you see? It's holding the Shade back right now.'

'Yes it's working *here*. But this is just shadow. It won't work where the Shade *is*.' Connie couldn't think how to explain quickly enough. They stood in the darkness that the Shade left behind, ordinary shadows. It was territory that belonged to the Shade, but the Shade itself was a *thing*, a predator that moved within the dark like water – not all at once, but in silky, liquid movements.

The way the girl stared at her, a slight frown on her disdainful expression, told her that maybe other people didn't understand it that way.

'If the lantern works here, it will work there,' the girl said. 'We don't have another choice.'

With that, she whirled round.

'Wait!' Connie cried, but it was no use – the group shuffled after the girl, swayed by her confidence and eager to stay with the light.

Only Tristan hovered, his eyes anxiously searching Connie's face, until Becca tugged at his arm. 'Come on. She's just scared.'

'Of course I'm scared,' Connie bit back. 'Only an idiot wouldn't be!'

Becca rolled her eyes.

There didn't seem to be anything Connie could do except follow them, trailing the edge of the lantern light, her palms clammy.

The fog was damp on her face. It seemed to Connie that the trees had stilled, for even the leaves ceased to whisper. There was only deep, aching cold.

Then something bowled past her.

Even in that split sensation, she felt the nature of it; flesh and sinew, and a rotting, disgusting odour that gagged her throat.

A scream split the air. Connie straightened with the sickly slowness of a dream. She knew she should be running. The fragile light was lurching. She caught glimpses of what was happening, like spitting shards of glass. Teeth. Eyes. A pale arm, flailing. The noise was at such a fever pitch that Connie's head was simply empty. She couldn't think.

Go back to the truck. The thought rose up. Important. Lifesaving.

Connie took a step. She heard the wrench and slick of flesh rending. Another jarring scream.

Has that really just happened? Is it true? Am I hallucinating?

She couldn't move. She was going to die. She couldn't even bring her arms up to shield her face. She closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable claws to seek her out, the teeth to sink into her limbs.

Instead the inside of her eyelids glowed pink.

She opened her eyes. Gold light. Solid light. *Oath lantern* light. The same as every marker they had passed on the road. It took a long moment for her to understand; the nearest lantern had been relit.

Slowly, the rest of the scene pricked into her awareness. The others were scattered – gasping, trembling. Some had crude weapons out. Some still crouched or shielded their faces.

A high voice pierced her awareness.

'Becca?'

Tristan was sprawled on the ground, staring at a blood-stained patch. He asked again, as if somebody was going to explain.

'Becca?'

Red smeared a trail to the path's edge and into the trees. Absolutely nobody moved to follow it. Not even Tristan.

Connie was dimly aware of people approaching. It was the escort, the two soldiers who had just climbed out of the driver's seat of the truck and vanished. They came from the direction of the newly lit lamp, their plated uniforms gleaming and their faces expressionless. What – had they just been hiding in the bushes all this time? Had they walked away on purpose?

'Can anyone tell me the mistake you made?' said the woman.

The silence was bone-deep. The girl with the lantern said nothing. Neither did Connie.

'You were instructed to obey orders. At all times. Not just when it seems right. Not just when you want to. Not just when you understand them.' She paused for emphasis. '*At all times*. What were the orders you were given?'

No answer came. She looked to her companion.

'Remain in the truck,' the man said.

'Remain in the truck.' She nodded. 'You are here to enrol at Blackwood. At Blackwood, following orders is the difference between life and death.'

This was the end of the speech.

'Now let's go,' said the man.

Tristan rasped in a breath. 'But – but Becca is—'

'She's gone,' the soldier answered. He spoke without rebuke or sorrow. Just stating a fact.

Then he waited for them to move.

Connie went to Tristan. She helped him to his feet and steered him alongside the others. He was so pale and unsteady she thought he might pass out.

Once they had all climbed back inside the truck, the engine rumbled and their journey resumed as if nothing had happened. Nobody made eye contact. Connie gritted her teeth to stop them chattering. Tristan gripped his keepsake in a fist. The girl with the long hair sat hunched and silent. Her lantern had long gone out.

Two things haunted Connie the most.

One was that she had just seen two of these hopefuls light an oath lantern. A small one, yes, but still an oath lantern. Connie had never come close to that kind of skill. If that was the level of the other applicants here, she had no chance of making the cut. Absolutely no chance at all.

The second was that she had just watched a girl be torn apart alive by the Shade.

Why exactly had she thought that coming here was a good idea?