

# SHADOWBRIDGE

by

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## Conferring with Gods

I.

The first time Leodora spoke to a god, it was at the top of a bridge tower and she was masked.

She went there to relax before her performance, to have time to be herself and answer to no one, not even herself.

That evening she climbed up the middle bridge tower of a cityspan called Vijnagar. It was a broad span in her experience, but her experience thus far was of only four spans on Shadowbridge — four grains of sand on an infinite beach.

The massive legs of the stone tower were ornamented with friezes of figures. She passed avatars and demons, monsters and heroes, row after row of them, each one separated by a stringcourse. On the side, where she went up the rungs hand over hand, the figures wrapped around from either face. Most were posed at the corners to stare at one another round the corners, and climbing in between them, she felt as if their painted eyes were watching her. Most of their identities, along with their stories, were unknown to her — each span had its own gods and tales, and she'd only been on Vijnagar a few days — but she did recognize some of the elements: the talaria that sprouted from one figure's ankles, the gnarled knobkerrie brandished by another. Some objects confounded her, and she hung awhile between heaven

and earth while trying to guess what purpose they served. One of the figures, in a long coat, was posed leaning around from the back edge and holding up a disk as if about to hand it to her. It looked like shell strung on a necklace until she observed that the necklace, rather than circling his throat, plugged into the figure's ears. What could that possibly be? And what legend could it be from?

Not only the queer bas relief figures, but the wide tower itself — one of three supporting the span — was too extraordinary in her estimation to have been created by the people of Vijnagar. Too high and too delicate. Too recondite. The tower and carvings must have been dreamed into being at the time the unseen gods of the Edgeworld had created the span itself.

At the top, Leodora curled her fingers into gouged handholds and pulled herself over the edge and onto the tower walkway. For a while she lay against the cool stone to catch her breath, then knelt on one knee.

To either side of her stood statues, more figures larger than life, two straight rows running the width of the whole span, overlooking it below the way gods were supposed to do. Unlike the obscure figures in relief below, these familiar ones would have been placed here by the people of Vijnagar, their personal contribution to the mythography of the towers.

She arose between them, pausing to readjust the plain black domino mask that she wore beneath her hood, and that disguised her. She was not the only person who liked to linger on the tower tops, and so she must be careful.

Mask in place, clothing dusted and smoothed, she turned to behold the world.

The sun hung like a spectacular gong behind the thin clouds on the horizon, not quite ready to relinquish the sky to the two deformed moons of Saphon and Gyjio. They were creeping up into the eastern sky behind her while the sun's dusking light spread molten copper across the sea, and painted the broad tower with its fire.

This was the hour when sacrifices were performed and spells cast and oracles consulted; the time when light and darkness split the world down below, and one could seek for glimpses of each in the other.

Dying wind plucked at her loose clothes. The breeze slipped up her sleeves and danced around her torso, billowing her tunic like a sail. It reminded her of the story of how Death came into the world.

In the ocean below, the shadowy shapes of large fish clustered around the huge support pier of the tower, there to breed in the warm, buoyant water. On many spans fishing off a pier was a popular pastime, but not on Vijnagar, where the people held many fish to be sacred, some by decree. No one's line dangled in among the fish she saw. The thought of fishing drew forth painful memories.

For most of her life Leodora had viewed Shadowbridge only from beneath a span. Now wherever she went she climbed the heights to look upon the world as though it might be something she could possess. As if she reigned with the lined-up avatars, in a sky palace somewhere. In the sun fire, she glowed like a copper goddess — a goddess of the Edgeworld, surveying the whole of Shadowbridge from beyond the moons. She would have climbed through the clouds themselves if there had been a ladder so tall.

She retreated from the western edge of the tower and walked along the lane between the statues.

Here was a figure of certain identity — the demigod Shumyzin, recognizable by the tusks protruding from his mouth. Facing west, he brandished a shield and short sword to hold off a clawing gorgon whose snarling face promised death. The swollen sun gave his terrible, pop-eyed, and unpainted features color. Almost health.

Hidden by him, Leodora squatted on the balls of her feet and peered out from beneath his shield down the row of statues. There was no one else on the tower tonight.

