



Powerless

Book 2: The Shadowing
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“I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind, and endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror, such as the deed which he had now done, nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me.”

Mary Shelley, “Frankenstein”

A Mother's Tears

Somewhere far away, a sixteen-year-old girl clung to life in the captivity of a merciless enemy army. She stood about five and a half feet tall, had the same brown hair and almond eyes, and had been taken from her family when she was just a baby. Her name was Clara Ipswich, and these were the only things Mira, her twin sister, knew about her.

Since learning of Clara's survival, Mira spent a sleepless night straining over what it meant to live within a broken family without ever seeing the cracks. She lay awake staring at the orange sky of an infant morning, the synapses in her brain churning through a thousand frantic thoughts.

A thin mat separated her from the ground, mere inches from the rest of the villagers and their mats surrounding her. The rustling of the townsfolk had already begun, but Mira continued to hide inside her thoughts until she heard one familiar voice.

"Thank goodness you're awake!" The loving yet urgent call of her mother, Jeana, startled Mira, and in moments her round face and rosy cheeks were gazing down from above.

Mira grabbed hold of her mother's extended arm and rose to her feet. She wiped her eyes and looked into her mother's troubled face. Images from the previous night's attack seemed to replay over and over in her mind like a looping dream. Jeana kept her hand on Mira's shoulder, even though they too would be forced to part soon. Mira's flesh and blood was out there, and there was no other option than to restore her.

But the worries that haunted her mother weighed heavily on her mind as well. If the great army of her nation couldn't get through to Clara, what could she possibly do? Jeana's squint struck Mira as one of envy, perhaps because she would be able to join them and fight for her, though she still had so much training and learning to do before she was ready.

"What now?" Mira asked.

“You must leave us,” Jeana shuddered, almost grieving. “This town is no longer safe for you—maybe it never was—but you must go and follow one of a similar hand before you can do what your father and I cannot, make our family whole.”

Jeana tugged on her arm and pulled her through the snoozing crowd. Looking at the villagers huddled together, the guard standing watch in the tower, and Corey’s assistants who bustled about, everything reminded Mira of her danger. The pressure weighing down on her, she didn’t know what she needed to do or find when they cast her out.

Mira’s father, Kevin, stood near her friends by the outpost’s huge stone gate. She noticed packed bags on the ground and heard nervous whispers as she got closer. Will rifled through his bag, yanking out possessions and stuffing them back in. Looking exhausted, Vern leaned his head against the wall. Aoi stood under the gate’s archway, her impatient hands wringing the strap of her bag. Roselyn and Mary chatted together, but neither of them seemed to have any baggage. Chucky spoke quietly with Kevin. They all shushed and turned to Mira at once.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“We’re getting ready to leave town,” Will explained.

“Everyone is leaving?”

“Roselyn isn’t,” Mary said, “because she’ll be Corey’s shadow. And I won’t be leaving until I can find someone to work with.”

“But most of the rest have already started out,” Will continued, stuffing clothes in his bag. “Everyone becomes someone’s shadow as soon as the Final Trial ends. We’re the only ones still here, but we’re getting ready to meet our mentors in Darmen.”

“Oh, you mean Jeremy’s not coming?” Vern said, feigning disappointment. “I’ll try not to cry myself to sleep about it.”

“Wait, but I never got a chance to thank everyone for helping out last night. I don’t want to imagine what would’ve happened if we hadn’t all fought them off,” Mira added, casting a sidelong glance to her father, who had been lucky to make it past the raiding party in one piece.

Vern approached her with a sly smirk on his face. He glanced at his friends and took a wistful look at the outpost courtyard before setting his sights right on her eyes.

“Mira, you don’t have to thank us for that. It may have been your house, but it’s our town. I’m never gonna stand idly by and let anything happen to it.”

“What a suck up! He’s just saying that because Corey can hear him,” Will joked, referring to the village elder’s power over sound, but Mira understood what Vern meant. Corey Outpost was her home, making it the one place where she should be able to feel safe. She was glad that feeling was important enough for them all to defend.

“You leaving too?” Mira turned to Chucky, knowing only a direct question would break through his shyness.

“A farmer down south a little ways had said he’d take me on. He’ll be surprised my class rank is third, but mostly I’ll probably just be planting and shoveling.”

“Oh. What am I supposed to do?” Mira asked, desperate to dispel the darkness.

“You’re supposed to learn from someone of a similar hand,” Kevin answered.

“That’s what Mom said too, but whose hand is similar to mine? Who would take that kind of time to instruct me? I’m...so different.”

Now that the time had come to leave, they all realized the commonplace explanations and vague instructions taught to children could no longer satisfy the need for details of what she would have to do. Mulling over the situation, it seemed dense and impenetrable. The Shadowing’s purpose was to teach them how to use their powers, but what would Mira do since she alone was without one?

