

SARAH HOLM

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## *The Shopkeeper*

It had been a completely ordinary day. There were a few customers, a few sales. Completely ordinary, which was mostly why he noticed when the clock failed to strike seven. He knew it was closing hours—he'd just checked his phone before starting to close up the shop. *'How annoying,'* he remembered thinking. Winding that damned thing was always a pain.

When the bell above the door rang, he bit back a sigh, looked up from his counter, and fought to replace his frown with an amicable smile. A glance to the door proved that he had, indeed, remembered to turn the sign around. He wasn't sure what was so hard to understand about the big, bold letters reading **'CLOSED'**, but maybe it was his fault for assuming the average client had more than one, half-dead brain cell. Or maybe it was his fault for not locking the door.

"I'm sorry," he said, not sorry at all. "We've just closed. Perhaps you would like to come back tomorrow? We open at 8, close at 7."

Half of the client's face was concealed by the shadow cast by their hoodie, and their hands were shoved deeply into the large pockets. Nevertheless, the shopkeeper noticed their pursed lips.

When they finally spoke, their voice was quiet, but the words were clear, "I would like to see your latest addition to the local history collection."

"I'm afraid it hasn't arrived yet."

"That's fine," they said, voice halting as if reading from a script. It was normal, for a first timer. "I'll have a look at volume 9."

The lines were said, and so began the transaction. It would be late by the time they were finished, which didn't please him in the slightest, but he had a reputation to maintain. Beyond that... All that mattered was the payment.

He lifted the countertop so that the client could follow him and led them to the back of the shop, through the door with a sign that read 'employees only'. Not that signs meant much to his current client.

The back room was cold and dark, even when he turned the lights on. From the corner of his eye, he saw the client tuck their arms further within their pockets. He didn't particularly love the cold, either, but it was necessary for his craft.

"So, do you have an idea of what you want?"

When he turned to face the client, their hoodie was pushed back, revealing dark curls and a smattering of freckles across a girl's face. A very young, very *human* girl. He faltered in his step, a deep frown beginning to form.

He'd never had a human as a client—rather, he'd never had a human as this kind of client. They were ignorant about everything, frightened to look beyond where they felt safe. He felt anger begin its sticky, hot path up his belly and throat. How did she find him, who—

"Something simple. I just need to get away from here, far away." She spoke even clearer now, and the determination on her face would have been admirable, if not for the fear in her dark eyes. She was nothing but a frightened *child*.

"Who told you about this place?"

Her determination faltered, and she took an anxious glance at her surroundings. It seemed she was just beginning to realize how out of depth she was. He could almost pity her.

"A friend," she said, finally. He waited for more, but the explanation, it seemed, was over.

He gave her a long, unimpressed look, to which she responded with a defiant frown. He sighed, feeling the anger fade. There was a first time for everything, he supposed. As long as she paid... He could figure out which one of his clients had betrayed him later.

"Very well. First, let's discuss payment..."

Before he could even finish, the girl had taken her hand out of her pocket. She unfurled her palm, and atop it sat a small pile of perfectly round golden coins, all of them inscribed with the same pattern.

The shopkeeper recoiled immediately. “Where did you get these?” he demanded. Not a moment later, he held up his hand. “Never mind that, I don’t want to know. I don’t care. Take those coins back to wherever you found them, and *never* come back here.” He shoved her hand away, anger boiling deep within his core, wild and untamed.

He’d gone this long without trouble, and he intended to keep it that way. How dare this girl—this *human* girl—show up out of *nowhere*, with something like that stashed in her pockets. She had no idea, no possible *clue* of what she’d gotten herself into.

“*Please*,” the girl said. “If not with this, I’ll pay another way. Any other way, *please*.” Her voice cracked on the last syllable, and her eyes were wild with panic. Her resolve had finally crumbled. “I don’t want to die, please help me.”

The shopkeeper observed her for a long while. He struggled to control his breathing as she wept openly in front of him. It was ridiculous, *absolutely* ridiculous. He had no obligation to her, and the only thing that mattered more to him beyond the shop was his own life—he would certainly lose both if he helped her.

