

The Shadows (Black Dagger Brotherhood)

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Two brothers bound by more than blood fight to change a brutal destiny in this novel in the #1 New York Times bestselling Black Dagger Brotherhood series.

Sold by his parents to the Queen of the s'Hisbe as a child, Trez escaped the Territory and has been a pimp and an enforcer for years. On the run from a destiny of sexual servitude, he's never been able to rely on anyone...except for his brother, iAm.

iAm's sole goal has always been to keep his brother from self-destructing-and he knows he's failed. It's not until the Chosen Selena enters Trez's life that the male begins to turn things around...but by then, it's too late. The pledge to mate the Queen's daughter comes due, and there is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and no negotiating.

Now Trez must decide whether to endanger himself and others-or abandon the female he loves. When tragedy strikes and changes everything, iAm, in the name of brotherly love, is faced with making the ultimate sacrifice...

J. R. Ward is the author of more than thirty novels, including those in her #1 New York Times bestselling Black Dagger Brotherhood series. She is also the author of the Black Dagger Legacy series and the Bourbon Kings series. There are more than fifteen million copies of her novels in print worldwide, and they have been published in twenty-six different countries around the world. She lives in the South with her family.

PROLOGUE

TERRITORY OF THE S'HISBE, GRAND PALACE

The footprints he left on the white marble were red. Red as a Burmese ruby. Red as the core of a fire. Red as the anger in his marrow.

The blood was TrezLath's own, but he felt no pain.

The murder weapon he'd just used, a sterling silver paring knife about as long as his hand and as narrow as his forefinger, was still in his palm. It was dripping, but that was not the source of the stain he was leaving behind. He had been injured in the fight. His hip. His thigh. Maybe his shoulder, he wasn't sure.

The corridor was a mile long and sky-high, and he did not know what awaited him at its termination. A door, he prayed. There had to be a door of some kind-this was the way out of the palace, so there had to be . . . an exit. And when he came unto it? He had no idea how he was going to break out. But he'd also had no clue how to kill another living male, and he'd done that minutes ago.

Further, he had no plan for what was on the far side of the palace enclosure or how he was going to get over the Territory's retaining walls. No clue where to go, what to do. All he knew was that he couldn't be in that cell anymore. It was luxurious enough, with silken sheets on a feather bed, and a bath that had its own pool, and a private chef to feed him. He had books written by the Shadow Masters at his disposal, and a full team of care specialists, from healers, to bathers, to exercise commandants. As for his clothes? His now-

torn vestments were studded with gems from the treasury, diamonds and emeralds and sapphires cascading down his robes.

And yet his body was regarded as far more valuable than the largesse it bore.

Trez was the sacred fatted calf, the prized breeding stallion, the male whose birth chart had proclaimed he was to sire the next generation of queens.

He had not yet been called into sexual service. That would come in time, when the Princess he was to mate had reached her astrological maturity.

Trez looked over his shoulder. No one was coming after him, but that would change as soon as the crumpled body of that guard he'd overpowered was found-and that wasn't going to be long. There was always someone watching.

If only he could-

Up in front of him, a door that was flush with the wall slid back, and a massive figure draped in black stepped directly into his path.

s'Ex, the Queen's executioner, had his chain-mail hooding in place, his features covered by the metal weave. But the sight of his face was unnecessary.

His voice, deep and evil, was pure menace. "You killed one of my males."

Trez shuffled to a halt, his dragging robes stilling on the floor. Glancing down at the knife in his hand, he knew that the flimsy "weapon" was going to get him nowhere against the Shadow he now faced. The silver blade had been designed to cut pears and apples, not even tenderloin meats.

And the executioner was not like that guard.

"You are trying to leave." s'Ex didn't take a step forward, but seemed closer anyway. "Which is not only unacceptable from my point of view, but against the law."

"Then kill me in punishment," Trez said in a tired voice. "Rip my body asunder and bury me in pieces outside of the Territory like the traitor I am."

"I would do just that. In retribution for your taking the life of my guard." s'Ex crossed his heavy arms over his thick chest. "But the very beating of your heart and breath within your lungs is divine. So that avenue is not open to me-or you."

