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Things in the Shadows

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They came after dark one evening when I was alone. I never heard them come in. Not a sound. No warning. Suddenly they were just there. I looked up and--

I'm getting ahead of myself. Better keep this story in order.

My name is Sam Sleet, private investigator, and I work alone. Except for one secretary, that is, who works only day hours. I have an office on the second floor of an old building with my name and business painted on the window. It's in the older part of the business district of the city, but I still draw a fair number of clients. This story starts like a traditional gumshoe novel, I suppose. It certainly doesn't end that way.

I was working late in my office. It was a little after nine. Just as I was filing the paperwork on a recent case and calling it a night, I heard a knock on the hall door. The entire length of the door has translucent glass, which gives me the advantage of seeing the silhouette of any visitor before I answer. This silhouette looked most welcome. A woman in a business suit with an hourglass figure. I locked the file

cabinet and went to open the door. On the other side was just what the outline had promised, and more. She was a platinum blonde, late twenties, with ideal proportions as shown by well-tailored, dark blue business attire. Her hair was collar length, lifted and combed back on top, and framed a too-round face, her only flaw. Her eyes were the deepest blue I had ever seen--colored contacts maybe. They were very penetrating as they looked me in the eye, as if trying to read me inside before checking me outside.

"Mr. Sleet?" she asked. Medium range voice, very smooth.

"Yes, miss. Can I help you?"

"May I enter?"

"Of course."

I let her pass, locked the door, and directed her to my inner office. I helped her to the guest chair in front of my desk like an old-fashioned gentleman and took my seat behind it. As I got a better look at her I saw the slightly domed look of the top of her head was not all hair, but a head actually a little larger than average. I wondered how much she actually had in it. Her chin also was not completely round, but came to a slight point.

"I need your help," she began.

"This is the place for it. May I ask your name?"

"Indra Stella Allen."

"And what kind of help?"

She reached deep in her black handbag and pulled out a square package wrapped in white paper, maybe typing paper. It was about as big as the palm of my hand.

"I need you to keep this for me." Her speech was clear and measured.

"What is it?" I eyed it carefully.

"It would be better if you do not know." Her answer was direct, unhesitating. Her eyes were steady.

"I need to know." I eyed her steadily. "I won't hold illegal goods for anyone. What is it? Drugs? Contraband?"

"Silicon," she replied.

"Mind if I see it?"

I held out a hand and she gave it to me readily. Inside the wrapper was a clear, round disk, a quarter inch thick. It was transparent around the edge with some pattern filling the center, apparently in the interior.

"Is this some over-sized microchip?" I asked.

"Very good, Mr. Sleet. Yes, exactly. It has information vital to your--your security. I want to give it to the CIA, but I may not have the opportunity. Could you make certain they receive it?"

"I'm willing to do that much. They'll have questions about it. What do I tell them?"

"The crystal has several layers of printed circuitry, filled with detailed information needed by all military and scientific departments of your government for security purposes."

"How do they read this?"

"Optically, by microscopic scan. They will see how to do it with a little study."

"If it's a matter of security, then there is some threat to this country. From whom? Terrorists?"

For the first time that lovely face showed some emotion. Fear. Very restrained.

"I will not discuss that."

"Why not?" I asked.

No answer. Just a pretty, stoic face.

"Does this disk contain the plans for the threat?"

"Yes. Please, Mr. Sleet, I do not wish to say any more."

I wondered at her evenness of tone. Not like a regular female at all. She was very disciplined.

"Do you work for the government?" I asked.

"If I did, I would not need your help."

"You might. Having a go-between could help you avoid suspicion. You must be in a position to have access to this

thing in the first place. If not, how and where did you get it?"

She leaned over the desk and took the disk out of my hand.

"Was my guess too good?" I tried to sound shrewd.

She rewrapped it and placed it back in her bag.

"All right," I said. "No more questions. I'll still take care of it, if you'll let me."

She studied me again with those sapphire eyes.

"No charge," I added. "As a patriotic gesture."

She took the package from her bag and returned it to me. As I was taking it, she held on to it. She nailed me with those deep blues.