“Well, there’s got to be someone who would do it,” Will mused.

“Mira, it’s about finding a teacher who can prepare you for the evils of the world you know are waiting for you. It’s a crucial step in a person’s development, and you’ll need to find someone who possesses knowledge and skills that would help you,” her father said.

Mira thought for a moment, straining her head so she wouldn’t be forced out of town with no one to go to. She dragged her foot against the dirt and sighed.

“The only real teachers I’ve ever had are the two of you. Can’t I just be a shadow of yours? You taught me everything and there’s no way I would have become class leader without you.”

“That’s not true,” Kevin objected, and Mira paused to think about the things she’d learned that hadn’t come from her parents.

“I mean, there are Flip Widget’s Manuals of Science, but I don’t think a stack of books would provide a very dynamic apprenticeship.”

“Oh, Flip Widget’s a real person,” Kevin said, turning to his wife and grinning.

“Should we tell her?” Jeana asked, smiling back at her husband and fluttering her eyelashes.

“I think we should,” Kevin agreed.

“Tell me what?” Mira started to get excited. The others listened with interest too, but they had never heard the name outside of Mira’s scientific explanations in class.

“Flip Widget was our doctor when I gave birth to you!” Jeana exclaimed.

“He would be perfect, wouldn’t he?” Kevin added. “I’d be hard pressed to find a more caring, intelligent person out there. He really was the blessing through that whole terrible ordeal.”

Mira noticed her friends’ hopeful glances, struck by how interested they were in seeing her succeed. Their smiles and nods encouraged her.

“And you think he would make a good mentor for me?” she asked.

“I’m willing to bet there’s no one else out there who can teach you more about science and machinery than him. He did write all of those books after all.”

A broad smile stretched across Mira’s face. She couldn’t wait to perform experiments and train with the very source of all the wisdom she had accumulated. “Ok, sounds great! Where do I find him?”

The smiles dropped from her parents’ faces and they scratched their heads. Shrugging their shoulders, they explained that they didn’t know. They’d been to his laboratory in the northern mountains when Mira and Clara were born, but they didn’t remember where that was or if he were still there.

“I don’t have a clue how you would find him,” Kevin said, but Mira would not be turned away from her new dream so quickly.

“There must be some way to learn his location. Someone must know. What about the publisher of the books? Yes! They would have to know the origins of those manuscripts. And they’d tell me where he is!”

“The only publishers out there are in Darmen, and that would mean you would have to come with us,” Vern noted.

“Oh! That would be so great!” The thrill chirping through her voice caught her off guard, and it only reminded her of all the heavy emotions she felt. She cast

a sidelong glance at her mother and father, who were very clearly not thrilled, but they held back any overt signs of sadness over her imminent departure.

“You’ll have to stop back at Cloud Cottage on your way north to pack a bag. Corey has been listening closely for signs of another attack, but we’ll send a guard to accompany you to the house just in case.”

Mira nodded, accepting the need for some protection because the danger was greatest right in her very own home. Knowing she would leave in a moment, she began to break down. Leaving them felt like jumping from a great height into a murky pond. She had no idea if she would hit bottom. Her friends had already made their tearful goodbyes, and they turned away to give Mira and her parents some space.

Wrapping her arms around them, Mira felt she would suffocate if she let go.

“You’ve got to be careful,” Jeana advised. “We can’t protect you anymore. It may seem impossible, but you are a smart girl and you can make it on your own. We’ve always been proud of you, and this’ll be a good chance for you to rack up a few more reasons why. Learn all you can. Come back to us in one piece. We’ll have our home repaired by then.”

“And then I’ll have to fight,” Mira whispered, carrying her mother’s plan to its logical conclusion, the war. “It seems like such a long and difficult road ahead. It’s a good thing I don’t know any better, or I would say it’s hopeless.”

“Now don’t say that, Mira,” Kevin said. “You’ve got a sister out there who’s waiting for you. Every single day, you’ve got to go a little farther and make yourself a little stronger. Then when the time comes you’ll be ready to stand up and do what you need to do.”

Mira nodded her head and wiped her teary eyes. Those first steps through the gate would be the hardest, and Mira feared someone would have to carry her through it. To think of how infinitely stronger she would need to be only increased her despair.

“I don’t think I can,” she sighed. “How am I supposed to fight against not one person with an ability beyond what muscle and mind can produce but an army of them? Just as one daughter comes back into your life, I’m afraid you’ll lose the other.”

“Mira, you’ve got to do for us what we cannot. Mira, use your mind, your friends, and your heart. There are so many reasons why we believe in you, and I hope you discover some of them for yourself,” Jeana said.

