



JOSHUA KHAN

A **SHADOW MAGIC** NOVEL

DREAM MAGIC

**“HERE IS A FANTASY WORLD YOU
WILL LOSE YOURSELF IN”**
RICK RIORDAN

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ONE

“**T**rolls did this,” said Wade. “Anyone can see that.”
“Can they?” Stepping lightly on the snow, Thorn picked his way over the rubble that had once been a farmhouse, his bow ready with an arrow nocked. He breathed slowly and deeply, ignoring the white mist emerging from between his lips, scanning ahead for any troll-sized trouble.

But the closer he got, the more he realized they were too late.

The morning’s snowfall sprinkled the broken wooden fence and the trampled chicken coop. A feeble thread of smoke still rose out of the chimney, but there were two other big, fresh holes in the thatched roof.

The rest of the patrol, all squires like him and Wade, were cautiously spreading out across Pitch Farm. Twenty boys, with hands tight around spear shafts and bows, and thickly wrapped in their black wool cloaks and whatever armour that

fit. A few searched the shed at the edge of the trees; another was poking his head into an empty dog kennel.

Wade pointed to the roof. "Give me a leg up."

"Get up yourself. It ain't high."

Wade gave a long, theatrical sigh. "I'm not a forest-born sprite like you, Thorn. And how long have you been a squire, exactly?"

Thorn knew where this conversation was going. "Three months."

Wade grinned. "I've been a squire three years, and I was a page for the three before that. Remind me, how old are you?"

"Twelve," Thorn replied sullenly.

"A mere twelve?" Wade stroked the few strands of hair on his chin, which he proudly referred to as his "beard." "I, on the other hand, am thirteen. Face it, *young* Thorn, I'm superior to you in all things, ways, and matters. So you have to do what I say."

"Is that right?"

"Sadly, it is. I don't write the rules. And even if I did, you couldn't read them, could you?"

Thorn glared at his roommate. His lack of progress in learning his letters was a sore point. "You know I'm gonna snip those chin hairs off when you're asleep, don't you?"

Wade laughed. "Anyway, you've got that brutish strength all peasants are famous for, and a flat head for me to rest my foot on as I climb."

"My head is not flat!"

Wade waited. "Well?"

Thorn scowled, then leaned against the wall and cupped



his hands. “Just get up there.”

Wade grabbed the edge of the low roof and pulled himself up, using Thorn’s shoulder – not his head – as an extra step. He grunted with the last push and knocked a slab of snow right on to Thorn. “Oops.”

Thorn gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the freezing snow now sliding down his back. “No problem. We peasants are famous not just for our brutish strength but also our hardiness.”

Anyway, Wade had no right acting all high-and-mighty. His mum was a fisherwoman, making him just as common as Thorn.

Still, Wade *had* been a squire a long time. He could use a knife and fork properly, vault on to a horse while wearing armour, and read and write more than just his name.

And Wade could *dance*. Really well. Thorn danced like he was trampling spiders. The dancing master had burst into tears and sworn to kill himself if Thorn dared to attend another lesson ever again.

None of this stuff – the jousting, the dancing, the reading and writing – mattered back in his home by Herne’s Forest. What mattered there was being able to shoot a bow and trap a rabbit and knowing the difference between wolf tracks and those left by sheep.

But this was Gehenna.

Gehenna. A country of nightmares. How many nights had his parents told him stories about the ghosts and ghouls that walked the bleak moors of the land of darkness?

Stories that turned out to be truer than he could have possibly imagined.

Sometimes Thorn felt really useless and far from home.

Maybe I should have gone back.

He'd had his chance to sail all the way to the village of Stour, with its pond and apple trees and the endless Herne's Forest beyond.

Best you forget about it.

He wasn't going back. He'd run away, and his dad was a wanted man there. Thorn's future – his whole family's future – lay in Gehenna and in service to House Shadow. His parents and five siblings would be here by spring, and like him, they would swap the earthy hues of Herne's Forest for the black of Castle Gloom.

A snowball thwacked his ear.