She pulled back her hood and untied the ribbons of the domino mask. She drew out her thick braid, untied it and let her hair fan out across her neck, her shoulders — hair as copper as the sunlight upon the sea.

Down below, hundreds of people and creatures milled about in the lanes and crooked byroads. She could peer straight down upon the crowning pavilions of minarets finished in

gold filigree; the sloping roofs of simple houses cast in darkness beneath them; and the colorful tower cupolas themselves, no two of them the same shade. In one nearby tower, a servant carried a torch from room to room, lighting candles and oil lamps, kindling globes of fairy light in window after window — a steadily rising spiral of candescent jewels.

Open fires lit Kalian Boulevard, the main thoroughfare. The first torchbearers would be emerging to look for work — for couples and parties they could escort from place to place. There was good money to be made by a well-spoken torchbearer.

Lights coruscated the length of the span all the way to the northernmost bridge tower, identical in size to the one on which she knelt. The salmon sunlight bathed the statues on its heights, too.

A goddess's peace settled upon her. She contemplated her temporary domain. "This is where I belong," she said. And it was true, and she had always known it. Never again would she live beneath the endless spans of the bridge of life. The breeze whispered across her face, suddenly cool. She glanced up.

"Hai," Shumyzin said in agreement.

His head bent to peer with apparent fury at her over the rim of his shield.

Leodora skittered back from beneath him.

The head of the statue tracked her over its shoulder. Shumyzin didn't look like a statue anymore. His skin was bluish beneath the sun's glow. His huge eyes glistened white with pinprick pupils. Around his tusks he was smiling. His golden armor gleamed.

"Who are you?" she asked, the only question she could think to ask.

"You don't know? I thought sure you did." His voice was a growl, as if gravel slid roughly inside his lungs.

"I —" She dared to look away from him. "Statues can't talk."

"But gods can."

"But a statue isn't —" she began, but gave up. Even she recognized her impertinence.

“— isn’t a god?” he finished. “And I suppose that a traveling storyteller posturing over a city that would eject her if it knew she was a woman should be?” He pointed his bronze sword at her.

She shook her head. Had he read her thoughts? She tried to gauge whether she could get to the side of the tower and reach the rungs before he caught her.

“If you’re so certain of your divinity, show me what you do. Tell me my story.”

“Tell?”

“That is what you do, isn’t it?” He looked at himself, at his colorless feet where the shadow of the world had risen to cut off the sunlight. “And you had better be quick, too, or I’ll be gone and it won’t count for anything.”

She goggled at him, unable to think.

“So, it was just empty talk, then,” Shumyzin derided her. “A child’s whimsy. A true god would know another god’s story. They know all the stories that are.”

Her jaw set defiantly. She didn’t like being taunted, not by anyone. She knew his tale, all right. Soter had taught it to her when she was eleven.

“Well?” challenged the demigod.

Leodora drew a deep breath and recited.

### ≈ The Tale of Shumyzin ≈

Shumyzin was the great conquering hero of the ancient span of Mankandikha. But if he hadn’t learned to conquer fear and anger first, no one now would know his name.

As a child Shumyzin bore many insults. He was an object of scorn, from adults as well as other children, because of the crooked, jutting teeth at the corners of his mouth. He had no tusks then, only big deformed and protruding molars. With his round eyes and pushed-out jaw, he looked more amphibian than human. One day the king of Mankandikha spotted him in the main street. He halted his palanquin to get a good look at the boy. A crowd gathered

around. They heard the king give Shumyzin a cruel nickname: a nickname that followed him everywhere thereafter.

“Frog,” proclaimed the king.

Shumyzin ran home in tears. The name chased him through the narrow streets. It followed him like a tail.

His mother was a mortal. Her name was Yemin. She said to him, “Don’t listen to them, little one. They know nothing about you.” She stroked his cheek. “Your father, the great god Gopurbh, weathered many insults, too, before he was given charge of all the winds. We have balmy days most of the time because he’s so hard to anger. You also are made for greatness if only you can learn to withstand their insults. I know this, because I’m your mother.” He let her voice and her promises soothe his troubled soul, and soon he fell asleep in her arms.

