

Shadows

By Jaden Cohen

The Beast prowled through the dense undergrowth, thorny bushes giving way with naught a sound. Cruel cunning shone in its eyes as it pressed forth. Ahead, illuminated by scant rays of light tricking through the dense verdant canopy, was a small clearing. A prey animal lounged there, its gossamer wings catching rays of light as it bent its fuzzy muzzle down to take another bite of grass. Abruptly, it twitched, muscles tensing as it scanned its surroundings.

The Beast sank deeper into the shadows, letting the darkness drape over its powerful form.

The creature relaxed and bent its head down to resume its meal. The Beast shivered as it beheld the creature's plump, unguarded neck. Still, instinct warned it to quench its desire and it did so reluctantly.

Sure enough, the creature's head snapped up once twice more to suddenly scan its surroundings before it truly seemed to relax, wrapping itself in iridescent wings and laying down under the sun.

The Beast struck.

A black blur streaked into the clearing like night lunging for the last rays of dusk. The creature's eyes snapped open, and streams of light began to bend towards its now flared wings. Still, upon witnessing the nearly crippling terror in its golden eyes, the Beast let out a silent purr.

Prey.

Just like every other.

It was over in an instant, and the Beast was back in the shadows.

And the jungle was quiet.

The Beast rumbled quietly, letting the gentle vibrations ripple through every inch of its night-clad body. It was lying in the shadows, protected from the scant few rays of starlight that filtered through the far-off canopy.

Its long black tail came to wrap around its body as it curled up, tucking its padded paws into thick black fur. Lightless eyes beheld the silvery forest, letting its soft noises drift to its ears.

The forest was never silent. Quiet, yes, but never silent.

It was full, it was warm, and it was content.

With one final purr, it closed its eyes and sunk into a shallow rest.

The next day was much of the same. A shadow among the trees, the Beast quietly stalked his prey, and the moment it let its guard down, he struck.

And once more, in the shadows, it watched the starlight ripple against the leaves like a sea of light till darkness took it.

Another day passed.

Then another.

Another.

Time slipped away.

The Beast hunted once more, sinking so deeply into the shadows, moving so quietly, that the careful tactics of his youth had become obsolete.

Shadows had no need for strategy.

They were everywhere, and they touched everything.

Sometimes, the Beast wondered, in the primitive way animals often do, what separated it from the shadows.

It too was unseen. It too was quiet. It too was deadly.

And in that same primitive manner, It came up blank.

So it hunted and slept. Stalked and rested.

And sank deeper into the shadows.

Till it was naught but a shadow itself.

The Beast's head snapped up, a foreign scent intruding upon its sleep. It was on his feet in an instant, slowly sinking back into the shadows. With careful steps, it padded toward the strange scent, assured of his invisibility.

Strangely, when it arrived, it found nothing. No scent trail, no animal, no trace.

Hackles rising, the Beast scanned the surroundings with care. it relaxed as it found nothing and began to turn away.

A sound drifted to his ears, the soft brush of fur against leaves.

The Beast's head snapped up, turning to the source of the noise.

And there it was, a creature with fur as black as its own, with the same feline sleekness and black eyes.

And it was looking right at the Beast.

It *saw* the Beast.

Suddenly, the Beast was a shadow no longer. The animal it was once more let out a low growl. The world narrowed as adrenaline surged through its system. Its heart began to beat, starting out slow and halting, but quickly picking up speed.

Scents and sounds drifted over to it, sharper than they had been in years, and it picked up a similar reaction in his mirror.

With halting steps, the Beast crept out of the shadows, cautiously approaching its Mirror. Its Mirror copied its motions, flinching slightly as light met its pitch-black fur.

In the middle of the light-stained clearing, they cautiously circled each other, feeling themselves come alive under the other's gaze. It was a primal sensation, a dancing interplay of instinct and dominance.

With every stride, the Beast felt more real, more alive, in a way that escaped its animal mind. It could sense his Mirror going through the same thing soft purring betraying it.