Trez closed his eyes briefly. His parents had been thrilled with the news that one of their two fraternal sons had been born upon the perfect moment in time, a preordained, stars-aligned split second that would transform the family-a blessing for them, with attendant riches and social position; a curse for him that had robbed him of his life whilst ever still he lived.

"Do not even think about it," the executioner said.

As Trez lifted his lids, he found that he had put the knife to his own throat. His hand was trembling badly, but he was pushing the blade in enough to nick the skin over his artery.

His blood, warm and smooth, caressed over his clenched fist.

Trez's laughter sounded crazy to his own ears. "I've nothing to lose except a life sentence for the crime of being born."

"Oh, I think you do. No, don't look away-you're going to want to see this."

The executioner nodded at the open doorway and something was pushed out. . . .

"No!" Trez yelled, his voice echoing up and down the corridor. "No!"

"So you recognize him." s'Ex uncoiled his arms and pulled up his sleeves, deliberately flashing bloody knuckles. "In spite of my work. Then again, the pair of you have been together for how long?"

Trez's vision went in and out of focus as he sought his brother's eyes. There was no gaze to hold. iAm was not conscious, his head lolling to one side, his face beaten until it was so swollen the features were distorted. His body was bound in a worn leather sleeve that ran from below his knees all the way up to his shoulders and was secured by a brass buckle system. Stains, new and old, darkened the brown of the straps and dulled the glow of the metal pieces.

"Give him to me," s'Ex commanded.

As the executioner grabbed onto the back of the hold, he lifted iAm's limp body from the floor with no more effort than he might put into raising a flask of wine.

"Please . . ." Trez begged. "He is not of this . . . let him go. . . ."

For some reason, his brother's dangling lower legs registered with nauseating clarity. Only one of iAm's shoes was on still, the other having been lost in whatever abduction and torture had occurred. And both feet were pointing inward, the big toes touching, one tilted in unnaturally from a broken ankle.

"Now, Trez," s'Ex said. "did you think your decision wasn't going to affect him? I'm telling you to put the knife down. If you do not, I'm going to take this"-the executioner jogged iAm's limp body up and down-"and I'm going to wake it up. Do you know how I'm going to do that? I'm going to take this"-in his free hand he flashed a serrated knife-"and put it into its shoulder. Then I'm going to twist until it starts to scream."

Trez began to blink away tears. "Let him go. This has nothing to do with him."

"Put the knife down."

"Let him-"

"Shall I demonstrate?"

"No! Let him-"

s'Ex stabbed iAm's shoulder so hard, the blade cut through the leather and went into the flesh.

"Twist?" s'Ex barked over the scream. "Yes? Or are you dropping that butter knife?"

The clatter of the silver hitting the marble floor was overpowered by iAm's harsh, dragging breaths.

"That's what I thought." s'Ex jerked the knife out and iAm started to moan and cough, blood speckling the floor. "We're going back to your quarters."

"Let him go first."

"You are not in a position to make demands."

Guards came out of that hidden door in a swarm, all black-robed figures with chain-mail masks. They didn't touch him. They weren't allowed to. They surrounded him and began to walk, pushing him along with their bodies. Forcing him back to the place he had escaped.

Trez fought the tide, rising up on the balls of his feet, trying to see his brother.

"Don't kill him!" he shouted. "I'll go! I'll go-just don't hurt him!"

s'Ex stood where he was, that notched, bloodied blade catching the light as he held it aloft. As if he were considering major organs for the next stab.

"It's up to you, Trez. It's all up to-"

Something snapped.

Later, when the white light had faded from Trez's vision and the cresting wave receded, when the roar was silenced and a strange pain in his hands began to ride up his forearms, when he was no longer standing but on his knees, he would realize that the first guard he had killed that night was far from his last.

He would realize that he somehow murdered with his bare hands all who had surrounded him . . .

...and s'Ex was still standing there with his brother.

More than the deaths he caused, and the horror at iAm's imprisonment with him, more than the copper-scented blood that was so red and now not just marking his footprints, he would remember the soft laugh that percolated through the mesh links covering the executioner's face.

A soft laugh.

As if the executioner approved of the carnage.

