

SHADOWBLOOD HEIR

J. S. MORIN

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Chapter One

I took pills to stop shit like this from happening. Subway cars flashed past, and my shadow danced from one to the next.

The platform at Kendall Station was packed. Diffuse light kept the whole station in a uniform gloom. It was just one crisp shadow that stood apart, and no one else showed any sign of noticing.

With a squeal of aging brakes and a rush of barely breathable air, the train stopped and the illusion broke.

As the doors opened, people streamed out of the cars, forcing me to angle a shoulder to keep from being swept along with them.

Once the surge subsided, I ducked inside, grabbed hold of one of the vertical poles, and pulled out my cell to check the time. Twenty minutes to get home before the *Shadowblood* season finale.

Harsh fluorescent lights inside the subway car washed away any chance of shadows, but that didn't stop me from checking over my shoulder. The show was making me paranoid, but that was part of what made it great.

As the car lurched and started the four-stop ride to Davis, I shot a quick text to Judy: “On my way. Be there in <20.”

She and Tim weren’t going to pause the DVR and restart from scratch if I was late. It was run or miss the beginning.

Just before the train reached Central Square, the Order of Vigilants theme chimed from my pocket—my favorite song from *Shadowblood*. Judy’s reply text: “Should have called in sick,” accompanied by a gif of Skeptical Cat tapping his foot.

As if I could afford to turn down hours. Plus, Reggie would have known I was blowing off work for the season finale; he wasn’t an idiot. I’d arranged my schedule around the live air times all season.

When the train stopped at Davis, I bolted. I jostled my way past a guy in a rumpled suit and skipped around a mother and daughter with a mumbled “excuse me.”

Only the thought of MBTA security mistaking me for a thief kept me from breaking into a full run. But once topside, decorum went by the wayside.

It was twilight, with a haze of red in the western sky and the streetlights fighting back against the onset of night. The red brick crosswalks and asphalt bike paths were uneven, but my sneakers knew them like their own soles. I ran headlong, not bothering to look at my phone. Time checked was time wasted.

It was less than half a mile, but my lungs would have sworn it was ten.

I paused at the stairs to catch my breath, wishing we lived on the ground floor. If my legs hadn’t been rubber, I’d have started up immediately. Instead, I hunched over to catch my breath and checked the time: it changed from 8:58 to 8:59.

The streetlight nearest the apartment flickered out, and when I shut off the phone, the stairs vanished into darkness. I stumbled to the second-floor entrance by muscle memory.

Inside, the curtains were drawn, and the lights were off. A row of candles lined the coffee table, intermixed with sodas and

open cartons of Chinese food. Wafting scents of lavender and ginger garlic sauce filled the room.

Judy sat cross-legged and barefoot on the center cushion of the couch, wearing sweatpants and a rune circle t-shirt. “Minute to spare. Get over here.”

Dropping my backpack by the door, I kicked off my shoes and took the end seat on the couch. “Sorry. Last delivery ran long.”

There was a commercial for boxed sets of season 4 playing, as if anyone watching the finale hadn’t already pre-ordered. Then again, not everyone could afford the full season... I was going to be rewatching Tim and Judy’s copy.

Tim put an arm around Judy from the far side, and she leaned in against him. “Price of freedom, am I right? Until you get Martinez-famous, you gotta earn your keep.”

“Yeah... I’d settle for my books paying for themselves.”

Judy sat up. “Chalkboards.”

The commercial was winding down. Next up would be the show intro. Reaching down beside the couch, I fished out a pair of small slate boards and two pieces of chalk—one for me, one for Judy. Tim never played along.

The screen went dark, and a low drumbeat sounded, joined two measures later by cellos. A line traced around the screen, forming first a circle, then a pair of inscribed squares offset from one another to make an eight-pointed star.

We drew matching patterns, chalk tapping and squeaking furiously. Within each of the tiny triangles formed around the star’s edge, a rune formed one line at a time.

Each episode, the rune was different, and after the furious rote pace of the inscribed star, our chinks slowed as each of us copied. Most fans of the show just watched, same as Tim. If they were curious about the runes, they looked online after the episode.

The ones who played at copying secretly hoped that the lore

spoke true when it said that if someone destined to be an arcanist copied the runes correctly, their personal rune would come to them—the rune which, if placed at the center of the diagram, would work true magic.

But it was a game, same as playing the lottery—the faint quixotic hope adding a thrill to the playing.

I knew the runes. The Written Shadow, the official source book on the series' magic, was tattooed into my brain. Every rune had a purpose and differed in precise effect based on its location and the runes around it. Of the fifty million worldwide viewers on a given night, I doubt that a thousand knew the spell without having to search the Internet. Trying to puzzle through the runes real-time slowed me down.

Judy slapped her chalk down. “Done.”

If I couldn't be first, at least I could be clever. “Mind-clouding effect to mask a betrayal.”

With five seasons at thirteen episodes each, it was the sixty-fifth time my personal rune had failed to come.

Tim glared past Judy. “Dude... spoilers.” Usually the spell in the intro had a bearing on the episode plot, but to call a betrayal a spoiler—in *Shadowblood* of all shows—was a stretch.

Judy elbowed Tim before he could build momentum for a rant. “Shut up. It's starting.”

The opening theme faded, and the rune circle burned away in violet flame. But the transition didn't shift to the first scene. There was no Castle Tsarvik, no Starwatch Forest, not even a comedic beginning with the beggars of Two-Coin Alley.

Instead, there was yet another black screen, this time with a simple, solemn message.

In memory of Patricia R. Martinez
May the Light guide your next journey.

Shadowblood Heir

The creator of *Shadowblood* was dead.



Grab a copy of *Shadowblood Heir* and continue your adventure now.