Wade stood at the ridge of the roof, another ball in his hand. "It wasn't me."

"You're an idiot."

"Quit daydreaming," said Wade, "and get busy."

Thorn inspected the farmhouse. Made of moss-clad stone and with a log pile stacked against it, the building sat half-sunk into the earth. The thick oak door lay shattered at the doorway, its iron hinges torn out of the frame.

Yeah, it does look like trolls.

Thorn ducked under the icicles dangling from the lintel and entered.

He immediately recognized the lingering, moist smell of earth, people, and animals mixed with the bitter bite of smoke. It stung Thorn's nostrils and reddened his eyes. Herbs hanging from the roof beams scented the air with thyme, parsley, and sage. His mum dried hers the same way, and the thought made him homesick.



It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Winter sunlight, pale and watery this early in the morning, lit the interior through the pair of big holes that had been smashed through the roof. Snow drifted in, forming two white patches on the floor.

His family lived in a place a lot like this – crowded, smelly, and full of heart.

The blankets had been tossed off the straw-stuffed mattresses. At the foot of one bed was a rough bundle of old clothes, covered in grey hairs and saturated with the friendly stink of dog. Clay shards from a broken jug crunched under his boots; its spilled water was now a sheet of ice. A crusty loaf sat on the chopping board and, lined up alongside, a row of jars. Thorn picked one up and inspected the dark red sludge within.

Strawberry jam, his favourite. He and his siblings would spend long summer days collecting the berries. They'd be out till dusk and come back only when every basket was overflowing and each face smeared with juice. He put the jar down. It wasn't right, handling other people's stuff. This was someone's home.

He'd met the family on a market day at Castle Gloom. Farmer Pitch; his wife, Milly; and their two boys, Alfie and Sam. They'd brought their scraggy wolfhound, Devil. Thorn remembered showing the boys how to trim its nails, and swapping a jar of flea powder for a basket of apples.

They were just everyday folk who'd lived their lives in accordance with the seasons, like generations before them, probably in this very farmhouse. And now this. He doubted anyone would live here after today.

A bulbous cauldron hung over the smoke-blackened stone fireplace, a ladle dangling from a hook beside it. Thorn laid his hands on the iron.

“Still warm,” he muttered, enjoying the heat entering his frozen fingers.

“What did you say?” Wade leaned down through one of the holes in the roof.

Thorn scanned the room one last time. He’d seen all there was to see. “Make room. I’m coming up.” He jumped on to the trestle table and clambered out.

The solidly built roof held them and the six-inch snow cover without a problem. Yet something, or someone, had smashed through it as easily as Thorn cracked his morning egg.

“Trolls,” said Wade. “Knocked the roof in, reached down, and grabbed them right out of their beds. They’ll be in the stew pot by now, poor sods.”

“But why didn’t they take the animals, too?” asked Thorn. A pig was snuffling at the tree roots. Chickens flapped about as squires tried to catch them.

“They’re trolls. Who knows?”

Thorn drilled the last of the snow from his ear. “I thought there was peace between the trolls and Gehenna. Ever since—”

“The Battle of Ice Bridge,” finished Wade. “That was years ago, and you’re right, we’ve had no trouble ever since Lord Shadow killed the last troll king.”

Thorn, like all squires, knew the story. “They say he summoned a black cloud of howling spirits. It blew over the troll army, and when it moved on, there was nothing but a pile of bones.”



Wade sighed. "I'd have given anything to see it. Lord Shadow was the greatest sorcerer in all the New Kingdoms. With him gone, the trolls have regained their courage. They're not scared of his thirteen-year-old daughter."

Thorn smiled to himself. "That's 'cause they don't know Lily."

"What does that mean?" asked Wade suspiciously.

"Nothing." Thorn changed the subject: "What's bringing trolls so deep into Gehenna?"

Wade kicked at some snow. "The ones from the Troll-Teeth Mountains must be getting hungry. They came down here for easier pickings."

Maybe Wade was right; there *had* been reports of attacks on villages at the base of the mountains. Most of the Black Guard was now stationed there, all the way up to Ice Bridge, which left the local patrolling of Gehenna to the squires.