Trez did not laugh. He began to sob, lifting bloody, torn hands to his face.

"The astrological charts did not lie," s'Ex said. "You are a force in this world, well suited for procreation."

Trez slumped to the side, landing in the blood, the jewels embedded in his robes digging into his flesh. "Please . . . let him go. . . ."

"Return to your quarters. Voluntarily and without hurting anyone else."

"And you'll let him go?"

"You're not the only one who can kill. And unlike yourself, I have been trained in the art of making living things suffer. Go back to your quarters and I will not make your brother wish, as you do, that he had never been born."

Trez looked at his hands. "I didn't ask for this."

"No one asks for life." The executioner hiked iAm's body up higher. "And sometimes they do not ask for death. You, however, are in the position to control the latter when it comes to this male. So what are you going to do. Fight against a destiny you can't change and sentence this innocent to a wretched, prolonged suffering? Or fulfill a sacred duty many before you have found great honor in providing our people?"

"Let us go. Let us both go."

"It is not up to me. Your chart is what your chart is. Your lot was determined by the contractions of your mother. You can no more fight this than you could fight them."

When Trez finally tried to stand up, he found the floor slippery. The blood. The blood he had spilled. And when he was on his feet, he had to scramble through the gruesome tangle of bodies, stepping over lives that he knew had not been his to take.

The footsteps he left on the marble were red. Red as a Burmese ruby. Red as the core of

a fire.

And the ones he left now were parallel to his first set of tracks, heading away from the escape he had so desperately sought.

It would have heartened him to know that in some twenty years, three months, one week, and six days from this moment, he would get free and make it stick for quite some time.

And it would have shocked him to the numb core of his soul that he would, sometime after that, voluntarily return to the palace.

The executioner spoke the truth that night.

Destiny was as uncaring and influential as the wind to a flag, carrying the fabric of an individual's existence this way and that, subjecting that which it rocked to its whims without an inquiry as to what the banner may have desired.

Or may have prayed for.

ONE

SHADOWS NIGHTCLUB, CALDWELL, NEW YORK

There was no knock. The door to the office just flew open like someone had hit it with C4. Or a Chevy. Or a-

Trez "Latimer" looked from the paperwork on his desk. "Big Rob?"

-cannonball.

As his security second in command stuttered and went into all kinds of hand flapping, Trez glanced over his shoulder at the twenty-by-ten-foot one-way mirror behind all his Captain Kirk, command central. Down below, his new club was poppin', humans milling around the converted warehouse's open floor space, each one of the poor sick bastards representing a couple hundred dollars of profit, depending on what their vice was and how much of it they needed to juice up.

It was opening night at shAdoWs, and he'd expected trouble.

Just not the kind that would make a veteran bouncer go twelve-year-old girl on him.

"What the fuck is going on?" he demanded as he got up and came around.

"I-you-I . . . the guy . . . he . . ."

Find your vocab fast, Trez thought. Or I'ma have to bitch-slap some words into you, my man.

Finally, the bouncer choked out, "Need to see this for yourself."

Trez followed Big Rob out and jogged down the stairs. His office was self-locking, not that he had any secrets shut in there. He did, however, have a couple of nice leather sofas, and some video-monitoring equip that could go the eBay route-plus he didn't like people in his spaces on principle.

"Silent Tom is containing the issue," Big Rob called out over the noise as they hit the ground floor.

"Like it's a chemical spill?"

"I don't know what it is."

T.I.'s "About the Money" was so pumped it formed a physical presence in the air, becoming something that Trez had to fight through as they made their way past the security guy guarding the entrance to the private lounges hallway.

As with his other club, The Iron Mask, there had to be little slices of Nobody Can See for his customers. It was tricky enough running a prostitution ring in Caldwell, New York, without having people flash their slappin' body parts out in the open.

"Back here," Big Rob said.

Silent Tom was a wall of human in front of the closed door of the third private room down. But Trez didn't need to have any reveal for him to put two and two together: His nose added that math up just fine.

The sickly sweet stench of a lesser permeated the hall, prevailing over the sweat and sex of the humans that were all around.

"Lemme have a look," he said grimly.

Silent Tom stepped aside. "Still moving. Whatever the hell it is."

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