The beast stepped closer, instinct guiding it, posing a simple question to its mind, one conveyed in raw feeling and vivid color.

It saw its Mirror shrinking back from it, its curious gaze turning to reverent fear.

If its gaze enlivened the beast so, what would its worship do?

It saw its Mirror reach the same conclusion as its purring gave way to soft growling, and it too began to creep closer.

Soft growling soon grew loud, and light strides became ground-gouging stomps.

Instincts unlatched themselves from deep within the beast's mind, flashes of memory that belonged not to it. It saw a creature wrought in its image pouncing with grace, saw vicious claw strikes, narrow dodges.

It saw war, and from war, it learned.

With a roar, it pounced, a black flash obscuring the sun.

Its Mirror met it, and in a intertwining of shadows, blood was spilled. The Beast hissed quietly as its warm blood trickled down its flank, only for the hiss to morph into a purr as it felt its own claw slice through flesh.

They separated in a flash of teeth, only to wheel around and clash again.

And again.

And again.

The Beast's heart pounded faster and faster, even as its lifeblood poured from its numerous wounds. Adrenaline surged, and clarity returned to a once hazy world.

Its Mirror reacted to it, sending surges of pleasure spiraling down its spine, even as it hissed and clawed and bit.

Here was a foe worth fighting.

Here was *recognition* in a world unworthy of gazing upon it.

Claws flashed and hisses grew in volume, a pained note entering them. Flagging muscles begin to slow, and sure strides begin to falter.

But still the spark in their eyes shone bright, grew with every clash, the light of being fed by the others wary gaze.

It was pleasure beyond any the Beast had ever known.

Still, the stalemate couldn't last forever, and as strength fled their bodies, the Beast began to push its Mirror back. A miniscule edge in strength, yet now the edge between victory and defeat.

Between self-actualization and ego-death.

Its Mirror finally caved, letting out low yowl as the Beast landed a particularly vicious blow. The fight from then was loud, the tacturn mastery of silence giving way to the desperate cries of the struggler.

The Beast loomed larger, and pushed harder, watching the light in its Mirror's eyes morph from resolute to terrified.

It was divine.

Finally, its Mirror pulled back with a desperate yowl, and right before the Beast could pounce, it bent its head..

The Beast froze, puzzled for a second before understanding trickled down from its mind.

It was submitting to the Beast, offering its service in exchange for its life.

Pleasure filled it at the thought of its once-equal serving it and it let out a low purr. It felt mighty, like the ancestors of old.

With a low growl, it motioned for its Mirror to follow it.

It would become the Beast's shadow.

And the Beast could finally bask in the light.

The Beast's Mirror tried to ambush it that night. But the seeds of fear had already been planted within it, and devoid of its formerly unyielding nature, the Beast easily conquered it, once more purring with pleasure as its Mirror submitted before it.

The pleasure was less this time, the joy of suppressing an already defeated opponent less than conquering a new challenger, but still, the Beast fell into a light sleep with a purr still rumbling in the back of his throat.

Time resumed its march, and with each passing day, the Beast's Mirror's attempts at escape became less and less, weaker and feebler. With every failed attempt, the Beast's scorn grew.

In its primitive way, it wondered where its Mirror's once unyielding nature went.

With every day, its Mirror's gaze dimmed, and with every dimming the Beast's annoyance grew, the pleasure dwindling as its Mirror fell further and further below it.

Its Mirror hardly reacted as the Beast tore its prey away from it.

It was a prime cut, and the Beast's stomach rumbled at its smell. It turned back to its Mirror, wanting to see the helpless anger in its eyes, to feast upon it.

And froze.

Its Mirror's eyes were empty, placid. It was a gaze the beast knew well.

Prey.

Its Mirror was prey.

Not worthy of being the Beast's shadow, not worthy of gazing upon it.

Without another sound, the Beast turned around and left.

A shadow once more.