But something bothered him. "These trolls are big, right?"

Wade stared at him. "What sort of dumb question is that? They're huge!"

"So how'd they get all the way down here without anyone seeing them? The Troll-Teeth are hundreds of miles north."

Wade shrugged. "Made their way down through Bone-Tree Forest. Easy enough to sneak down, even if you're the size of a troll."

Thorn gazed at the trees on the other side of the farm. "Maybe in the summer, when the trees are covered in leaves. But look at 'em. All bare now."

"Someone made these holes, and someone took the

farmer and his family. And I'll bet you a week of stable cleaning it was trolls."

Snow clouds stretched across the sky, heavy, grey, and promising a blizzard. The wind stung; its freshness scratched Thorn's throat, and he rewrapped his scarf. "It don't make no sense."

Wade fished out a wrinkly apple. He bit out a chunk and handed it over. "You know what your problem is?"

"Having you for a roommate?" Thorn took a bite and handed it back. That was their deal when it came to snacks.

"Ha-ha. How my sides ache with laughter." Wade tapped his brow. "You think too much. Think and think and think. It's not healthy. It leads to a muddled head."

"A muddled head?"

Wade chucked the apple core at one of the squires. "Leave the thinking to those above you, Thorn. Which, in your case, is everyone except the privy cleaner. Just do what you're told, and life will become much easier."

Thorn glowered. "That's how a sheep lives."

"Have you ever seen an unhappy sheep?" Wade spread out his arms. "And isn't this better than slaving away in the stables?"

Thorn nodded. "Them new horses are hard work. Never met animals that need so much pampering."

"That's because they're not just any old horses, but fire breeds," said Wade, his eyes shining. "The stallion, Zephyr – made out of desert wind, he is. Lady Shadow's been receiving some fine gifts these last few months."

Thorn scowled. "Sultan Djinn gave her them horses



because she helped save his son, K'leef. Do you know who else helped save him?"

"Oh, here we go again . . ." muttered Wade, eyes rolling.

"Me. Right here," said Thorn. "And what did I get? A box of mangoes."

"Anyway . . ." Wade continued, clearly not bothered by the injustice Thorn had suffered. "Have you seen the clockwork aviary the Eagle Knight gave her? Not a single spell required! All mechanical, they tell me. You wind the birds up with a golden key."

"Yeah, I've seen it, and heard it," said Thorn sourly. "And Captain Moray sent her a chest of black pearls."

Wade jabbed Thorn in the ribs. "And how do you know what's in Lady Shadow's jewellery box?"

"Dott told me."

"You've got one of Lady Shadow's maids spying for you?" Wade tutted. "You have to aim lower, Thorn. Way lower. Lady Shadow's not for the likes of us."

"It's not like that!" Thorn snapped.

Wade just didn't get it. How could he? Wade wasn't the one who'd helped Lily back when her uncle had tried to overthrow her. Wade hadn't been there when she'd—

"Thorn, look at this," said Wade from behind him.

"I'm not interested."

"Thorn, *look*."

Reluctantly, Thorn turned around and looked.

Wade had his hands wrapped around a sword hilt. Its blade was half-buried in the roof. "It's stuck." He braced his legs on either side and *pulled*.

It did not budge.

“How did it get up here?” asked Wade.

“Let me try and use some of my brutish strength.” Thorn gripped it with two hands and pushed it forward. Then pulled it back. Inch by inch he worked it loose, then looser still. “Just a bit more . . .”

There was a sharp *crack*, and the sword tore free.

Wade stared at the sword, then the hole in the roof. “Maybe Pitch had it for protection? Grabbed it as he was pulled up?”

Thorn hefted the weapon in front of him. The blade was bright and the edge razor sharp. “Too good a sword for a farmer. Would have cost him a year’s labour, at least.”

“What are you two trolls playing at? Get down here!”

The shout shook more snow off the roof, and Old Colm stood below them, glaring. “Are you deaf as well as stupid? I said get down! Now!”

