



The Snow Queen's Shadow (preview)

By Jim C. Hines



The Snow Queen's Shadow: Preview

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The Snow Queen's Shadow

July 5, 2011 from DAW Books

ISBN: 978-0756406745

Price: \$7.99

352 Pages, Mass Market Paperback

Author Website: <http://www.jimchines.com>

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Chapter 1

The plan had been so simple. An hour or so before sunrise, Snow White and Talia would sneak into the Sailor's Bone inn. Talia would "persuade" the innkeeper to tell them which room held the two fugitive witchhunters who had recently snuck into Lorindar. Snow would cast a spell of sleep upon their quarry, who could then be brought to Whiteshore Palace to face trial.

The universe rarely cooperated with Snow's plans. She should have been halfway back to the palace by now, not staring down the pointy end of a silver-tipped arrow, wielded by a man known to have murdered at least sixteen witches, while fire spread through the inn's upper story.

It went without saying that this was entirely Talia's fault.

Snow's would-be prisoner went by the name of Hansel. He was middle-aged and built like a bear, with shaggy blond locks that hung just past his shoulders. He wore heavy furs over a thick leather vest, studded in brass. Knotted braids of hair dangled from his belt: trophies of his kills.

Hansel jabbed his longbow at Snow. "Call your witch friend. Tell her to bring my sister back."

"Talia's not a witch." Snow searched the empty tavern for anything she might use as a weapon. The occupants had fled into the cold right around the time Snow sent Hansel tumbling down the stairs. His sister had escaped onto the roof, with Talia close behind. "Besides, she never listens to me. If you'd like to put down that bow, we could head to the palace to wait for them."

“No thank you,” he said, his expression half sneer, half smile. “I’ve better things to do than be executed by your witch-loving king and queen.”

He stepped around a broken table, wincing as he put weight on his right leg. Blood darkened the area around the sharpened steel snowflake stuck in his thigh. Hansel had some sort of protection against her spell, but nonmagical weapons worked just fine. Had her aim been better, she might have ended things at the top of the staircase. On the other hand, then Talia never would have let her forget how brute force had triumphed where magic failed.

At least if Hansel killed her, she wouldn’t have to worry about Talia’s teasing. Snow knew the only reason he hadn’t fired was because he might need to bargain with Talia to get his sister back, but she had no idea how long he would wait. He didn’t strike her as the patient sort.

“Take off that necklace of yours,” Hansel said. “Slowly.”

Snow touched the back of her choker. Gold wire unraveled, and the choker fell into her hand, its small oval mirrors clinking together. She glanced at the largest, searching for Talia, but it was dark outside, and Talia was moving too quickly to make out any details. Snow concentrated, maintaining the thread between her choker and the mirrored bracelet Talia wore. If nothing else, Talia should hear their conversation and know what had happened.

“Toss it to the floor.”

Snow obeyed, throwing the choker so it landed at his feet. She moved sideways, putting another table between herself and Hansel. He stood so he could see both Snow and the door, and he was rumored to be good enough with that bow to put an arrow through her knee should she try for the stairs.

She heard shouts outside as neighbors worked to organize against the fire and keep it from spreading. The flames had reached the top of the staircase, and smoke darkened the ceiling. “That was an interesting charm you used to protect yourselves from my spell,” she said brightly. “The one that burst into flame when Talia ripped it from your neck? So you kill witches, but you’ll use witchcraft when it suits your purposes?”

He scowled. “You’re Allesandrian, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“So you’re old enough to remember the Purge.”

Snow’s smile vanished.

“I see that you are. You’ve seen the damage such power can do. How many people did Queen Curtana murder?”

“Officially? Forty-seven.” Unofficially, the tally was far higher. Forty-seven men, women, and children were known to have been executed for treason during the week-long purge, convicted only by the secrets Snow’s mother had plucked from her magic mirror. Snow forced the cheerfulness back into her voice. “Two years ago, a man from southern Lorindar murdered twelve people with an axe. Should we kill all the woodsmen? And what of you? You shoved a witch into an oven when you were younger. Obviously we should hunt down and destroy all bakers!”

