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Claimed by Shadow

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Shitty Beer

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Author's Note: This is an odd little thing, somewhere between a short story and a deleted scene. It started when a reader, Emma Queen, wrote into my page on Facebook to ask "I'm rereading *Claimed by Shadow* again and I'm curious, how exactly did Pritkin describe Cassie to Mac? I've always wondered." So here's the answer, plus a little bit more.

"I, for one, like a good cheap beer," Mac said, tilting his chair back against the wall behind his shop, careful not to let his skin touch the burning brick. The sun had been on it for hours, until finally sliding off to torment some cacti around the corner, assuming the cacti minded. John didn't know. He found the flora in Nevada as strange as that in some of the hell regions, which was fair considering the average temperature of the place. He wiped some sweat off his temple, before it could roll down the side of his neck, and took a swig from the bottle Mac had provided.

"Water," he said, because there was no discernible difference.

But Mac didn't seem to take offense. "It's not water, it's beer. It's just shitty beer."

"And you drink this why? Have they suddenly stopped paying your pension?"

"Like I'd notice if they did," Mac said dryly. War mages, especially ex-war mages, were not over paid.

It was probably why his friend had turned a hobby into a second profession. John watched as a painted snake that had been hiding in Mac's long mustache suddenly dropped out of sight, only to reappear on his chest and upset an eagle tat, which pecked at it savagely. The snake slithered off under Mac's stringy bicep, and his friend took another swig, as if he hadn't noticed.

Maybe he hadn't. He only had about a hundred of the things, magical tats of all types and descriptions, covering his body in colorful perfusion to compensate for his inability to shield. He'd once been a war mage, as spit polished and disciplined as any. But ever since a curse stripped away his shields, and thus his career, he'd been looking more and more like a man with no purpose, doing tats for the magical community and waiting . . .

For what John didn't know.

Maybe for better beer.

"There's a liquor store around the corner," he offered idly. "I could make a run —"

"You're not listening," Mac told him, squinting against the sun, which was now behind John's head. "I like shitty beer."

"You like shitty beer."

"Yes."

"So, if I were to go get, say, a Newcastle, or a Black Sheep, or that damned chocolate stout you used to favor —"

"Then you could drink it yourself."

"Since when do you champion fizzy, ice cold, tasteless crap?"

"Since I moved to Nevada," Mac said, shooting him an amused look. "Climate changes a man. A good, strong lager and a warm fire pair up nicely when your bollocks are about to freeze off. But here," he waved a hand from the heat shimmering off the nearby road to the dry as dust desert, "not so much. I used to laugh at American beers, too, until I realized why they brew them like they do."

"They brew them?" Pritkin said dourly, and drank his slightly sour soda pop.

"Laugh all you want. But I have learned to appreciate paying a fiver for a six pack, less if I get it on sale. I've learned that, sometimes, I want to sit back with some carbonated barley water and watch the sun set, rather than have my taste buds assaulted by hops, or feel like I'm drinking a bottle of syrup with some of the imperial stouts. I've learned to appreciate grabbing a shitty beer when I'm out at the bars, because it doesn't make me feel like a pretentious SOB, and I'm not paying fifty bucks to get drunk."

"You've thought about this," John said dryly.

"I have." Mac held up his brew, which had started out ice cold, but was now sweating as much as they were. "I salute you, shitty beer! You serve a purpose, and a damn noble one. Give the people something they can enjoy while doing chores or at a barbecue. Give people something they can share with their friends and not worry about the budget. Give people something they can buy at every grocery store, jiffy stop and gas station to quench their thirst and get a slight buzz. There are better beers, but none dearer to my heart." He drank deeply.

John sighed and did likewise.

It was still shit.

"So, did you just come by to insult my beer, or is there something else?" Mac asked, while fishing them a chaser out of a cooler filled with ice.

He handed a bottle to John, and the nut brown skin of his hand was hardly discernible against the same-colored dirt. Mac looked like he'd been born here, like he'd risen whole from the baked earth, with cut offs and crow's feet and long, droopy biker 'stash instead of Adam's fig leaf. It was less like he'd gone native than that he'd absorbed the place into his genes.

John grasped the bottle, expecting to see a serious contrast in their skin tones, since he was less than a year out of the London office and a still pasty transplant. Only to notice that a faint tan had started to cling to him as well. Like the desert hues had bled onto his skin, beginning to claim him for its own.

He stared at his hand, suddenly feeling more than slightly off balance. Like the world had tilted, or like he'd blinked and it had changed. Maybe because it had, shattering in a million pieces just this morning, when his life took less of a turn and more of a jack knife. What it would hold now, how the picture would look when all the scattered shards fell into place, he had no idea.