"Hide it carefully. And don't have anyone come to your office for it. Go to their headquarters. Better still, meet them at police headquarters. Have the police check on them." She released it.

"Why don't you do that?"

"Your police won't accept a refusal to answer questions. Now I must go." She stood.

"Your security, your government, your police," I quoted her.

"Are you from another country?"

"You said no more questions."

"At least tell me how to contact you."

She headed for the hall door.

"Just one thing. Please. How did you happen to pick me?"

She paused in the open doorway. A perfect still shot from a film noir. She was admirable. More than that.

"Your light was on," she replied.

It crossed my mind that there was only one bright bulb in my office, and it wasn't me.

She closed the door softly behind her. Her shadow melted off the glass and her heels clicked quietly down the hall. Too quietly. Was she afraid of being heard? It suddenly struck me that she had seen me on impulse. The light in my office window must have been a refuge. Had someone followed her?

I reached to shut off the desk lamp, then stopped. Putting the office in darkness might warn anyone outside. I rushed to another window farther from the light and lifted the edge of the shade with one finger. Nobody on the street. I waited. I never saw my new client leave the building. Had she gone out the back? Management locked the rear entrance after regular business hours. I decided to rush downstairs and check. No one around. No one in the halls as I went down. Not a sound. No sign of trouble. I hoped she had gotten away all right. I returned to my office.

I took the mysterious package from my pocket and stashed it in a special hiding place that had never failed me. Then I leaned back in my chair and put a leg on the desk, my favorite

thinking pose. I wondered what country she might be from. Her round face suggested Oriental blood, but her features did not show it. Her speech seemed intended to erase any trace of an accent. Had she given her real name? Probably not. There was no question she was well educated and highly trained in some profession. My thought was still that she was in the government. But whose?

It was then I saw trouble. From the corner of my eye I caught a movement. I half closed my eyes to hide where my gaze was aimed. On the wall opposite my desk were shadows, moving just slightly, silently. But I saw nothing between the wall and the lamp. The ceiling light was off. I sat up, leaned over the desk, bent up the flexing arm of the lamp, and aimed the light directly at the wall. There were three distinct shadows, two short ones and a tall one in the middle. But no one was standing in the room.

I've seen a few strange things in my day, but this totally creeped me out. It took a few very long seconds to collect my wits. Then I stuck my right hand inside my suit jacket.

"That's a nice trick," I said to my guests, with an unsteady voice. "Mind telling me how you do it?"

"Please give us the package that the woman gave you." A man's voice. Medium range, even and measured, just like Miss

Allen's. Was he from the same government department?

"Who are you?" I asked.

The tall shadow started moving. It grew bigger on the wall. He was approaching the light--and me.

"Close enough!" I drew my thirty-eight and aimed it on a straight line with the light.

The shadow stopped. "I doubt you will be able to use that."

"It won't be the first time," I said in a low tone.

The shadow approached again. I tightened my trigger finger, intending to hit the guy's leg. That should be enough to make all three behave, I figured. But my finger stopped. Try as I might I couldn't pull off the shot. And it wasn't just my finger. I couldn't move a muscle or a hair.

"Put the weapon down, please."

It was the last thing I wanted to do, but I laid the gun on the desk in front of me.

"Take your hand from it."

I did that, too. The tall shadow moved out of the light, coming around the desk. I felt someone standing near my right side. I couldn't turn my head to look.

"Where is the package? Show me."

I wanted to fight with all my will, but I couldn't even do that. I bent down in my chair and brought my hand to the trim

panel under the bottom drawer of my desk. I pulled it straight out. A flat tray was attached to the inside. There was the package. A gloved hand in a dark coat sleeve, perfectly visible now, reached down to take it.

"Close the drawer. Thank you." Smooth as cream, that voice.

Again I followed orders, then sat up. The two smaller shadows stepped out of the light, moving toward the door. I felt their mysterious control over me fading.

"Who are you?" I just managed to get the words out.

"There is no need for you to know--or for us to tell you. Go about your normal business, please."