But he knew all too well the feeling of dipping your toes into the yawning abyss that was this world, only to drown in it moments later. He knew what it was like to be a human—insignificant, mortal, and vulnerable. He knew how desperately he had clung to his own survival, however long ago it had been. And he knew that he would not turn away the girl.

“You are a foolish, *foolish* girl,” he said quietly. “But I will do as you wish.”

There were tears in her eyes, a grateful smile on her lips as she snivelled pathetically. The shopkeeper grimaced.

“Don’t thank me. I never want to see you again, and if you tell anyone about this transaction, I have the means and motive with which to make you suffer for the rest of your pathetic, minuscule, mortal life.” He sighed deeply and with some satisfaction when the

girl shrank back, wide-eyed.

“You may sit there while I work.” He pointed to a small stool off to the side of his workbench. She slid onto it after a moment of hesitation, but he paid her no mind, settling down at his own seat.

The clay was cool and malleable beneath his fingers, easily manipulated into the shape he envisioned. He murmured incantations as he went, slowly and carefully, so as to not trip up on any of the words. Even after all this time, he took the utmost care with his creations. It was a lesson his master had drilled into him early on, and probably one of the only ones that had stuck.

Next, came the paints. It was his favourite part—they made all his creations come to life. Normally, he would take a few *days* to complete an order, but under the current circumstances... He'd had to work quickly, efficiently. There was no time for little details, or the stories he would create. He hoped it would not make the end result less lifelike.

Once the paints had dried and the final incantation was spoken, he looked upon his workbench and saw the girl's new self. A beautiful hooked nose, mischievous eyes, and a wide mouth. He'd kept the skin dark, but altered the shade, and as for the rest... Well, that was up to his spells. They were strong, nearly unbreakable, but they needed something to hold on to—something inanimate, as his master had discovered early on. When applied to one's own face. Well, the consequences were never pleasant. And it was better off left at that.

He plucked the ceramic mask up off the table and turned back toward the girl.

In the time it had taken him to complete her request, she seemed to have fallen asleep. He cleared his throat, and within the moment she was awake, rubbing at her eyes. There were tear tracks beneath them.

“Before I give you this, we need to establish some rules. First, you never come back here. When you leave, get as far away as you can and pray they don't follow.” When she nodded, he continued, “Second, once you put this mask on, it'll take a while for you to get used to it. Don't take it off until at least a week has passed. Third, don't ever go looking for something you know nothing about again.

Save us the grief of having to clean up after your mess.” He paused. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

The ceramic mask passed from his hands to hers. She looked at it for a long while before turning it over. He placed a hand atop hers.

“Don’t put it on now. Wait until you’re a good few miles away.” If anything, he could at least deny he’d helped her if someone—or something—came knocking at his door.

She was quiet for a handful of moments, staring down at the face she cradled in her hands. When she spoke, her voice trembled, “I know you said not to thank you, but... I hope you know that whatever happens to me, I’ll be forever thankful for the second chance you’ve given me.” She smiled.

The shopkeeper didn’t know how to respond, so he said nothing at all. The girl nodded once, turned on her heel and walked towards the door. As her fingers touched the cool metal, a familiar chime sounded from the front of the shop.

“Stop,” he said, very, very quietly. His client turned her head slowly, and he could see from the fear in her eyes that she’d guessed just who had decided to drop in unannounced. He beckoned her closer with one hand and she complied quickly. “Listen to me. Keep quiet and stay here. I’ll handle this. If things seem grim. Hide. No one can enter my workshop without my say-so.”

She nodded, face white, eyes wide. He hoped she could pull it together long enough for him to work a way out of this mess.

The doorknob felt like ice, and when he stepped outside the safe confines of his workshop it was unbearably hot. He walked up to the counter, plastering a small smile on his face along the way, and faced one of the creatures he’d tried so hard to avoid.

There were few things that phased the shopkeeper anymore. Fewer things still which scared him. But these beings were truly deserving of the moniker monster. They were ruthless, cunning, and older than many knew. He’d heard that their true form could destroy your perception of time and space, but, as far as he knew, no one was lining up to test that theory.

“Shopkeeper,” the creature greeted. Its mouth didn’t move, open in a permanent grin with rows of large, sharp teeth.

"I'm sorry, but we're closed," he said.

The creature closed its mouth. "And yet, the door is open."

He shrugged. "I forgot."