Now, everyone else claimed that Shumyzin’s father had been a local rich man’s son, Cabor the Drunk, who’d climbed into the wrong house one night and stupidly forced himself upon Yemin; afterward — the story went — Cabor’s father paid her a tidy sum to keep quiet about his idiot son’s indiscretion. Neither she nor the elder Cabor would speak of it at all — in fact both strenuously denied that such an incident had ever occurred. It was the drunken lout, Cabor himself, who spread the story. One time when the ugly child passed by, Cabor abruptly proclaimed, “That’s my bastard there. Look how he turned out!” The story spread quickly. People called Frog’s mother a whore. The boy seethed with the desire to kill them for it. But she wouldn’t let him. “I can bear their lies,” she said, “and so must you.”

He didn’t look like Cabor. He didn’t look like his mother. Or like anyone else in the entire city. Yet people often prefer scandals and gossip to rational thinking, and so the story became fact.

Frog grew up strong and steady. Unflappable. He weathered the worst taunts he could ever hear. The cruel jibes at his mother were the most awful, the hardest to bear. He worked daily for her, pushing a great grinding wheel that crushed grain into flour for bread. Yemin

baked and sold the bread. Over time her son's shoulders became striped with muscles, and his back grew wide. As he grew older, his grotesque visage changed, too. His eyes bulged more than ever and his twisted teeth straightened, forming two small vicious spikes, as if all his suppressed anger had taken form in the corners of his mouth. He became terrifying to see, and although he did nothing to suggest hostility, the taunting of him stopped.

Then one day the span was invaded by a demon army. Of all the citizens, Shumyzin alone didn't panic. Nor did he try to flee.

All those who did try to escape were cut down or rounded up to be slain later. The king who'd once made fun of Frog tried to bargain with the demons. They stripped and paraded him before his people to destroy the will of Mankandikha. His money and property were taken from him. The leader of the demonic army rode around in the king's fine palanquin, forcing eight naked women to carry it. They were whipped if the carriage went too slowly; and sometimes they were whipped anyway.

While all of this was happening, the avatar of Gopurbh appeared to Shumyzin in his mother's house, cloaking them both in mist, so that not even Yemin knew. The avatar said, "This is your day, and I am your father. Here are the means to defeat the fiends." The clever god gave his son a fine scimitar and shield, and golden armor.

Once Shumyzin had put the armor on, his father told him, "You can't be harmed today, nor seen in that armor by your enemies."

When the demon soldiers reached the street where Shumyzin and his mother lived, the smell of her bread drew them hungrily. They entered the shop, intending to steal its goods. They saw only Yemin at her oven, unarmed and helpless. They drew their swords to kill her.

Not one of them left the bakery alive.

Like a wave of heat Shumyzin slipped unseen through the enemy's midst, slaughtering them one after the other. With each he killed, his tusks grew larger.

Demons on the streets suddenly clutched at themselves and doubled over, spilling their life into the dust. Their limbs dropped off, their legs were slashed out from under them. The

survivors fled in terror from the lethal phantom. They knocked over their leader's stolen palanquin, smashing it as they clambered over the sides, kicking their king in their haste to get away. The whipped maidens scattered before them, shrieking.

When the demon king pushed himself out the window, Shumyzin glided invisibly over and cut off his head. Then he ran through the streets, shaking the gory trophy at the enemy. All they saw was the gaping, dripping head itself floating upon the air. Some of them jumped to their deaths in the sea. Others raced to put a thousand spans between them and that phantom. They heard a raw voice shout after them: "Tell everyone that Shumyzin, son of Gopurbh and Yemin, guards this place, and will take all your heads if you come back again."

After that, Shumyzin's heroic deeds fell upon the span like drops of monsoon rain. He became a legend, the defender of his city, the slayer of a thousand foes. Grateful for his protection, the citizens rejected their king — the same one who had belittled Shumyzin years earlier — when he tried to take back his office. They placed Shumyzin on the throne in his place. The hero proved to be a generous ruler. He married the maiden, Kyai, daughter of the sun. Although they'd humiliated him for so long, he exacted no penalty from the people ... save for one episode.

