

HAVE YOU EVER HAD THAT FEELING? The feeling that someone's looking at you, watching you, but when you turn around to look, there's no one there? Your skin begins to crawl, goosebumps form on your arms and legs, and the back of your head tingles as if there are eyes burning into your skull. Of course you have. We've all had that feeling, but usually, it turns out that nobody's watching you, and you convince yourself that it was all in your head, right? Well, the problem is, you're wrong. No one's alone, at least not where I come from. I can feel it right now. They are watching, those terrifying, black creatures, but most people would never notice. Sometimes, I think maybe I am insane; that maybe I am hallucinating or dreaming. I mean, no one else can see shadows, at least not that I know of, so why can I? But in the end I know, I am seeing the truth, and it is everyone else that is dreaming....

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I can feel their eyes now, as the wind whips hair into my face and whistles in my ears. The hairs on my arms and the back of my neck raise, but I can't tell whether it's the Shadows or the wind. It's so loud, that I don't hear Bexley the first time she asks me a question. "What?!" I ask, in a half-shout. She repeats, "You know what I don't understand?!"

"No, what?" I ask. I catch movement in my peripheral vision and my head snaps to the right, towards the other side of the street, but there's nothing there. *Hmm, the Shadows are being quick today. I'd better keep an eye out.*

"Well," she says, oblivious to my brief mental detour, "we're doing this unit in history class about Genetica X experiments, and I just don't get it," Upon finishing her statement, she lifts her arms into the air and then drops them to her sides like limp noodles.

There it is again, a Shadow, stuck in a stealth position on the siding of a house. "Bexley, do you see that?" I ask, pointing to the dark figure.

"Um, no I don't see anything," she says, reaching over to brush away a leaf that has blown onto the front of my navy blue corduroy jacket.

"Are you sure, Bex, because I see something over there," I say, but when I point back towards the house, the Shadow isn't there. "Oops," I say, "Never-mind, it's gone."

"Uh-huh, well maybe you should just relax a little, Eriligh. You're getting pretty worked up over something that I can't even see," she says, and I fight the urge to tell her that that's the point! I know she can't see Shadows!

"Yeah, I guess you're right, Bex," I say, but I'm really still looking. Turning to a beige house on the corner, I see the last of the Shadow, as he (or she?) flies around the corner and into the backyard, its two-dimensional body conforming to the landscape. Dang, this one's fast.

"Eri, I can tell you're still looking," she says, sounding worried, "What are you even looking for?" I mentally debate on what to say. I can't tell her the truth. I tried that one time, and afterwards, she was afraid of me for weeks. I don't want to lose my only friend. The Shadows have already taken so much...

Finally, I say, "I just thought I saw a cat. On the sidewalk." I look at her, and her grey eyes are filled with concern. I'm kind of glad that she can't see Shadows. She's innocent, and I want her to stay that way.

By the look on her face, I know she doesn't believe me about the cat, but she just says, "Oh, ok," and keeps walking. At least she's willing to drop it.

"You know," she says and pats my back a little, "I've noticed that you've been sorta jumpy lately, and I was thinking, there's a party tonight and I think we should go, to you know, get your mind off things. You just worry way too much, and I think it would be good for you to relax a little. Also, you owe me from the other day." That's right. She had bravely rescued

me from answering a question in class when I clearly had not been paying attention. In fact, I had been scrutinously watching a Shadow that had appeared outside, not that anybody else knew that.

Bexley gives me a hopeful glance, and I cringe back. "Alright," I say, "but only because you're my best friend...and because then I won't owe you anymore."

"Yay! It's gonna be great! I knew I could guilt you into it! I haven't been to a party in forever, and it's been even longer since you've come to one with me, Ms. Antisocial!"

I laugh a little as we turn onto Edra Avenue, and wave goodbye to Bexley when she begins walking up her driveway. "See you tonight, Bex!" I yell, and she waves back to me before opening the door and walking inside. Even from here, I can hear her mom in the kitchen, probably trying out a new cookie recipe. My mom used to love baking. I turn away from the house and walk quickly down the sidewalk, holding back the tears that are threatening to spill over. I haven't cried in three years and I'm not going to start now.