It was a dizzying prospect for someone who had avoided thinking about the future for as long as he had.

He swallowed and took the beer, and looked up to see Mac eyeing him narrowly.

"Anything you care to share?"

"No," John said hoarsely, and looked around for the opener. Only to realize that Mac had left it inside.

But then, he didn't need it. John watched as his friend held his own brew up to his shoulder, where a painted jaguar sprang at it, grasping it between its paws and gnawing it enthusiastically. Only to spit the sadly mangled bottle cap into the dirt a moment later, a smug look on its tiny face. John eyed the thing warily, then used the underside of a small table to open his own.

And scowled.

"You know," Mac told him. "I could wrestle up a soft drink, if you're really *that*—"

"It's not the beer," John told him, "It's the girl."

Mac blinked. "What girl?"

“The one who may be coming by here later.” Or might not, he thought, recalling the sight he’d been left with: a blond falling out of a too tight, sequined bit of nothing sliding into the front seat of a luxury sedan. She’d had a hole in her tights, cobwebs in her hair, and blood on her left knee where she must have skinned it during their morning’s adventures. Yet there’d been a small smirk on her face, because she thought she’d won.

And she had, at least for the moment. She had driven away, leaving him bleeding in the dust, and fuming, because he couldn’t do a damned thing to stop her. Couldn’t even argue, for fear that the two incubus-possessed humans with her might recognize him and say something that gave away his heritage.

And wouldn’t that just help him make his case?

But he’d wanted to. He’d wanted to rage at her, to say that he wasn’t there to hurt her, which should have been obvious since he’d just saved her life! And likely ruined his, because he’d been seen helping a fugitive to escape when he had orders to kill her on sight. As the premier magical authority on earth, the Silver Circle wasn’t used to having its rules thwarted by anyone, much less one of its own. He probably had a bounty on his head by now, too, and plenty of people only too happy to collect, many of whom had never thought a half breed demon spawn belonged as a war mage in the first place.

Well, he likely wasn’t one now, he thought grimly.

“John?” Mac was looking at him over the bottle.

“I . . . put my foot in it this morning,” he said, wincing at the understatement. “There’s a new pythian candidate — have you heard?” Mac shook his head. “You remember that disgraced heir who ran away a few decades ago?”

“Of course. Elizabeth O’Donnell. Front page news for weeks, only they never found her.”

“No. They never did.” And if she was anything like her insane progeny, John could understand why. “She’s deceased, but it seems she had a daughter, and the Senate found *her*—”

“The vampires?” Mac sat up in his seat, beer forgotten. “You’re telling me they have a pythian acolyte?”

“Not an acolyte; she was never trained. Which is the damned point!” John said, suddenly exploding. He’d been holding his temper all day, never an easy task, and doubly so with that hellion not listening to a damned word he said. And then sicking those three ancient terrors she’d been hanging around with on his friends — his former friends — ah, bollocks!

John drank more shitty beer.

“She’s supposed to show up here later,” he told Mac, who was looking at him expectantly.

“A pythian acolyte is coming *here*?” Mac abruptly stood up. His dour, jaded ex-partner suddenly looked as flustered as a boy on his first date. Why John didn’t know. The average acolyte — the ones he’d seen, at any rate — were almost silent girls in virginal white who wafted about as if their dainty slippers never touched the polished floors of the Pythian Court. He’d always found them vaguely creepy, and suspected that they practiced their knowing looks in a mirror in order to fluster people.

They’d never flustered him.

If they really had received any visions about his life, they’d have fled screaming when he walked in the door.

“You can relax,” he said dryly. “You’re not likely to meet her.”

“But you said she’s coming —”

"I think she told me that to get rid of me. The Circle has a bounty on her head and she doesn't trust me, even though I'm the reason they failed to collect! But I'm going to have to track her down somehow. I need her to help me go after Myra, Lady Phemonoe's heir —"

"What?"

"— who should have been proclaimed pythia already, but there's reason to believe that she poisoned the Lady —"

"What?"

"— and now she's fled into faerie and is plotting with our enemies as we speak. Which is why the Circle designated me to go after her — they don't dare to set foot there, but I have some experience with the place. But not enough, not for something like this, which is why I need you. You have tats that work in faerie, don't you?"

Mac just looked at him for a minute. "I think I need another beer," he finally said, sitting back down.

"You *have* a beer, and I need an answer!"

"In a minute," Mac said. John had never been able to rush him. "Let me get this straight. Myra, the heir to the Pythian Throne, has gone bad?"

"Yes. And I've been sent to bring her back to justice or kill her, and it was made clear that the Circle would prefer the latter."