A laugh rang out in the shop. "Ah, of course, of course. I'm certain you're glad that it was me, and not some thief, that came in."

"Can I help you with something?"

The thing frowned deeply. "Yes, you can. I seemed to have misplaced something—something very important—and I was hoping you could tell me where it is."

"What are you looking for?"

"Are we really going to play this game?" The grin was back. "I don't mind at all. I enjoy watching you squirm, and I think your fear smells wonderful. If I could bottle it up, I would, but, alas, my kind isn't one for long term solutions." It walked towards him, and with each step the shopkeeper felt his nausea rise. It leaned against the counter, nails digging into the carefully lacquered wood. "I like you. We *all* like you; you're a staple of our weird and wonderful community. But you know the terms and conditions of our deals better than anybody." In an instant its hand shot out and grabbed him by the chin. With one strong tug, it pressed their foreheads together and inhaled deeply. "Don't be foolish enough to side with the humans."

He could feel beads of blood form where its nails pressed against his cheeks, and he felt about ready to empty the contents of his stomach. He swallowed the bile down, grimacing at the acidity.

The urge to give up was overwhelming. But if it knew he'd helped the girl for certain, it was just playing with him now. It would never let him go alive, not without a deal. And deals with these monsters were never without dire consequences.

On the other hand, if it somehow believed him...it might let him go. The girl would have her second chance, and he could set up shop somewhere else. His services were needed all over the world; he'd have no problem at all.

"She came in, and I refused to help her."

The grip it had on him tightened abruptly and his jaw creaked under the pressure. "You are about to cross a line, here." When he said nothing, it let go. "Fine. Like master, like apprentice. At least the last one—"

Before it could finish, a voice sounded from behind him, "Stop."

The shopkeeper resisted the urge to scream, he resisted the urge to vomit, and he resisted the urge to kill the girl himself. In front of him, the creature's eyes lit up.

"There she is!" it cheered.

Faster than he could process, it crawled over the counter and grabbed the girl. Its fingers were long and spindly, and while one hand could easily fit around her throat, it used both. All the while, the girl didn't even struggle, eyes fixed on the ceiling above her. "Where are my coins?"

She reached, feebly, into her pocket to produce the golden coins. They fell to the floor. With one, swift movement, it picked them up and swallowed them.

"I would tell you to be more careful next time, but, well." It grinned. "Oh, come, now. No screams? No struggles? I know you want to. You have that look in your eyes, like your life is flashing before you in technicolour. What do you see? Your parents? The lover you never should have left? The dog that died when you were eight? Tell me, please."

The girl's eyes filled with tears, but she did not speak. She'd given up, just like that.

Maybe it was the fact that after consuming the girl's soul and then feasting upon her body, the creature would most certainly turn its sights on him for trying to deceive it. Or maybe it was the fact that the sliver of soul he had left was crying out to him, making his remaining humanity impossible to ignore. Or maybe it was the fact that she would give herself up to an awful, unknowable fate so willingly after fighting so hard to live.

Whatever it was, it didn't matter. Not really. He was running on adrenaline, and if he didn't act now they would both surely suffer the same consequences. He was always one for self-preservation, and not much for grovelling. He would get them both out of this mess.

"You can't hurt her."

Annoyed at the interruption, it turned to him. "Oh?" it said, mockingly. "And why is that?"

He breathed deeply. "She is to be my apprentice." The girl turned her wide eyes towards him, but he ignored her for now. If everything

went according to plan, he would have plenty of time to explain.

“What?” It laughed, loud and grating. “Why is this the first time I’m hearing about it, then?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “I forfeit the right to my immortality, as my master did before me, and her master did before her, and so it has been since the first of us, and so it will be until the last of us.”

The creature’s grin disappeared slowly. “You can’t be serious.”

Beneath it, the girl struggled to talk, and so it tightened its grip in warning. “Quiet now, the grown-ups are talking.” She gasped, clawing at its hands. The shopkeeper glanced at her quickly, hoping the look he gave her would inspire confidence in his plan, and she quieted soon after. The creature relaxed its hold.

Just to prove it wrong, the shopkeeper removed the plain, black band around his finger, took the girl’s hand in his, and closed it around the ring. She was crying again, and her fingers grasped at his own desperately. He patted her hand and nodded before pulling away.