Walking the rest of the way home is eerily quiet. Usually, there are people walking, or birds chirping, or something, but today the Shadows are more active, and while most can't see the Shadows, they can still feel their presence. I see that one with the green eyes again, and I try not to look directly at it. Maybe it knows I can see, and that's why it's following me. Maybe it's just going in the same direction as me. All I know is that I don't really want to find out.

When I finally reach my Aunt V.'s small house, I look around, check-

ing again for the Shadow. I don't see it, so I start up the driveway, doing my best to avoid the potholes. Before reaching the porch, I notice two things. The first thing I notice is that some more of the baby blue paint is starting to peel away from the siding, as if it find the house repulsive to be around, and the second, is that my bedroom window is open. I could have sworn I closed it last night. Slowly, I open the marigold-yellow front door (it's never locked), and breath a small sigh of relief to find an empty foyer waiting for me, not a thing out-of-place, but before I release the rest of the air I'm holding, I check all of the other rooms, just to be safe. Then, I go do homework.

When I'm done, I check the purple holo-clock projecting on the wall above my nightstand, and find that I've been working for nearly six hours. The boxy green numbers read 8:56 p.m., but that can't be right because Aunt V. still isn't home from work. She told me last night that she was going to be a little late, but normally she gets off of work at six. I walk quickly to the kitchen, pick up the phone, and dial her office's number. As I wait for someone to pick up, I observe the photo of me and Aunt V. at the lake last year. I remember that day. There had been Shadows everywhere and... Gerty, the secretary, answers the phone and interrupts my thoughts. I tell her that my aunt still isn't home from work and ask what time she left the office today.

Gerty gives a little "oh" and says, "Honey, your aunt called in sick this morning. She wasn't at work."

When I don't respond right away, she hastily adds, "But I'm sure she's fine. Probably just went to get

some fresh air or something. You know how she is. Always busy, busy, busy, so don't worry any about her, ok?"

I tell her that I won't, but when I hang up, panic settles in the pit of my stomach like a stone in water. As I dial Aunt V.'s cell phone number, nervousness gnaws away at the pit of my stomach, and I tap my foot anxiously on the pink vinyl. She picks up after the seventh ring. "Hi, honey. Are you home from school?" she asks in a too happy, too sickness-free voice.

"Uh, yeah. I have been for like, five hours," I say, annoyed that she's acting so blasé about her absence. "Where are you?! Gerty said you called in sick today."

"I just needed some groceries, sweetheart. No big deal." Yeah, right. I can already hear her tapping her long green nails on something on the other side of the phone, a tell-tale sign that she's lying.

"Aunt V., you never call me sweetheart, or honey, and I can hear you tapping your nails. What's going on?" The tapping stops, and then continues a few moments later.

"Really, Eriligh, it's nothing. I just needed to get out of the house a little bit. I'm not used to being cooped up inside all day," she says, but I still think something's up.

"Ok, well, when are you going to be home? Should I just cook myself dinner, or what?" I ask.

"No, that's alright. I'll be home soon. Just sit and relax, and I'll cook your favorite, okay?" Her casual tone does nothing to hide the sadness in her voice. She seemed fine yesterday, but a lot could change in only a few hours. I would know.

"Okay, Aunt V.," I say, "Are you

alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I'll see you soon, ok?" I hear another noise in the background, but I don't question her about it.

"Okay. Hey Aunt V.?"

"Yes?"

"I love you," I tell her. I don't know why, but it feels like a good thing to do.

It may just be me, but I think her voice breaks when she says, "I love you too, Eriligh. See you soon." Then, she hangs up. I put the phone back in its place.