"And, at the same time, this other possible heir pops up out of the woodwork as the vampires' protégé —"

"Yes."

"— and now the Circle wants her dead, too?"

John made a disgusted sound. "They think it's better that than she inherit, and we have a vampire-controlled pythia to deal with!"

"Yet you protected her?"

"She's young," John said, shifting uncomfortably. And remembering the first time he'd seen her, a little over a week ago. She'd been in another ridiculous outfit, this time a bright yellow happy face tee, which might not have looked so bizarre if she hadn't been wearing it in the middle of the damned Vampire Senate!

The ruling body for all North American vampires intimidated even senior mages, and that was when they were playing nice. They hadn't been that day. He'd come in to find her sprawled in the middle of the floor, being menaced by a grim faced relic out of a Victorian nightmare.

And all alone. Just a tiny figure in that ridiculous T-shirt, with no weapons and no one at her back. Yet she'd been defiant. Obviously terrified, yet unbending, staring the embodiment of death itself in the face.

And not blinking.

He looked up to find Mac's shrewd gaze back on him, and a little smile flirting with the corners of his mouth. "She's a pawn," John snapped. "Little better than a child; the vampires are using her. Does she deserve to die for that? And without a trial? The Circle put a bounty on her because of who she is, not what she's done. Is that who we are now? Is that what we do?"

"No," Mac said flatly. "We must protect her."

"I must. You must stay out of this. I just need —"

"You can't do this alone, John," Mac said stubbornly. "And we're partners, remember? And war mages —"

"We aren't anything of the kind," John said tersely, because this wasn't the discussion he wanted to have. "They all but ran you out the door, and I'll be lucky to get away with the same. We're not anything anymore —"

"We're *war mages*. You wouldn't have done that this morning if you weren't; I wouldn't be helping you now if I weren't."

"You'll help me?"

"Did you have any doubt?"

John sighed. No, he hadn't. But he also had no intention of dragging Mac into this. This was his fight. Mac had already had his, and barely survived. It was enough.

But his friend didn't seem to think so. "War mages protect the pythia," he said quietly. "That is who we are. *That is what we do.*"

"She isn't pythia yet."

"And she may never be without our help."

John shook his head. "And if the Circle finds out? You could be charged as an accessory. I'll tell them you didn't know, but —"

"You can tell them any damned thing you want. *I'll* tell them that it isn't about the uniform, or the title. It's about the *job*. I took an oath to stand against the tide trying to swamp us, to take everything the other side can throw and hurl it back in their faces. We are the light in the darkness, the circle that hedges the world of men, the guardians —"

"I know the oath."

"Then I assume this conversation is over."

Not by a long shot, John didn't say, because it wouldn't do any good. Mac was a better man than he was; Mac probably believed the oath and the brain washing that went along with it. The whole velvet robed ceremony, kneeling with swords a-glitter, as if the Circle was some chivalric order out of the middle ages instead of a modern military/police force, with all the backstabbing, deal making and politics of any such group.

Mac had been in it, but never *of* it. He'd been able to see this person or that one as corrupt, but not the Circle itself, not the Corps he loved. But the Circle had changed, and since it commanded its military wing, the Corps had as well. John couldn't trust them anymore, not after they decided to murder an innocent girl. Or even a not-so-innocent one. Even Myra deserved a trial, not that she was likely to get one, and the Palmer girl even less so. And the damned thing about it all, the fact that took it from fuck up to farce, was that he didn't even know that saving her made sense.

If the Circle had gone bad, surely they needed a proper pythia to help root out the rot? But what did they have instead? A possible murderess on the one hand and a . . . John didn't even know what on the other. He saw the pythian acolytes again: cool, calm, serene, otherworldly. And then he saw her, blond hair falling in her face, sweat on her brow despite the casino's overpowered air conditioning, grunting and cursing as she crawled down the middle of a deadly hallway, through the only safe zone in the casino's menacing wards.

Was that a pythia?

Instead of all knowing, she'd looked as confused as he was. Instead of cool and collected, she'd been complaining half the morning and alternating between whimpering and screaming the rest. Instead of otherworldly, she'd been only too human, all panicked blue eyes and swollen lower lip from biting it too often.

Was that who was supposed to take on the corruption in the Circle, to lead the supernatural community, to fight a *war*?

John didn't think so. But a look at his friend's face told him that Mac didn't share his opinion. For once, it was free of roaming artwork, leaving the thin, un-lined features bare and visible, not that John needed them. The expression blazing in the eyes would have been enough.

For the first time in a while, Mac looked like himself. A war mage and a true believer. John almost envied him.

He wasn't sure what he believed in anymore.