Again nodding her head, trying to take in her parents' hope and faith, she struggled to believe them. How quickly her confidence of the night before deserted her. Jeana wiped the hair away from Mira's eyes and looked directly upon her.

"I've got something for you, Mira. I hope this'll help."

Jeana reached into her pocket and pulled out a tough little bottle sealed by a cork and a string. She held it out to Mira, who took it and held it to her eye. A cloudy liquid filled it.

"Do you remember when I told you about storing gifts? Well I found a way for me to do it. These are my tears, Mira, and they'll do for you what I can do. If each one of them saves you a tear of your own, then they will have served their purpose perfectly."

Mira hugged her mother and again marveled at the little bottle. Just a drop from it would put anyone to sleep. In addition to this little bit of power tied to a loop on her hip and slipped into her pocket, she had the static electricity generator covering her left forearm. The bottle and the static charger made her begin to think she would have a chance to defend herself.

"I've got something for you, too. Here," Kevin said. He reached into his ear and pulled out the blood stone Corey had given him so long ago. He handed it to Mira, and she felt its smooth surface.

"He said you should have it now."

Mira held it to her ear, wondering if she could hear through to Corey in his secret chamber beneath the outpost, but nothing came to her. That didn't discourage her excitement though, and she quickly slipped it into the fold on the inside of her ear. Her friends noticed this transaction, and they too were impressed.

"Bye, Corey, bye!" They all shouted at Mira, unsettling her. "Don't abuse Roselyn too much."

"Yes, light abuse only, please," Roselyn quipped.

"Mira, are you going to bring your mechanical bird?" Will asked, and Mira shook her head.

"It would be nice, and I did spend so much time on it, but there'll be no way to recharge the batteries. At least that isn't something I have to worry about with the static charger. It doesn't take much juice."

Everyone began to notice Aoi had inched herself through the gate and was now several feet away, attempting to coax them into leaving. Responding to her frustrated groans, the others began to pick up their bags. Mira's heart skipped a beat when she realized the time was finally upon her. She peered around the outpost at everything she would leave behind. People began to rouse, many of them wondering what happened the night before to pull them from their homes. And then she saw Yannick, manning his post outside of the Darmen Exchange office, appearing scratched up but functional.

"Wait a minute!" Mira shouted to her friends. "I have to do something."

She ran over to her strange and misunderstood friend, surprising him with her arrival. He had risked his life bringing the news of her sister's survival after trailing the raiding party that attacked Mira's home. He had not recovered all of his vigor, but he still mustered a warm smile for Mira.

"I never got a chance to thank you for what you did. I know it was difficult, but I'll never forget you for it. I'm sure none of us will ever forget."

"That's alright," Yannick chuckled. "You just be sure to keep yourself safe, and bring your sister 'round here one day so I can meet her."

"Alright," Mira said, his optimism impressing her. She waved her hand and trotted back to the gate.

"Ok, sorry. So is that it? Are we ready to go?" she asked the others.

"Only if you plan on ditching us without saying goodbye," Mary teased.

Mira remembered Mary and Roselyn wouldn't be leaving, and Chucky would be headed in a different direction. She hugged them and wished them luck. The rapid succession of goodbyes tugged on her heartstrings and left her drained.

"Have fun on the farm," she said to Chucky.

"Is that your only order, class leader? I suppose I can live by it," he joked, smiling broadly.

"Maybe you can have fun working hard and training too," Mira added, not wanting him to have too cushy a time while she wasn't around.

Mira couldn't leave before giving her parents another hug, and she walked backward through the gate as her friends began to set off for the road. A guard had joined them, though he didn't appear to take his responsibility too seriously. Mira waved to her parents until she could no longer see them. Finally, she expelled a heavy sigh and furrowed her brow.

"What power they must have to rip apart my insides so."

They turned the corner at the end of the outpost and began to walk along the edge of the forest. Passing the massive block of marble sitting next to a path, she thought about how they were each leaving everything they knew behind. The senior schoolhouse at the end of the path would sit vacant for a time before new, hopeful students would come to replace them. What would the scope of their trials and triumphs there amount to out in the big world? The uncertainty of what would come next for them seemed perilous and grim beyond belief.

Walking along the dirt road between the town and the forest before it curved away, Vern turned to give one last look to his hometown. Will put his arm around him and led him along into the woods.

“Come on, I can’t wait to get started!” he cheered.

Arriving at the home of Mert Bogger, they spotted the old man busily clipping away at a bush in the front yard. As they approached, he stopped and stood idly next to the road, assuming a regretful, somber air. Mira remembered her conversation with him when she left her home for the first time. He had reacted so strangely to learning she didn’t have a power, didn’t have a connection to the forces of the universe like all the others. She’d seen that reaction so many times, and it never failed to sting her.