Just as I'm about to walk back into my room, the doorbell rings, and my heart begins to beat a little faster. Then, I realize that it's probably Bexley coming to pick me up for the party, and my heart rate drops slowly back to normal. I'm still in my uniform, so she's going to have to give me a few minutes to change because I'm certainly not wearing a pleated skirt to a party. The doorbell rings again, multiple times in a row. Just to be sure it's not a stranger, I pull back the curtains on the window to the right of the door, and scream a little when I see Bexley's face, puffed up like a fish, pressed right up against the window staring at me. I fling the door open and she walks in laughing.

"God, Bex! You scared me!" I say.

"I'm sorry, but I just knew you would look out that window to see who it was, and I couldn't resist," she says with a smug little smile, small chuckles still erupting from her mouth.

"Whatever! I can't help it if I'm a little paranoid! You know I hate answering the door."

"Yeah, I know, I know," she says while rolling her eyes, "But that's

not why I'm here, Eri. I'm here to take you to a party so why are you still wearing your school clothes?!"

I sigh and say, "I forgot about the party, so you're just going to have to give me a minute to go change. Also, I need a snack because I'm really hungry, and I need to write my aunt a note so that she knows where I am. I don't want her to worry." Like I'm worrying about her now.

"There'll be food at the party so just go get dressed!" She shoves me towards the stairs and I almost trip on the first step.

"Ok, ok!" I say, and run up the rest of the stairs two at a time. In my room, I throw on a nice peasant blouse (cream colored with ruffles at the bottom), and a pair of skinny jeans with holes at the knees. I slip on some ballet flats and start back down the stairs, but before I reach the bottom, I turn back and check that my window is locked, just to be safe. When I'm back downstairs, I write a note to my aunt on the pad we always keep by the phone. I wish I could just stay home and wait for her, but I told Bexley I'd come with her, and I can't let her down.

Aunt V.-

Bexley made me promise to go to a party with her tonight. I'll be back by midnight. I forgot about it, and that's why I didn't tell you on the phone earlier. Please, please, please call me when you get home so that I know you got here safe. I promise I'll answer. Sorry I can't have dinner with you tonight. Please call me.

Love,
Eriligh

I notice for the first time that Bexley is no longer standing by the door. I yell her name, and she walks out of the kitchen with a pint of ice cream in her hand and a spoon in her mouth. "What?" she asks, "Oh you're ready! Ok, just let me put this back in the freezer." I roll my eyes and wait patiently by the front door, checking my hair in the large mirror by the laundry room. She comes running out of the kitchen and practically drags me to her car, an old 2098 Volkswagen Wasp. "Hurry up and get in!" she yells, "We're gonna be late!"

I watch tree after tree fly past my window while Bexley drives. Oak tree, maple tree, evergreen, birch tree. I try to name as many as I can as a way to entertain myself, until something important pops into my head. "So exactly where is this party," I ask Bexley.

"Um, I'm not exactly sure. I have the address and some directions, but I'm not sure who's place it is or anything like that," she tells me. She hands me a small, square napkin with interconnected lines on it on it. I take one look and realize that the napkin came from the Meal Center.

"So let me get this straight. You stole a napkin from the Meal Center. That's illegal, as in very bad and punishable by law, in case you hadn't already learned from when Jaz got meal suspension for using an extra pack of vinegar! Also, these directions are absolutely worthless, Bex! How are you even gonna find this place?"

She shrugs, keeping her eyes on the road, "I'm pretty sure the M.C. will survive the loss of one extra napkin, Eriligh. You know I love you, so

you know it comes from my heart when I say LOOSEN UP. What's the point of being a teenager if you're not going to do anything stupid. Besides, we both know I'm great with directions. I always know how to get un-lost."

"That's not a word," I mumble, but she's right in any case. I've never gotten lost when she was leading. Rain begins to come down in fat drops on the windshield, and I sit in silence for the rest of the ride. As I let the rhythmic movement of the windshield wipers fill the silence, I think about the one thing that's consistently on my mind. Shadows. I remember the first time I ever had a shadow attack. It was terrifying, the feeling of being overtaken by Darkness, and the realization that I truly am different from everyone else....