"The power chooses the pythia," Mac reminded him. "That's its job. Ours is keeping her alive long enough for it to decide."

John nodded tersely. Arguing would be useless, so he wouldn't. He would get what he needed and get out, before Mac got hurt. He would find this girl, use her to find Myra, and get the truth out of the two of them.

And then they would see.

"Come on," he said, putting the bottle down in the dirt. "Let's get to work. I'll fill you in as we go."

* * *

John let the door close behind him on its own.

It was dark inside the little pub, and cramped, with a ceiling that brushed his head until he moved down three steep steps onto age-old boards. The steps were an abrupt drop off from the door, a trap that most new comers didn't see in time, and so ended up sprawled in the floor. It had become almost a rite of passage through the years; John had witnessed dozens of fresh-faced recruits rise stiff and red faced after a spill, including one youthful Archie McAdam, sans mustache and with a head full of ginger hair.

He paused at the spot Mac had fallen, all those hours ago, and recalled how easily he'd played it off. Jumping back to his feet, asking if he had slid farther than anyone. And when he was told no, that that honor belonged to a long ago recruit who had slammed head first into the bar and left a still visible mark, had offered to go back out and try it again.

Mac had immediately fit in around here, at the unofficial war mage pub in Stratford, the home base for the Corps. John never had. And it was particularly foolish for him to be here today, less than twenty-four hours after breaking with the Circle, with a bounty on his head and a whole phalanx of allies-turned-enemies on his trail.

Like the ones who swiveled from the bar, long coats swinging out over enough hardware to tear him apart a hundred times over. There were two of them, plus three more at a cramped table under the eaves. And another just coming in from the washroom in back, drying his hands on a paper towel because there was no room for a trash can in there, before stopping on a dime.

And staring.

John didn't move. He knew them — most of them, anyway — like he knew the bartender. Grizzled Jeroboam, almost two hundred years old and legally blind, who saw through the eyes of the pet hawk on his shoulder. Master and bird were staring at him now, too, like everyone else in the pub, staring but not moving as he stood there for a moment.

And then walked slowly and deliberately across the small space to the back room.

It wasn't any bigger, but it was brighter, although not because of the lighting. Thousands of small, circular pins studded the walls, the ceiling, and the two sturdy columns helping to hold up the roof, reflecting the light like tiny mirrors. Or like someone had decided to wallpaper the place in silver.

It wasn't far from the truth.

John walked along the walls, searching. Some of the pins were polished and bright, looking brand new. Others were older, their color dimmed by tarnish and age. Here and there, one was mangled or burnt almost to a crisp, or speckled with something dark that had never been washed away, because that was tradition, too. Another rite of passage, the last one. Like the pub's name, this was Journey's End for members of the Corps.

The pins were those given to every new mage in the ceremony of joining. They'd been useful once, to close the cloaks earlier war mages had used to conceal their arsenal. Now they were merely ceremonial, and often tucked away, as Mac's had been, amidst his medals and commendations, the little velvet box all but forgotten until John broke into his apartment and retrieved it.

That had been foolhardy, too, but he couldn't trust anyone else to do this. Mac hadn't been active duty when he died, at least not as far as the Corps was concerned. And this wasn't a room for mages who had passed after a long retirement, much less those who had gone rogue and defied the Circle. This was a room for heroes, and they wouldn't have believed Mac qualified.

John knew better.

He finally found a place, a small piece of blank wall at eye level, far in the back. The pin bit into the old waddle and daub easily, sinking into place as if it had always been meant to go there. John stared at it blankly, fingers lingering on the smooth surface.

This was what you did, after a brother died in battle. This was where you brought him, the final act you did for him. John waited, wondering if it was supposed to bring him some measure of peace, some kind of closure.

If so, it wasn't working.

Mac had sacrificed his life to save their new pythia, and John had thereafter assumed his role as Pythian Protector. He didn't know what he'd been thinking. He wasn't a white knight, wasn't a true believer, wasn't even a Corpsman anymore, and she . . .

God help them all.

But she had Lady Phemonoe's blessing, which was something. And more luck than she deserved. And stubbornness, resiliency, a reckless bravery that reminded him terribly of Mac, and an odd vulnerability that he didn't know what to do with.

John could only hope it would be enough.

He turned around and went back into the bar.

The tableaux hadn't changed, except that there was now a beer at the end of the battered old counter, the kind he usually drank. John looked at it, and then at the other offerings on tap. And made a different selection.

"You're sure?" The venerable barkeep kept staring straight ahead as usual, but his creature levelled a wall eye at John.

"I'm sure."

The pour was made and sat before him, and for the next half hour, he leaned on the bar and drank his shitty beer.

And then left, unmolested.

The End