

## **Shadow Man**

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BY

Tara Fox Hall

Sample file

## CHAPTER 1

History speaks of the months after the Crash of 1929 as desolate, and hopeless. I'm sure that was true for many. But I wasn't unhappy, even though my days seemed to have lost their color, and my nights blurred one into another until I sometimes lost track of the date. My problem was that now that things had calmed down, some of the horror of my life had caught up to me, hurting me in the one place I wasn't defensible: my dreams.

I had often dreamed of Giselle after her death, and of my other slain sisters. Those dreams had lessened in the years that had passed. Now they seemed to come back with a vengeance, and they brought friends.

I awoke screaming most nights, with one of Abraham's guards pounding on my door, asking if I was okay. I was reluctant to go to an alchemist to ask for any help sleeping. I had to be ready in case of attack, either on my vampire boss, Abraham or on my sister Sam and her children, not to mention myself. I couldn't be off in dreamland with big-bosomed women and still be of any use.

Fortunately, I was able to function fine with only about four hours sleep, which was what I usually got when the nightmares were said and done. I learned to control my cries with help of a book Abraham got me, so I didn't have someone pounding on my door most nights. But I could do nothing about the dreams. It got so fucking bad that I would dread going to sleep and would find any excuse to put it off, until I was so tired my tail would have been dragging if I were in snake form.

There was something good about being awake in the early morning hours: Abraham and I were becoming friends. We had been together for almost ten years now. I was his first weresnake friend; he told me himself. I was probably the first weresnake he'd given the time of day to, though he never was rude enough to say something like that to me. It wasn't out of fear, but rather because he didn't want to hurt my feelings. He alone seemed to get how I felt, being snake in a world that hated snakes. It was hard not to like him just for that. Not to say he wasn't hard with me, or even terrible,

when he felt he had to be. But he was almost a gentler version of my father, and I admired him greatly.

At night, we'd often share alcohol, blood, or a mixture of the two and have long talks. It might seem odd, that I liked that almost as a vampire did, but I'd developed a taste for it by now, after spending so much time with Abraham, and was kind of a connoisseur of it, just as he was. I still preferred whiskey, sure, but he was my friend, and so I tried to be accommodating.

One night, after I had come in from a job, he asked me into his study. I could tell right away that he was serious about something. Once I'd sat down and he'd poured some wine laced with blood for both of us, he got right to it.

"I've heard reports, Lash. There is a man who is not taking no for an answer sometimes from the women that work the streets in the Quarter."

I knew what he was saying so delicately. He'd heard of Brianna. It was true she'd been the first I'd threatened into accepting, but not the last. I always paid them, though. Fuck them if they didn't want me. They were whores. If they got paid, what did it matter? I sipped my blood and didn't say anything.

"There have been deaths." Abraham's voice was regretful and sad.

I said nothing, planning to just stay quiet and wait him out. But Abraham was a master at that, and he outlasted me easily. Finally after five minutes of utter silence, I spoke, my snake fangs forming in my upset.

"I pay them, every time. Double the going rate. I can't help that one of them killed herself. There was only the one who did that, Abraham."

Abraham looked at me, his eyes tinged red with obvious anger. He said nothing, and for some reason that made me feel guiltier than if he'd yelled at me.

"I never hurt any of them! I just took my pleasure, is all! Is that so wrong?"

"I want you to stop," Abraham said quietly. "If they say no, accept it."

"I like humans rarely," I hissed quietly. "The women are mostly fey, or other types of were."

"Iso is still here. She is snake, like you. What is the problem?"

"She's a bitch, and the nastiest slut to ever haunt a street corner. And sometimes I want a woman who isn't asking me to hurt her or be rough!"

Abraham poured us another drink, this one of straight alcohol. He sat back and sipped his scotch. I sipped mine, still feeling guilty, hating the feeling.

“Look,” he said finally. “Would you consider taking a mate? I know by the way you talked a few months ago that you were considering the woman who lived here with you for a time.”

He meant Gretchen. I was glad he didn't say her name. I'd grown to hate her in the weeks that had followed her death, for the selfish actions she'd taken and for the fact that she'd made me the instrument of my own children's death.

“Tryst—”

“Call me Lash, Abraham,” I reminded him. “I have to be called that. I want my sisters safe. I have nieces and nephews aplenty now.”

“Sorry. Lash, I know your sisters are all on their second and third children. But you are still unmarried. It's normal to want a mate. You are what, twenty-six? Twenty-seven?”

That sounded about right. I nodded. “You know there are no single women here of my kind, Abraham, not even with the influx of refugees from the North. There are only prostitutes, and even then, only Iso.”

“You know that is not true,” he said softly. “There is at least one young snake girl, close to twenty, who is not yet spoken for. She is very comely. I saw her with you at the theater a month ago, and also one other night having dinner at the Two Sisters.”

Ruby. “I offered for her already,” I said, embarrassed and ill at ease. “She refused.”

“Do you want her?” he asked seriously.

“She refused,” I said again in slow measured words. “She doesn't want me. With the other males of my kind around here, the competition is fierce. She has many suitors, and can afford to marry a much richer man than I.”

“I can help. I can compel her father—”

“No! I was to be married before, back when I was only seventeen. My father did what you are offering to do, and it had a tragic ending. I don't want to go through that again, or make someone my mate who doesn't want to be.”

“Then is there a woman you ever knew who I might send for, to join you here? I know that another woman came to you, after your lover died. She left a month or so ago. She is welcome to stay here. If she does not want to be dependent on you, to work, I can find something for her. We always need cooks here, the way my werefalcons like to eat.”

“No,” I said, trying not to sound bitter. “Her life is on a faraway beach. I already asked her. I offered her anything she wanted if she’d stay.” I looked down. “She still left.”

“I apologize for causing you upset,” Abraham said quietly. “I just want there to be some woman here that would make it easier for you, Lash. A live-in mistress for you would be convenient for us all.”

No shit. Like I wanted to go out and be with hookers in alleyways. Christ.

“No,” I said, thinking of Britney. “There is no one else I was ever close to, or that I cared for, or even that I would trust to live here.”

Hell, even Char was dead. I remembered her, and all she’d done for me and mine. That memory made me realize more and more how stupid I’d been not to think more of her, as my father had. I probably should have taken her up on that offer the day she’d said she’d wanted a little—

“Then will you let me import a suitable woman for you?” Abraham said, breaking into my thoughts. “There are many weresnakes of your breed in the territory of Texas.”

“A mail-order bride?” I asked with interest. “They still do that?”

“Of course!” he said, smiling so his mouth creased faintly. “They can provide any kind of woman. Many are looking for husbands, especially those with children. There are many whose husbands have died or gone to look for work and not come back.”

Like Sam’s husband. No good bastard.

“Do you have a preference for hair, or eyes? Body type? Age?”

“Dark hair and eyes. Curvy, but not over two hundred pounds. I’m not too tall, so probably not too much taller than me.”

Abraham nodded. “Let me look into it, and get you some pictures, and details. The process takes a while, I’m afraid, as it is all done through the mail. And there is one regrettable thing.”