Giving her the ring was more of a symbolic gesture than anything, but it would have to do until they could forge a proper one for her.

The creature lessened its hold on the girl. “Do you even know what you’re doing, foolish human?” She didn’t respond, glancing between it and the shopkeeper. It smiled widely. “You are trading one deal for another. He’ll take your soul, just the same as I.”

“She knows just as well as you or me,” the shopkeeper said loudly, drawing the creature’s attention away from the girl’s panicked face.

*‘Please have faith,’ he thought. ‘We can both make it out of here intact.’*

“You cannot take that which doesn’t exist,” he continued. “And since your pact wasn’t with me, you can’t reclaim a soul that is, for all intents and purposes, mine.”

“Our deal was made before yours,” it said, seeming amused. “I have first claim.”

“I have reason to believe the deals were made at the same time.”

The smirk disappeared from the creature’s face, its hands releasing the girl entirely. As soon as she was free, she scrambled back as far as she could, fingers massaging the rapidly forming bruises at her throat.



“I grow weary of this back and forth. You know the rules, shopkeeper. A soul that is promised must be delivered, no matter what.” It sighed, long and theatrically, before grinning once more. “But I admire your courage. Fine, I’ll believe she made two contracts at the same time. Thus, we will divide the soul in half.”

The shopkeeper nodded and held out a hand. “It will be so.”

Long, cold fingers gripped his own. The creature was grinning even wider, and as the shopkeeper waited for it to say its part, it pulled him forwards.

“Just kidding,” it said, eyes wide and wild with bloodlust, before taking its other hand and shoving it deep into his chest.

He could feel it grip his heart, could feel the blood and the broken ribs and torn muscles and damaged lung. But he could also feel his hand on the creature’s face not a moment later, and the incantations form upon his lips like they had thousands of times before. And he spoke quickly and without pause and with the utmost care.

One of the first things he had learned as an apprentice was to always, *always* use inanimate materials to form masks. They are to be used as a tool to blend in with the humans, and not as an entirely new identity. There are a variety of spells that can be used to help this process along, such as infusing the masks with their own personalities and stories—something that could be extremely useful for the more reclusive beings. Most importantly, masks can be taken off. Your own face, however...

The creature ripped its hand out of his chest and screamed, flesh and bone morphing rapidly, turning it into something else entirely.

Released from its hold, the shopkeeper slumped onto the counter and touched the sharp edges of his exposed ribcage gingerly. With a grimace, he placed both hands at the cavity and began to heal himself.

Meanwhile, the creature thrashed wildly as it changed, screeches turning quickly into whimpers, then moans, then nothing at all. The shopkeeper looked up and smiled.

On top the pile of blood and flesh and bone stood a rather confused, rather naked, man. A perfect replica of one of his master’s favourite masks.

“Hello there,” the shopkeeper said. “You must be terribly lost.”

Upon seeing the shopkeeper's current state, the monster-turned-man promptly fainted. If it weren't for the perforated lung, the shopkeeper would have laughed. Instead, he returned his concentration back to the mending process.

"Oh, God."

The girl was looking quite faint, and perhaps a fair bit ill. The shopkeeper didn't blame her; once the adrenaline wore off, he was sure to be sick as well.

She looked up, and as if finally noticing that he was, in fact, still alive, rushed towards him.

"I'm so sorry," she said, dropping to her knees. Fresh tears sprang to her eyes, and soon there were streams. The shopkeeper wondered faintly just how much one girl could cry in a day. "I'm so sorry. It should have been me, it should have been me. Oh, God."

Her sobs were loud and, quite frankly, grating. The shopkeeper nudged her with one knee, and she looked up.

"I'm not going to die." At her disbelieving look, he rolled his eyes, then winced. The adrenaline was starting to wear off. Not good. "I have a few strong healing spells up my sleeve, alright? Plus, I'm technically immortal unless I take on an apprentice."

"You *were* lying to that thing, then. You aren't really going to take my...my soul? Or make me your apprentice?"

A wave of pain brought a flush to his face. He spoke through gritted teeth, "Let me...fix this first."