A scary silence followed. I sat like a statue for at least a minute. Maybe two. I should have tried to do something, but the fact is I was just petrified. When I finally got the nerve to move, I turned on the overhead light. It filled the room and left no shadows. That felt good. I turned on the light in my secretary's outer office. I thought of going through the whole space swinging my arms, or even a chair, to be sure no one was around, but I dropped the idea. Even though I never saw or heard the hall door, I had a feeling I was alone.

I went back to the desk and slumped in my chair, trying to calm down and steady my breathing. That took a while. Then I made a quick record of the evening's events on my digital voice

recorder, about four minutes' worth. So, what next? The police? Hopeless. They wouldn't believe a word of the whole story. And I didn't even have the package for proof. I felt the need to talk to someone. Then I had what seemed like the right idea. I thought of Dr. Nathan, a psychiatrist who once hired me. The clock said it was still before ten. Not too late for a phone call at least. I rang his home number and he was in. I asked for an appointment with him the next day, but he said his calendar was full. He surprised me by offering to see me right then. All the better. He was only ten minutes away. Maybe I could actually get some sleep that night.

Nathan had a fine, tower apartment in the heart of the high rent district with a view of the city. He welcomed me to the living room, where I sat near a wide, vista window. Outside was a sea of lights that ran to the horizon. That was quieting, comforting. Nathan himself was a comfortable looking fellow, heavy set, bearded, graying, sixty-something, and grandfatherly.

"Thanks for seeing me," I said.

"I'm more than happy to return the favor you did me a couple years ago." He smiled like the gracious host you would expect a psychiatrist to be.

"It wasn't exactly a favor. I billed you for services rendered."

"So, I can bill you, if you like." He smiled even more broadly.

"That's fine." I smiled back.

I told him my strange story. I skipped the part about Miss Allen--none of his business. The part about the shadows was more than enough to occupy his mind. It did that, all right. His eye was locked on me, his expression engrossed. He showed no sign of thinking I was losing it. He wouldn't, of course. That was his professional training. Then I told him why I came to him.

"I thought this would be up your alley because I must have been drugged or hypnotized."

"Possibly both," he said. He thoughtfully stroked his beard. "I suspect hypnotism because it easily explains the illusion of invisibility. Human sight is a complex business involving a full third of the brain. The visual cortex, in the back of the brain, processes information from the optic nerves and transmits the result to the conscious mind. A hypnotic suggestion, if accepted and acted upon by the unconscious part of the mind, can prevent all or part of that information from reaching your consciousness. You will not be aware of what your eyes actually do see."

"So my eyes really did see those people?" I concluded.

"If they were opaque enough to cast shadows, you must have

seen something. And you did see an arm and a hand."

"How could I see their shadows and not them?"

"Possibly an oversight on their part when they worded their suggestion to you. Or your subconscious may have rebelled enough to let you see a warning of their presence."

"I owe my subconscious a big favor. Could you hypnotize me and help me remember what I saw?" I was a little uncomfortable about what might be lurking in my memory, and I'm sure my voice sounded shaky.

Nathan stroked his beard again. "I can. Are you sure you want to know? I don't know what you're involved in. Only you can decide if ignorance is bliss."

"I need to know. I have a feeling this business isn't done. And not remembering, knowing it's in my head somewhere, will just go on bothering me."

"I'm sure you're right about that. Very well. Sit up straight, rest your hands palm up in your lap, and close your eyes. Take a couple minutes for slow breathing. Then I'll talk you through this."

"Mind if I record this for later?" I pulled my digital recorder from my pocket and showed it to him.

"Not at all. Put it on the coffee table between us."

He used his slow, modulated tone of voice to lull me under.

I had a doubt that he'd be able to do it. But he must have. Before I knew it I was drifting. Then, suddenly I heard him tell me to open my eyes. I felt awake and alert and in a pretty good frame of mind. His suggestion, no doubt. Then I looked at him. My good frame of mind didn't last long.

"What is it?" I asked somberly.

He picked up my recorder and handed it to me. It showed an additional seventeen minutes elapsed.

"Mr. Sleet," he said very gravely, "I have given you a few suggestions to help you cope with these memories, if you choose to bring them to conscious recollection. I recommend you listen to the recording first. You might prefer not to experience the actual memory. If you do, I think you had better do it while you are here and I can help you."