I was lounging on the couch, eating marshmallow after marshmallow straight out of the bag, not caring about the sticky residue on my fingers or the few marshmallows that had fallen onto the fuchsia carpet. It was a sort of game I played with myself. For every marshmallow I ate, I had to think of one thing I hated about living at Aunt V.'s. So far, I had eaten 237. It's a wonder I wasn't obese, I ate so much in those days.

I looked around the room, doing a quick inspection, and saw a dark figure crouched in the corner, next to my aunt's glass bell collection. It looked like it was sitting cross-legged, like a giant, black sticker, so out of place in this eccentric house. The only bit of color the shadow possessed were its two round, pupil-less, Emerald-colored eyes. They peered at me curiously, and I stared right back, too frightened

to turn away from the boyish-looking shadow for even a second. After a few moments, the human-like being, raised one hand in what looked like a greeting. I sucked in a breath, and behind the figure emerged ten's of hundred's more shadows. They grew and stretched, morphing like figures in a funhouse mirror, to fit the walls of the living room. I sucked in, but the air was stuck somewhere in between my mouth and my lungs. Soon, every wall was covered in Darkness, and it overtook me. Shadow hands reached towards me from all sides, wisps of air caressing my skin like ghostly fingers, and I screamed. The last thing I heard before I blacked out was Aunt V.'s pumps clacking quickly on the vinyl.

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When I woke up, my head was on a small pillow and I was still on the couch. Aunt V. was sitting next to my head, brushing the hair back from my face. "How are you feeling?" she asked, her big, dark eyes shining with worry.

"Alright," I said, but when I tried to sit up, the world started spinning. I laid back down.

"Ok, sweetie," she said, "What happened? I heard you screaming and then when I came in, you were out cold."

"I just, um, had kind of a panic attack, I think. I'm not really sure," I told her, even though it wasn't entirely true.

"Oh, well maybe we should see a doctor about it? I'm sure they have a medication that can help you."

"No!" I yelled, and then in a calmer voice, "I just think I'm a little stressed out because of, you know, my parents, and moving and all. No big

deal. How long was I out anyways?" There was no way I wanted to take meds. Only the crazies did that.

"Only a couple of minutes. I was going to take you to the hospital if you didn't wake up soon. Maybe you should try to get some rest."

"Ok, Aunt V. See you in the morning," I said, and stood up. I was still a little wobbly, but not quite so dizzy. I headed towards the hallway, and when I looked back towards the corner, the shadow was still there, sitting cross-legged on the wall.

I remember everything about that night. I remember how scared I was to fall asleep because of the Shadows, and how lonely it was knowing that I was so different. I knew that even if I told my aunt, she would never believe me. No one would. Shadows were a thing of the past for most people....

The sound of the tires on a gravel driveway pulls me out of my thoughts. I can already feel the pulse of the music. As we drive farther down the path, I note that whoever owns this place practically has their own road, except for that it's made of small rocks instead of pavement. About thirty seconds later, we arrive at a house. It's huge, at least three times the size of Aunt V.'s, with beige colored siding, a porch made out of stone, and windows everywhere. The only problem is that all the lights are off inside, so either there's no one in there or they're sleeping. We can hear the music (it's really loud now, coming from directly in front of us), but we can't see anything that indicates there's a party nearby. "So, where's it at?" I ask no one in particular.

"I'm not sure," says Bexley, "This is

where the directions said to go.”

A dark figure holding an umbrella emerges from a group of trees and starts moving towards the car. Every nerve in my body screams “SHADOW!”, but I know that a Shadow would never be able to walk upright like that. Still, it’s hard for me to calm myself down. I try using the technique I developed over the past three years.

Breathe in, breathe out. It’s just a human. Breathe in, breathe out. It’s just a human.

“Eri, are you ok?” Bex asks me.

I just nod my head in response. The nauseous feeling in my stomach makes its way to my throat. I squeeze my eyes shut and pull my feet up into the seat so that my face is on my knees, trying to ward off the vomit. Bexley rubs large circles on my back, but it’s not helping. I hear the window roll down, and then someone talking.