One afternoon he was alerted that Cabor the Drunk was causing trouble. He found Cabor in a narrow side street. The new king's self-proclaimed father was whipping a dwarf with a bamboo rod. Beside him lay a maiden whom he'd already beaten unconscious. Shumyzin flung Cabor against a wall hard enough to knock him senseless. He had his soldiers arrest the villain, and for a week exhibited him in a cage hanging outside his own house. He confiscated all of Cabor's property and wealth and gave it to the two people who'd been harmed. When the week was up, Shumyzin cut off Cabor's nose and ears, and threw him out of the city, off the span.

In this way — by refusing to tolerate intolerance — the hero brought tolerance to Mankandikha.

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“And that is the tale of how Shumyzin the Sufferer, once called ‘Frog,’ gained renown, but not how he and Kyai found bliss, which is another tale altogether.” She concluded with the traditional ending, the promise of the next story, spontaneously. She had been so caught up by it that she’d forgotten herself. Her hands were up, as if she’d been maneuvering her puppets. She supposed that she had. Self-consciously, she glanced at the demigod. He had tears on his cheeks.

He said, “I haven’t heard my beautiful Kyai mentioned in a very long time.”

“It’s better with puppets,” she responded, and when he growled she thought she’d angered him, but realized after a moment that the gravelly rumble was laughter.

He said, “Ah, Leodora. You tell the world of your genius but you doubt it to yourself.”

“You know my name.” “I’m a god, girl. I have to do something to warrant it besides killing a few mouth-breathing Jatos. Add that to your tale when you speak of those demons: Jatos is what they were, straight out of a sewer.”

She took note of the name, but was more curious about something else. “You haven’t heard your wife’s name in a long time? Isn’t she with you?” Even as she spoke she sought among the eikons for the figure of Kyai. The goddess was not represented in the statues nearby.

Shumyzin replied, “Death doesn’t work like that. You tell the stories — I know you know about Death.” He made to shake his head, and a look of alarm strained his features. He glanced down at his torso. The shadow of night had reached his collarbone. “Quick now, Leodora, come here. I must tell you something.”

Leodora got to her feet and took a reluctant step toward the frightening god.

“Faster!” he snapped.

She edged closer.

“Listen,” said Shumyzin. “I know the one you travel with. We’re old friends, he and I.”

“Soter?” she asked.

“Pah! Not the lush. The other one. The one who visits you in your sleep.”

She stared at him in awe.

The tiny black pupils fixed her. “I know the riddle of him.” The shadows touched his throat, and his voice shrank to a whisper. “And a warning. You rattle the darkness where you travel, Jax. A piece of it is sure to come calling.” His intense goggle-eyes regarded her in a way that imparted both his regard and concern for her. She had to look away from such intensity. His neck now in shadow, he wheezed, “One more thing, and the most important,” then fell silent. She looked up. A purple cloud had masked the sun, and Shumyzin’s head had returned to stone. He faced the gorgon, a statue again.

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For an eternity she stared at the streaks of water on the polished cheeks — the only evidence to convince her that she hadn’t dreamt the conversation with him. She waited, hesitant, hopeful, but when the cloud passed and the dying sunlight touched him again, he did not come back to life.

The overhead sky now twinkled with stars as if it were an inverted sea reflecting Vijnagar. Before the light disappeared altogether she must make the climb back to the ground. She hastily rebraided her hair, then curled her braid around her fist, tied it up and stuffed it inside the collar of her tunic. She pulled the hood up on the back of her head. Across the horizon, only a magenta swath remained now, as if the sun had bled out upon the sky.

She turned and knelt, placing her fingers in the handholds. She gave a final glance back but the statue remained gray and still.

With her left foot she felt for the first of the rungs carved in the side of the bridge, then pushed herself over the edge. In twilight she climbed quietly the rest of the way down, much more slowly than she’d climbed up.

By the time she reached the ground, night owned the sky. All the light now came from torches and lamps and the crescent of bold Saphon peering around a minaret.

She easily replaced her mask and set off along the boulevard.

People paid her no mind at all. They couldn't tell that she had just spoken with the demigod of Mankandikha.

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