In the time it took him to patch himself up, the creature turned man on the floor of his shop still hadn't woken up. He wasn't sure what to do with it yet, although he felt the best course of action would be to send it back to where it came from. The thing had betrayed a contract; it deserved what it had gotten.

Besides the creature, the girl had followed his instructions and locked the door and closed the blinds. He didn't want any more unannounced guests, not for a long, *long* time.

Afterwards, the girl chose to look around, checking in on him every few minutes. The constant vigilance was annoying, but he couldn't spare any attention to telling her to knock it off. Not when the pain was so intense that he'd blacked out a few times already.

When he was ready to talk, he was breathing heavily from both

the mental and physical exertion. He felt ready to pass out again, but he'd promised the girl answers.

"Go on, then. Ask me your questions."

She was quick to jump on the opportunity, "Will more of those things come for me?"

He observed her for a long moment, wondering just how much he should tell her. Human minds were feeble, more than any other being. They couldn't take much of anything that didn't conform to their idea of 'reality'. But... the girl had seen more than most, and she still seemed somewhat sane.

"They have no grounds to, since the one who made the contract with you is... well, for all intents and purposes, dead. Its pact is null and void. They live by certain rules, you know."

She seemed relieved, and he debated whether or not he should leave things at that. But it seemed unreasonably cruel to allow her to go back to her life now, when she might never be safe again.

He sighed quietly, and continued, "I guess it depends more on the deal you made. Just because I got rid of that one doesn't mean another won't come looking for you to hold up your end of the bargain. They're a prideful sort."

The girl shifted in her spot on the ground, averting her eyes. For a while, the shopkeeper thought she wasn't going to speak, but then she cleared her throat and looked up at him.

"I can't go back, can I? To my old life." His silence seemed to be the only answer she needed. She laughed a little. "I guess it doesn't matter much, anyways. I'd already accepted that I was going to have to leave everything behind."

To that, the shopkeeper said nothing.

"Can I ask you another question?" When he nodded, she continued, "Was it lying, when it said you would take my soul? Is that how it works to become an apprentice?"

He felt another sigh begin to build in his chest. The trajectory of this conversation was beginning to lead to topics he didn't really want to get into.

"Not all of it," he said. "Just enough to complete the part of mine I still own. Then, I would be mortal, and you would be immortal."

"And were you being serious, when you said that you were—"

“Look,” he interrupted. “Anything that happened before was for my own self-preservation. Before you barrelled into our conversation, I almost had it convinced...” He took a short breath, nostrils flaring, which then quickly turned into a quiet sigh. “I just want you to understand that becoming my apprentice... It isn’t easy, and it isn’t quick, and, honestly, I’m not even sure it would keep the others from coming after you.”

The girl looked down. He saw shame in her face, and fear. Then, she seemed to steel herself; when she met his eyes, there was determination, strength. The fear lingered, in the lines around her mouth, the tremble of her lips, but she’d come to a definitive decision.

“Will you accept me as your apprentice?” ... And there it was.

The shopkeeper kept silent for a long moment. He thought of his master, and how, towards the end, she’d told him that you never have a choice in who you take on as an apprentice, that *‘they find you.’* He wondered if she was laughing at him this very moment, shaking her head like she usually did when something unfortunate happened to him. He wondered if she would approve of this girl, but, then again, she’d approved of *him*, hadn’t she?

He sighed, and hoped he wasn’t about to make a mistake. “Do you understand what you’re asking?”

“I understand the risks.”

The shopkeeper held out his hand, and the girl took it. “Then it will be so.” He waited for a moment. “You have to repeat the words back to me.”

“Oh, uh, it will be so.” She looked closely at their hands, and when nothing earth-shattering happened, she frowned. “Is it... done?”

“Yes.” He got to his feet, unsteady and lightheaded as the world spun around a few times before righting itself. She may not have felt the pact, but he sure as hell did. Goddamn humans.

“Thank you,” she said. When he looked back at her, she was smiling, eyes wet. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can ever repay you.”

“I didn’t do any of this for you.”

Her smile softened, as if she knew something he didn’t. “Thank you anyways.”

“Let’s just get this place cleaned up before I pass out.”

## THE SHOPKEEPER

“Alright,” she said, and that was that. The shopkeeper was glad; he’d never been one for sentimental moments.