“Um, is something wrong with her?” a male voice says.

“No,” Bexley replies, “She’s just not feeling great. She didn’t eat lunch at school today. Did you, Eriligh?” I peak out of my left eye, but keep the other one closed tight. The person looks our age, and he’s wearing tight black shirt and khaki pants with black and white tennis shoes. His untamed blonde hair and bright green eyes are mesmerizing, and it’s hard to look away. Rain is hitting his face, despite the umbrella, and he’s staring at me, not as if I’m strange, but as if I’m someone that he knows. He has a smirk on his face, the kind of smirk that says, “I knew you’d be here.” The look in his eyes makes my heart flutter a little. No one this pretty can possibly be dangerous...or maybe that makes him more dangerous because

everyone assumes he’s not. I don’t know, but I still can’t get my heart to slow down.

“Hello? Eri?” Bexley says, sounding irritated.

“Huh? Oh, yea, right. Not feeling great,” I say, and reach my hand out to open my door. It takes a few tries because my hands are still shaking and I can’t seem to get a deep breath. I need some air.

As we walk, the boy introduces himself as Haiden, and quickens his pace to match my own.

“I’m Eriligh,” I say.

“That’s a pretty name,” he tells me quietly, and offers to share his umbrella. I accept. Turning my head slightly to the left, I try to sneak another glance at him, and find that he’s already staring at me. In the dim light, I can see his cheeks flush. “Sorry,” he says, “I was looking at your scar. That’s pretty unique.” Gently, he touches the star-shaped mark on the left side of my neck. It makes me shiver, but it’s not an unpleasant feeling.

“Yeah, well, most people don’t really notice it.” I reach up to cover the scar with my hand.

“Oh,” is all he says, but I can’t tell if he means it to be a question or a statement, so I change the subject.

“So, this is your party, huh?” I ask.

“Yeah. My parents wanted me to invite some people over, so I could “make some pals”. His air quotes make me laugh a little.

“So how come I never see you at school? I mean, you’re throwing a party and my source tells me that practically everybody from G.P. is going to be here, but I’ve never even met you

before.”

“I’m technically homeschooled, but I play lacrosse for the high school, since I live in the district.”

“That’s cool. So do you know Bexley, then? She’s the girl who’s with me, and she dated Link Parker at one point last year. I figure you’d know him from lacrosse.”

He’s about to reply, but Bexley comes up behind us. I hadn’t even noticed she was gone. She’s drenched and doesn’t seem happy.

“What the heck, you two! You just left me back there! I could’ve gotten lost!” she yells.

“Sorry,” I say, even though we had only walked, like, 100 feet from the car, “What took you so long anyways?”

“My stupid key got stuck in the ignition and I practically had to wrestle with my steering wheel to get it out.” she says.

Haiden leads us to the party, which turns out to be in a barn at the back of the property. The whole place belongs to his parents. The barn is lit up inside and out with strings of multi-colored lights, and the music is so loud that, although I can see people talking everywhere, I can’t hear them at all.

We walk inside through the large set of doors, and immediately, Bexley drags me to a group of guys by the refreshments table.

“See you later!” I yell to Haiden. He is shaking water from his golden hair, but he looks up momentarily to wave goodbye.

When we reach the table, all of the guys look up. I don’t know any of them very well, and suddenly I feel like a six year old with my mother at the grocery store, hiding behind her skirt

while she talks to a friend. Why are they looking at us like that, anyways? Is there someone behind us, or something? I turn my head around, just to check. Nothing that I see.

“Hey, Bexley,” one of them says, eying her short, pink skirt. Oh, now I get it.

“Hey, Grayson,” she replies, “My eyes are up here, in case you couldn’t tell.” I blush with embarrassment, not for myself, but for Grayson, although he doesn’t seem to mind. He just rolls his eyes.

“Right,” he says, and stares at her face with emphasis.

