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I first saw the second shadow in the reflection of a puddle.

Rain had fallen the night before, pooling between the headstones in the old cemetery where I kept watch. I was making my rounds at dawn, as I did every morning, checking that the gates were locked and the offerings left by mourners hadn't been disturbed by wind or animals.

The water was still. The sky above it gray and flat.

And in that mirror of rain, I saw two shadows stretching behind me.

I turned, expecting someone to be standing there. But the path was empty. Only weathered stone and dying grass, the iron fence at the hill's edge, and beyond it, the town still sleeping in the mist.

When I looked back at the puddle, both shadows remained.

Mine.

And another.

It stood at a slight angle to my own, as if cast by a light source that didn't exist. Taller than my shadow. Thinner. Its edges sharper, more defined.

I stepped to the side. My shadow moved with me.

The second shadow followed.

But not quite together. It lagged, just a fraction of a second behind, like an echo struggling to keep pace.

I told myself it was exhaustion. I had been keeper of the cemetery for—how long now? Time moved strangely when you lived among the dead. Days bled into one another. Seasons passed without announcement.

I bent and disturbed the water with my hand, scattering the reflection into ripples.

When it settled again, only one shadow remained.

I continued my rounds and thought nothing more of it.

But the second shadow did not leave.

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Over the following days, I began to see it everywhere. In the long afternoon light that slanted through the cemetery gates. In the brief flare of my lantern as I walked the paths at dusk. In the moonlight that fell across my small cottage at the hill's base.

Always slightly wrong.

Sometimes it moved before I did, as if anticipating my steps. Sometimes it lingered after I had already turned away, frozen in place while my own shadow continued on.

And no one else acknowledged it.

When the baker's widow came to tend her husband's grave, she walked right past me, nodding in greeting, her eyes sliding over the two shadows I cast as if only one existed. When the priest visited to bless a new burial plot, he stood beside me in the sun, and I saw his single shadow stretch across the grass next to my two.

He noticed nothing.

I began to wonder if I was losing my mind. If the years of tending the dead had finally caught up with me, if isolation had cracked something essential inside my skull.

But the shadow felt too real for madness.

Too deliberate.

It grew stronger as I grew weaker.

I hadn't noticed my own deterioration at first. The keeper's role demanded so little, physically—just walking, watching, maintaining. But lately, my legs had grown heavy on the hill's slope. My hands trembled when I lit the evening candles at the mausoleum gates. Sleep came in fragments, interrupted by dreams of soil and roots.

And as I faded, the second shadow sharpened.

It no longer lagged behind. Now it moved in perfect sync with me, sometimes even anticipating my gestures. When I reached for a gate latch, its hand was already there in the reflection. When I turned to face a visitor, it had already begun the motion.

It was learning me.

Or perhaps it had always known me, and I was only now becoming aware of what it already understood.

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One evening, as I locked the cemetery gates for the night, I turned and found the shadow standing beside me instead of behind me.

Not attached to my feet.

Not trailing from my body.

Just there. Parallel. Equal.

Facing the same direction I faced, as if we were two people standing side by side, waiting for something to begin.

I did not move.

The shadow did not move.

We stood together in the failing light, and I felt the weight of understanding settle into my chest like a stone dropping into still water.

This was not haunting.

This was inheritance.

The cemetery had been waiting for a keeper when I arrived.

I couldn't remember how long ago that was. Years, certainly. Perhaps decades. Time was strange here, as I said. The dead did not age, and those who tended them seemed to slow as well, caught in the amber of duty.

I had taken the role willingly. Or had I? The details were unclear now, softened by repetition and routine. I knew only that I had come here once, and I had never left. The cemetery needed someone to tend it—to keep the gates, to light the candles, to ensure the dead were honored and remembered.

And I had done so.

But keepers did not last forever.

We were not immortal. Only patient. Only still.

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And when the cemetery decided we were no longer needed, when our hands grew too unsteady or our hearts too tired, it called the next keeper home.

The second shadow was not following me.

It was waiting to replace me.

I began to test it.

When I walked the grounds, I stopped abruptly, watching to see if the shadow would stop with me or continue forward.

It stopped.

When I reached for the iron key that unlocked the mausoleum, I hesitated, pulling my hand back at the last second.

The shadow's hand completed the motion, grasping at air where the key should have been.

When I stood at the grave of the cemetery's founder—the oldest plot, the one from which all the others seemed to radiate—I closed my eyes and stepped backward.

The shadow stepped forward.

Into the space I had vacated.

Claiming it.

I understood then what I had been refusing to see.

The shadow appeared not when I was dying, but when I was no longer needed.

The cemetery had accepted its next keeper.

And I was free to go.

That night, I returned to the founder's grave.

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It stood at the center of the cemetery, beneath a willow whose branches swept the ground like a curtain. The headstone was simple granite, worn smooth by weather and time, the name barely legible.

This was the threshold. The heart of the place. Where keepers were chosen and keepers were released.

I stood before it as I had stood a thousand times before, my lantern casting light across the carved stone.

And beside me, the second shadow stood fully formed.

Not behind me.

Not trailing from my feet.

Beside me.

Solid. Separate. Ready.

In the lantern light, I could almost see features. The suggestion of a face. Hands that looked nearly real. A posture that mirrored my own but belonged to someone else entirely.

Someone who would walk these paths after I was gone.

Someone who would light the candles and lock the gates and keep the dead company through the long, silent nights.

I set the lantern on the founder's grave.

The shadow did not move.

I stepped back. One step. Then another.

The shadow remained where it was, standing at the threshold, its edges solidifying in the lantern's glow.

For the first time in years—decades, perhaps—I felt the weight lift from my shoulders. The invisible tether that had bound me to this place loosened, then released entirely.

I was no longer the keeper.

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I turned and walked toward the gates, my footsteps light, my breath coming easier than it had in so long.

Behind me, I heard nothing. No footsteps following. No voice calling me back.

Only the soft rustle of willow branches and the distant tolling of the church bell marking the hour.

I did not look back.

I knew what I would see.

The shadow, standing at the founder's grave, lantern in hand, beginning its watch.

Solid now. Real.

No longer waiting.

I left the cemetery as the sun rose, the gates swinging open at my touch as if they had been expecting this moment.

The town below was waking. Smoke rose from chimneys. Voices called greetings across cobblestone streets.

I stepped onto the road and felt the morning light fall across my shoulders.

Only one shadow stretched before me now.

Short. Ordinary. Singular.

Mine alone.

And for the first time in longer than I could remember, I cast no other.

Behind me, the cemetery stood silent on its hill.

Waiting, as it always had.

But no longer waiting for me.