We eyed each other. Then I started the playback.

The hard part was hearing my voice describe the intruders. The two short guys wore shiny, dark coveralls and something like motorcycle helmets with mirrored glass on the visors. The tall guy in the middle had a long face with a pointed chin and a domed cranium that appeared too large for a human being. A narrow band of thin, gray hair was combed back on top. He seemed to talk without opening his mouth or moving his lips. As they left the office and stepped out of the direct light of my desk lamp, one

of the short guys turned his head for a last look at me. Without the glare on his mirrored visor, I could see a little through that glass. A pair of large, dark eyes were looking back at me. Something seemed to move through my brain at that second. When the eyes were off me I felt the difference. They left the office without my seeing how. My impression of all three was that none of them were human.

I stopped the playback. A long moment of silence passed, rather slowly.

"I think I'll skip the actual memory," I finally said. "That might be too much right now."

"Very well," nodded Nathan understandingly. "I recommend you face it sometime soon, so it doesn't become a deeper problem. I'll be happy to help you when you do."

"Doc," I asked hesitantly, "do you believe what I said while I was under?"

Another stroke of the beard.

"Go ahead," I added. "Say what you're thinking."

"I find the description of these people very hard to believe. More likely that also was planted in your mind."

"Then why the invisibility? Why hide one illusion behind another?"

"Increase your confusion. Ruin your credibility if you try

to report this to anyone."

"What if they come back?" I heard my voice shake again.

"I gave you a suggestion to resist their hypnotic influence. Whether it works or not remains to be seen. It may depend on your incentive to remain free of their control."

"I don't like being anyone's puppet. I have plenty of incentive to fight that."

"What will you do now?"

"Go back to my office, I think. I need to write this up for my own records. I'd better do it before I go to sleep, while it's fresh in my mind."

"Are you afraid to go back to your office?"

I shook my head. "They got what they wanted. They have no reason to go back there." I stood. "Thank you for your time and help, doc."

He stood, eyeing me. "Will you come back soon?"

"Yeah, I will. As soon as I can say case closed."

We shook hands. He saw me to the door.

Outside I stood for a minute, breathing in the night air. There was still light traffic whooshing by at that late hour. It felt normal out there. No strange presence lurking near. Good. I drove back to my office.

I looked around before using my key to the building

entrance. I made sure to lock the door after me. Then up the stairs. It was only eleven-twenty. I had made good time.

No sooner was I seated at my desk than I saw three shadows appear on the glass of the hall door. They passed through the door and frame and wall like ghosts. *That* was a surprise. An even bigger surprise was how calmly I took it. One benefit of seeing Dr. Nathan, I suppose. They looked just as my recorded voice had described them. They entered my inner office. I put my right hand inside my jacket.

"Take your hand off the weapon." The same smooth voice.

I drew my thirty-eight and aimed it. "That's far enough."

"You will not be able to use that."

"I think I will. And this time I can see *you plainly*."

The three stopped. The tall one seemed stymied for a moment. Then he communicated without moving his mouth.

"You are the first human to resist us."

"Maybe not the last," I said. "What do you want this time?"

"Allow me to show you this."

The tall spokesman took the wrapped package from his coat pocket and stepped forward. I pulled back the hammer. He placed the package slowly, carefully on the desk.

"Open it," he directed.

"Back off," I directed.

He took two steps back. Keeping an eye on him, I unwrapped the paper with one hand. Inside was--a woman's compact.

I stared at it. I didn't bother opening it. It wasn't quite big enough to hide the silicon disk. But it made a perfect decoy. So did I, apparently. She pulled a switch when she put the first package back in her purse during our talk. She used me to throw these three off her track. She used me. Never to darken my hall door again, no doubt. I had a couple seconds of bitterness. But no more than that. Poor woman, she probably did the only thing she could do at the time.

"You are right," said the tall stranger. "She did the one thing that could confuse us."

"Are you reading my mind?" I asked disbelievingly.