“That’s better,” says Bexley, “So, where’s Benton?”

“Your brother’s here?” I ask, semi-surprised. He’s usually pretty closed off, not the partying type. Then again, neither am I, I guess.

“Of course, Eri,” she says, “I told you everyone would be here. Anyways, Grayson, where’s Benton?”

“Last I saw, he was sitting at one of the tables over there, eating or something.” He points to a set of circular tables off in the corner of the barn. They’re the kind that you would see in a cafe in Paris, small and made of iron, twisted and bent into intricate designs.

“Thanks,” says Bexley, “Come on, Eri.”

“Why are we going to your brother?” I ask.

“Because I want to dance, but I know you won’t come with me and I don’t want you to have to be alone, so I’m leaving you with Ben.”

“Bexley, I don’t want to sit with your brother all night!” I stop walking and cross my arms in front of my chest.

“Ok, that’s fine, so are you go-

ing to come dance with me?"

"I don't really want to do that either," I say, with a cringe.

"Ok, well, I guess it won't kill me to come sit with you for a little while," she tells me, but she seems genuinely disappointed at not being able to dance.

With an exaggerated sigh, I say, "No, go dance, Bexley. Have a good time. I'll just go sit at a table or something."

"Really, are you sure, Eri?" Her eyes light up a little.

"Yeah, I'm sure. I'll be fine."

"Alright, but if you need anything, come and get me!" With that, she runs off towards the dance floor.

I really want to find someone to hang out with, but as hard as I try, I just can't bring myself to talk to anybody, not even the people I know. It's just not in my nature, and I end up sitting at one of the Paris tables by myself. Out of the corner of my eye, I think I see something, and I turn my head. Against the wall, there is a dark, human-shaped figure; a shadow. I suck in a breath, and squeeze my eyes shut for a brief moment. I open them again, expecting it to be gone or expecting it to be a human, like before. It's not. The Shadow is still there, creeping in the darkness. It moves further into the darkness, until I can no longer see it, but I can feel the Shadow's presence. A shudder ripples through my spine, and it's as if a dark veil has been lifted from my eyes. Everywhere I look now, I can see the Shadows; feel them. There is one by the door, crouching down as if preparing for a race, one slithering across the dusty wood flooring like a snake, another one on the ceiling, and

the list goes on. They are all facing the center of the dance floor. There is something strange about the way they are arranging themselves, something familiar, like I've seen it before, but I just can't put my finger on it.

A hand touches me lightly on the shoulder and I nearly jump out of my skin. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," says a voice I recognize from earlier. It's Haiden, and he pulls up a chair to sit down next to me. "That's okay," I reply, "I get scared pretty easily these days."

"I can tell," he says with a wink and a brilliant, white smile. "So, why are you over here all by yourself? What happened to your friend?"

"Oh, she wanted to dance, but I'm not big on that kind of thing, so I told her to go ahead and have fun."

"I'm not much of a dancer either, but that might be because of my severe lack of coordination."

I laugh a little and try to go back to my shadow searching, but he just won't stop talking. "So," he says, "if you don't like dancing, and you don't like talking to people, what on Earth could have possessed you to come to this party?"

"Bexley," I reply, "She guilted me into it, and besides, it's not like I don't like talking to people, I'm just *uncomfortable* talking to people. There's a difference."

"Hm, I guess you're right about that, but you seem all right talking to me. Why's that?" he asks.

"I don't know. I guess you're just different from everyone else."

"Well," he says, another smile lighting up his tanned face, "It's good to know that I'm easy to talk to. I'm

going to get a drink. Do you want some punch?"

"Hmm, only if it's the kind with sherbet in it," I say in a joking tone, but I'm kind of serious. The red stuff is gross.

"Ok. I'll see what I can do." he smiles at me and walks away, towards the refreshments table.

Alone again, I become even more aware of the Darkness that surrounds this place. Something inside me clicks, an instinct, and I know that whatever those shadows were trying to do earlier, they've done. It's like I can feel their thoughts, but not actually see what they're thinking. I look around again, and I can no longer see their misshapen human forms, but I can feel them. As the panic wells inside me, I decide that I need to find Bexley, just in case, but when I look around, she's nowhere to be found.