The one-legged weapons master wore a grimace. His heavy crossbow, Heartbreaker, rested on his broad shoulders. “What have you got? Show me.”

Thorn and Wade slid down the slope and handed him the sword. “Found this, Master Colm. Sticking in the roof.”

Old Colm inspected the blade. “This is from the forge of Castle Gloom.”

“Really?” asked Thorn.

Old Colm scowled at him. “Four eyes between the pair of you, and not one of them works. Look at the maker’s mark. The hammer and crescent.”

Thorn saw it, just where the blade joined the hilt. Every sword and piece of armour from Castle Gloom had that mark. How could he have missed it?



Old Colm tucked the weapon into his belt. “Got the same mark on my pewter. Not that the likes of you eat off anything but clay.”

Wade winked at Thorn. Everyone knew how proud Old Colm was of his pewter dining set, a gift from the previous Lord Shadow. A squire polished it every evening, and Thorn’s turn had come last Sunday. Eight spoons, four knives, and four forks, along with ten plates, six cups, and a mug deep enough to hold two pints of ale. By the time he’d finished, every piece had shone brighter than silver.

Old Colm scratched his wooden leg, something he did when he was thinking. “Troll, go help catch the chickens.”

“Me, Master?” asked Wade.

“Of course you! That’s what I said, wasn’t it? Now go grab some feathers before they all run off into the forest!” He turned to Thorn. “You, follow me.”

Old Colm taught the squires how to shoot, how to wrestle, and how to fight with sword, axe, staff, and anything else that came to hand. He was as mean as a wounded boar. But right now he just looked like an old, tired man as they crossed the farmyard. His eyes were on the horizon, his thoughts roaming even further. “A bad business.”

“What do you think happened?” Thorn asked.

“What else? Trolls.”

That was Old Colm, through and through. If it was too wet, trolls. If it was too dry, trolls. Too windy, too calm, too deep, too shallow, too much of this and too little of that, all the fault of trolls.

Still, I suppose having your leg torn off by one might make you a little bitter.

“Then where are their footprints?” said Thorn.

“It’s snowing. It’s covered their tracks.”

“No. We have ogres in Herne’s Forest, smaller than your trolls but just as heavy. Their prints go in deep; it takes more snowfall than this to cover them.”

“How do you know? The trolls could have been here days ago.”

“Hearth fire’s still warm. Someone was tending it not twelve hours ago,” said Thorn. “They attacked last night, and whoever they are, they ain’t trolls.”

“You ever met a troll, troll?”

Thorn met Old Colm’s hard stare. “Yeah, I know the one who—”

“I don’t mean *her*,” Old Colm interrupted. “A *real* troll, one taller than that hovel over there, with teeth made of stone, and fists that could flatten a bull. I’ve seen one rip a tree out of the ground, roots and all. I’ve seen them, fought them, killed them for more years than you can count, and I don’t need a troll like you telling me about trolls.”

Thorn couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “But something ain’t right. Where’s the dog?”

“Dog?”

Thorn nodded towards the empty kennel. “Devil. Their wolfhound.”

“Your point?”

“If it *was* trolls, Devil would have heard them coming. It was sleeping in the farmhouse; our dog does the same when it’s cold out. A squirrel steps on our roof, and he’s up, barking. No way a canny old mutt like Devil would sleep through a troll attack. It would have warned Pitch



and his family way in advance.”

Thorn snapped his fingers. He knew what else was wrong. “And their axe is missing, too. There’s a log pile, so Pitch must have one. If he’s like any farmer I know, he would have his axe resting up against the door. My dad does. First thing you grab when there’s trouble. If it’s not here, he’s still got it with him.”

“You found any human footprints?”

Thorn gestured at the squires spread across the farm. “After they’ve been all over? Forget it.”

Old Colm peered out into the forest. “So you think the family is still out there? That they made a run for it?”

“Let me look.”

“They could be anywhere. Bone-Tree Forest’s a big place.”

“I’ll have help.”

Thorn whistled and summoned a monster.