“Another flock, going to herd themselves into the lion’s den.”

Unsettled by his words, they walked by without replying. Mert received only furtive glances for his warning, and he went back to pruning his bush once they passed.

Mira knew the painful reminders she would find around the next corner, and they filled her with dread. She closed her eyes rounding the last tree, cringing at the others’ gasps. When she could no longer keep them closed, she braced herself for the sight of her home and opened them.

What she saw struck a hollow note right in her center. In the light of day, the damage to Cloud Cottage screamed out at her. Debris littered the lawn. The porch was wrecked and collapsing. Windows were broken and the door had been torn off its hinges. Charred wood encircled holes in the walls and roof.

Everything reminded her of the horror of the night before. She had been lucky to make it out unscathed; the house had borne the brunt for her. The sight of her home made her feel embarrassed in front of her friends. It made

her want to lash out at the ones who'd destroyed all she'd known for the first fifteen years of her life.

"The pain of every fresh cut screams louder than the last. They all call out for retribution, but I'm afraid even that won't silence them." Mira hobbled toward the entrance, her friends and the guard following behind. All seemed quiet and still, so they walked comfortably yet attentively. The porch creaked and cracked but managed to hold their weight. They stepped over the broken door lying against the wall and entered the house.

Inside, the destruction and the mess covered every inch of the interior. The air was cold and damp, like a cave, and it made Mira understand that this uninhabitable place was no longer her home. They turned into the kitchen and then into the living room. Shattered glass from the back door shimmered in the sun. They could see out into the backyard and beyond to the woods, where they had all arrived last night to fend off the wretched attackers.

For a moment, Mira thought she could see herself tiptoeing to the stairway, her desperation to find her parents weighing down on her. She remembered seeing them huddled in their room through a little window in the mist. Her heart beat quickly, reliving everything in her mind.

"Be sure to pack light, since you've got a long ways to go, but make sure you've got all the essentials," the guard recommended.

Reminded why they had come, she immediately began the necessary task of packing up her life. She grabbed a bag from the closet and climbed the stairs to her room. Before she went inside, she peeked into her parents' room, which looked like a massive piece of charcoal. She stopped dead, gradually edging closer to their doorway. Her mother's plush, fuzzy carpet had caught fire and incinerated everything in the room. How close had her parents come to the end? Now the only piece of carpet that remained was wrapped around her left arm inside the static charger. Unable to bear the heart-wrenching sight anymore, Mira turned back to her bedroom.

Largely unscathed, even its bay window was intact. She went through her drawers and tossed some clothing into the bag. She agonized over each decision because she had no idea what she would be doing and what she would need. She grabbed odds and ends, a brush, her scissors, and her sewing kit.

Content, she lifted the bag, which would not be too heavy to carry, and returned downstairs.

“Are we ready to go yet?” Aoi demanded.

“Wait, I still have to get one of Flip Widget’s manuals so I can find the publisher in Darmen.”

Heading for the door leading to her basement workspace, she remembered how it had made her suspicious the previous night when she’d found it closed. Now she hesitantly reached out for the doorknob. She wished Mary were there to tell her if anyone lurked behind.

She cracked open the door, peeked down, and all seemed fine. Opening it further and touching the first step, something rushed up the stairs at her. She fell backward into Vern’s arms as a wolf exploded through the doorway. It brandished its teeth and growled, taking an attack position on the living room floor. A busy nose sniffed at Will, making it bolder.

Just as it was about to pounce, the guard stepped in front of the group, fell onto all fours, and made a gruesome face that sent the suddenly timid and yelping wolf running off through the back door.

“Wow, nice work,” Will appraised once they were safe. “Now let me check to see if my pants are still dry.”

“Here, I’d better head down first and make sure the coast is clear,” the guard said, moving for the door.

Receiving his ok, Mira went downstairs where another horrific sight awaited her. Although she always left her small, simple laboratory a mess, it now had an inch of water on the floor, and the wolf had shredded most of her books. Had the raiding party brought the animal with them? She dug through the stack of manuals to find one that was minimally torn and mostly dry, stuffing it into her bag. Unable to resist, she grabbed a few tools though most would likely rust because of the moisture.

She had spent so much time here, and all of her success had grown out of the ideas she developed in this cramped and damp corner of the house, but now she wondered how she ever did it. The place looked so foreign and uninviting and shabby.

If Flip Widget were the scientific genius she believed him to be, he would have something much more impressive to show her. Anxiously, she went back upstairs, trying to forget all of the abominations that had swept into her life, instead imagining the life-changing journey she had in store.