Then, the lights flicker on and off a few times, and the room goes black. The music disappears and I can hear some people mumbling complaints, and others laughing as if a lack of vision is actually funny. Then, there are sirens and the sound of boots on the old wood flooring, and the room is in chaos. I am plastered against one wall, too scared to move without the ability to see what's around me. My vision begins to adjust and all around me I see people running and screaming, some lying on the ground, some more with guns in their hands. I take deep breaths, attempting to calm myself, but I just can't. Something hits me in my right temple, hard. I fall to the ground, and just before I am overtaken by the blackness, the blurry outline of a person comes over me. It says something

and brushes the hair away from my face, and then I am gone....

I awake with a splitting headache and a huge lump on the side of my head. I sit upright too quickly, and a wave of dizziness overtakes me. I drop back down, and I realize that wherever I'm lying is quite comfortable. As the rest of my senses become sharper, I can hear people talking in another room. I open my eyes a bit, and see that the room is empty, except for someone sitting next to me. I open my eyes all the way and try sitting up again, slowly this time. I turn to my left, and find Haiden sleeping in a chair next to my bed. "Haiden," I whisper quietly, but he doesn't move. "Haiden," I say again, but louder than last time. He finally jolts awake, sitting straight-backed in the chair.

"What? What is it?," he questions frantically, "Oh, you're awake." He rubs his eyes with the palm of his hand, trying to coax the sleep from them, and slumps back down in his wooden chair.

"Yeah. Haiden, where are we?" I ask, not quite sure I want to know the answer.

"Well," he starts out, "We're in the, um,...Dark Realm..." He mumbles the last part, and then cringes as if he's scared of my reaction. He should be.

"What do you mean, "Dark Realm", Haiden?" I ask in my calmest voice.

"I mean that we're in the Dark Realm. It's as simple as that," he says.

I try frantically to get up out of the bed, but he pushes me back down. "Let go of me!" I yell.

"No, Eriligh! You have to stay here and listen to me! The Shadows

aren't what you think they are!"

"Haiden, I've been seeing Shadows my whole life! They stalk me and watch me and freak me out, even in my own home! Try living my life and then we'll see what you think about the Shadows!"

"Please, you have to listen! It's important, really important. Please."

His emerald eyes watch me warily, and I notice something. "You," I say in a suddenly breathless voice, "You're the Shadow who's always in my house!"

He looks at me in sudden disbelief, but doesn't say anything.

"I knew it! I could tell by your eyes! Why did you kidnap me, Haiden? I just want to go home." The tears flow freely now, even though I try hard to stop them.

His mouth opens and closes a few times, as if he can't quite figure out what to say, and he finally settles on, "Your life isn't what you think it is. There's a reason why you can see Shadows, Eri, and a reason why you were taken from that party, although we didn't anticipate the government attack. Eriligh, there's a reason we've, I've, been watching over you for the past three years."

"I don't understand. What happened to Bexley, Benton, everybody else at the party?" I know my voice sounds as panicked as I feel, but I don't care.

"Eriligh, your family and friends are safe. They're here, and they're waiting for you to wake up. As for the rest of the people at the party, they either got away or were taken in by the officials, but I'm sure they'll be released soon. None of them know

anything about our plan."

"I want to see my aunt, and Bexley." The tears are flowing freely now, and there's nothing I can do to stop them. There goes my record.

"There's something I need to tell you first," he says, but he's hesitant.

"Ok, well what is it?"

He takes my hand in his and says, "Eriligh, I know you won't believe me when I tell you this, but....well.... you are a Shadow...or half Shadow, at least."

And suddenly all of those days I spent wondering why, why it had to be me who could see the Shadows, why nobody else was forced to endure what I had endured my entire life. The answer hits me like a brick wall.

No. NO. No, no, no, no, no....