"Yes. She can block our thoughts, but you cannot. She made you believe you had the disk. By convincing you, she convinced us. We failed to follow her when we should have. By now she has put a great distance between herself and us, and may have already contacted some high authority."

"What's on the disk?"

"I will not tell you. No, not even at gunpoint."

"What will you do to Miss Allen if you catch up with her?"

"What name did she give you?" The tall fellow looked quizzical.

It dawned on me too late that I had a big mouth. Mentioning the name she was using, real or not, only helped them track her. I saw the tall fellow's eye on me, concentrating.

"Indra Stella Allen." He smiled. The first real expression I had seen on his face. "Interesting word play. You would call her an *interstellar alien*."

"She's one of you?"

"Yes."

That answered a lot of questions for me. But not all.

"Did she rebel and run away with your plans?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"She is a hybrid of human and alien parents, as I am. She has more sympathy for the human world and feels our plans are wrong. She is acting on that sympathy--foolishly. She could do us more harm than we would do--"

He stopped suddenly, looked over his shoulder at his little friends, then back at me.

"You do not need to know any of this. We are wasting time."

The tall fellow picked up the decoy package, put it in a pocket, then reached for my thirty-eight. I tightened my trigger finger. Something caught my movement, stopped it in a blink. I couldn't move at all. The tall man, if I could call him a man,

took the revolver and placed it at the far corner of my desk.

"My friends do not need to rely on hypnotism. They have much more powerful minds than I have. They can take direct control of your nervous system. Now...."

I've been amazed more than once in my life by just how fast a person's mind can race. Mine flashed at a dizzying speed. I reflected on how easily I was impressed by a pretty face and figure, how quickly I let her pass from a client to a prospect in my thinking, and how eagerly I imagined I might have a future with her if only I succeeded in helping her. Most of all I wished I could be two people just so I could kick myself for all the times I had similar imaginings about any attractive woman who walked through my door. Typical gumshoe. Stereotypical, rather. A guy smart enough to survive on the streets, egotistical enough to imagine he's hard-boiled, and stupid enough not to realize that secret soft spot in his heart is really in his head. That was me. I felt like the biggest idiot in the city. I wanted badly to blame this latest woman, to tell myself that it was her mental influence which took me in. But my common sense, what little I had, told me it was all my own doing.

"She would not do that to you." The tall guy seemed almost sympathetic. "Take some comfort in that thought."

"Still reading my mind?" I was surprised he could follow

the rapid pace of my confused mental processes. And I was bitter that I could not wallow in self-pity in privacy. "I hope you're not bored. Or amused."

"Not at all. I am intrigued by human complexities. But, now, we must finish this...."

I had a feeling--actually I was scared--this was my last moment of life. At least as I knew it. Would they kill me to silence me? Or would I end up in some ghastly extraterrestrial zoo for the rest of my pitiful days? I'd rather be dead than face that. I would have prayed for a merciful death if only my mind had one more second to race. But, just then, even my confused mental processes stopped. I--

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I woke up in my office. I was leaning back in my chair with my head drooping at a painful angle to one side. With a very cautious effort I slowly straightened my neck and rubbed it. Wow. I must have been like that all night. Dawn was well on its way. Plenty of early morning light was coming in the windows, giving the place that mellow look. I yawned and sat up. Then I started thinking.

What was I doing in my office at that hour? Why had I slept

there? I never did that before, no matter how late I worked. And why in the world was my revolver lying on the corner of the desk? I couldn't imagine why. If I needed it out of my holster, it was out of reach there. When I tried to stand, something in my side pocket bumped the arm of the chair. I pulled out my digital recorder. That was another funny thing. I usually kept it in my desk, and seldom took it along anywhere. Had I been somewhere? The display said twenty-one minutes were recorded. Of what? I put a finger on the playback button. I stopped. A strange hesitance lurked in my mind, an uncomfortable feeling that maybe I'd better not listen. I couldn't understand why I would feel that way, especially without knowing why. Did I know? Was some part of me afraid to face up to whatever was on that recorder? How could I go on like that? And for how long? I took a long, slow breath, paused, held my breath--stiffened--and--

I pushed the button.

END