# The Book of Borrowed Shadows

AN OCTOBER TALE



Orion Saint

AN ILLUSTRATED GOTHIC MYSTERY

# The Book of Borrowed Shadows

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*A shadow is the only thing that follows you without asking where you are going.*

TEN CHAPTERS . SIX PLATES

*Illustrated manuscript edition*

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*The order in which the shadows returned*


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PLATE I

*The book had survived neither fire nor its owner.*

CHAPTER I

# The Uninvited Book

Rain had been falling on the city for three days. By the fourth, even the stone saints above the bridge looked disappointed.

Mara Venn was repairing a prayer book when someone knocked at her workshop. She opened the door. Nobody stood outside. A parcel lay on the step, wrapped in grey cloth and tied with copper wire.

Inside was a book the colour of dried roses. Its leather was warm. The corners bore small silver moths. There was no title, no author's name and no obvious reason to let it into the house.

Mara let it into the house.

She had earned her living by mending books for seventeen years. Some had survived fires. Others had survived their owners. This one looked as though it had survived neither.

A slip of paper lay beneath the cover. RECEIVED: ONE SHADOW. TERM: UNTIL THE LAST HOUR OF OCTOBER. In the space for a signature someone had written her name.

The handwriting was her own.

*Received without a sender.*

# The Uninvited Book

She turned the first page. An engraving showed a canal, a narrow house and a man standing at a window. He held a cup with both hands.

Her brother had always held his cup that way.

Elian had disappeared seven Octobers earlier. There had been a coat on a chair, bread on the table and no body. The city had supplied explanations. None had supplied Elian.

Mara touched the little figure. His head turned.

The workshop candle bent towards the book. Her shadow, cast across the wall behind her, lifted one arm. Mara kept both hands on the table.

At the foot of the engraving, a sentence emerged from the paper as slowly as a bruise. RETURN WHAT FOLLOWS YOU.

Outside, a carriage passed through the rain. The sound was ordinary and therefore suddenly precious.

Mara closed the book. Her shadow remained with its arm raised.

Then it pointed at the mirror.

CHAPTER II

# A Shadow out of Place

Morning arrived with the appearance of having been postponed. Mara went to the clockmaker across the canal. Her shadow followed half a step ahead.

Mrs Vale inspected the book without touching it. She was eighty-two and suspicious of anything that kept perfect time.

'That belongs to the House of Borrowing,' she said.

'I have never heard of it.'

'Most people hear of it once. That is usually sufficient.'

Mrs Vale placed her left hand beneath a lamp. The hand was solid. Its shadow ended at the wrist.

'They offered to remove my grief when my husband died. I gave them something small. The grief returned. The hand did not.'

Mara showed her the engraving of Elian. Mrs Vale looked at the cup for a long time.

'People go there to leave something behind. Some leave more than they intended.'

She opened a drawer and took out a brass key. It was thin enough to have been cut from a leaf.

*The witness had lost a hand.*

# A Shadow out of Place

'Put this against a mirror after sunset. Take a candle. Take something from your ordinary life. The House makes sorrow easy to remember and everything else difficult.'

'Can I bring him back?'

'You can ask him to come.'

Mara disliked the distinction. Mrs Vale appeared to have expected that.

'And my shadow?'

'Reading is how it invites you. It has lent your shadow to itself. Do not mistake a receipt for consent.'

On the way home Mara bought bread. The baker asked whether she wanted yesterday's loaf at half the price. It was reassuring to encounter an honest transaction.

She packed a candle, the key and a copper needle from her workbench. She ate half the loaf. She put the rest in her coat.

At dusk, she pressed the key to the mirror.

The glass softened. Somewhere behind it, a bell sounded once.

Her shadow went through first.



PLATE II

*Her shadow went through first.*

CHAPTER III

# The House behind the Mirror

On the other side was a corridor lined with mirrors. None reflected Mara. Each showed a room somebody had left in a hurry.

One held a table set for two. One held a child's empty bed. One held a coat hanging from a nail. The coat was still dripping, although the room contained no rain.

Her shadow waited beneath a staircase. When she approached, it climbed the wall and slipped under a locked door.

A woman sat on the bottom step. She looked about twenty. Her hair had been cut unevenly. Fine ink lines crossed her hands, disappeared beneath her sleeves and continued across the stone beside her.

'You brought bread,' she said.

Mara handed her a piece. The woman smelled it before attempting a bite.

'I remember that,' she said. 'Better than I remember my face.'

'What is your name?'

The woman opened her mouth. An ink stain appeared on the stair. Nothing came out.

*No return address was provided.*

# The House behind the Mirror

'They call me the Girl in the Margin. It was simpler than leaving a space.'

Mara told her about Elian. The woman pointed towards the far end of the corridor.

'The Collector keeps the ones who might persuade someone else to stay.'

'You know the way?'

'I know all the ways. Knowing is different from using.'

They passed a ballroom. Empty coats swayed beneath chandeliers that held no candles. A violin played from inside a locked cabinet. Its musician had apparently been economical with his escape.

Above a door hung a courteous notice: NOTHING IS TAKEN THAT HAS NOT BEEN OFFERED.

Beneath it, scratched into the wood, someone had added: READ THE OTHER SIDE.

Mara tried to turn the notice over. It was nailed through the wall.

The woman gave a brief, dry laugh.

'You are a bookbinder,' she said. 'He will not like that.'