As she finished speaking, she waved a hand at her choker. Sunlight flashed from the mirrors. Snow crouched low and upended the table between herself and Hansel. She heard the snap of Hansel’s bow, and an arrow punched through the wood a handspan from her face.

She pulled a long knife from her belt and thumbed a hidden catch on the hilt. A circular plate with an engraved snowflake swiveled open at the center of the crossguard, revealing a small mirror. Through the mirror, she saw Hansel stumbling toward the door, one hand shielding his eyes.

Snow jabbed her knife at the door and spoke a quick spell. The door slammed shut.

Hansel merely lowered his shoulder and smashed his way through. Cold air rushed into the tavern.

Snow swore and hurried to retrieve her choker. Her head throbbed from the magic she had used tonight, an old injury warning of worse to come if she continued to push herself.

She shoved the pain aside as she followed Hansel onto the street. Sixteen witches dead, in Lorindar and elsewhere. Like Snow’s mother, Hansel killed indiscriminately and without remorse.

Snow had been too young to stop the Purge, but she’d be damned before she let Hansel murder another witch.

She squeezed through the gathering crowd, diverting a part of her attention to her choker and her connection to Talia’s mirror. “Where are you?”

“On my way back to the inn.” The choker relayed Talia’s voice as clearly as if they were running side-by-side. Talia didn’t even sound winded. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine!” Her boots splashed through slush and snow as she ran. The sky to the east was just beginning to brighten, but the streets were still dim. Her mirrors enhanced her vision, helping her spy Hansel limping up Mill Street. Snow cut through an alley, hoping to intercept him. The snowdrifts were higher here where the three-story buildings

protected the streets from the sun. “He’s making his way toward Holy Crossroads.”

“Probably heading for the gates.”

Snow bit back a yelp as her feet skidded on the cobblestones. A rain barrel had frozen and split, and ice covered much of the alley. She slowed, chafing at the delay, but she would never catch Hansel if she slipped and snapped an ankle.

The crowds had already begun to fill the streets at Holy Crossroads, eager to hear the preachers and their daily performance. The preachers’ garb had grown more flamboyant over the years, as had their rhetoric, as each shouted and condemned his neighbor to eternal damnation.

Even if Snow had been able to spot Hansel, the crowd shielded him from both magical and mundane attacks. She slipped into the crowd, elbowing her way past the gawkers. “Danielle, are you listening to this?”

Princess Danielle had remained behind at Whiteshore Palace. “I’m here. Did you really set the Sailor’s Bone on fire?”

“That was Talia’s fault! And if they get that bucket line organized, I’m sure they can save part of the building.”

A priest of the Fairy Church stepped into the middle of the street, blocking her way. He raised a hand to her. “No mundane errand is more important than your immortal soul,” he shouted. “Enter the house of the fairy saviors. Confess your sins and receive their blessings!”

Snow smiled. “I like my sins.”

The priest looked to weigh twice as much as Snow. Had he stood his ground, she would have been hard pressed to move him. But Snow had spent years working with Talia, and had picked up a number of tricks. She lowered her shoulders and ran, showing no sign of slowing. The priest stepped back. That move cost him his balance, and moments later he was tumbling into the slush on the side of the road, earning shouts from his followers and cheers from the other churches.

“What was that?” Danielle asked.

“Nothing. Can you get word to the guards at the southern gate?”

“It will take time, but I’ll see what I can do.”

A splash of red drew her attention to a snowbank on the left. She plucked her steel flake from the snow where Hansel had discarded it. Droplets of blood marked his path toward the gate. Snow ran around a mule-drawn wagon, then stopped to search the intersection in front of the gate. The main avenue was broad enough for three carriages to pass side by side. Two other roads branched away from the gate, parallel to the wall. There were too many people and too much space.

The stone wall wasn't as impressive as the one surrounding the palace, but Snow doubted Hansel could have scaled it with his wounded leg. The barred iron gate was wide open, though. Danielle's message must not have gotten through. Snow approached the closer of the two guards on duty. "Have you seen a witchhunter pass through here? Shaggy and bleeding, carrying an enchanted bow?"

He stared. "Are you all right, miss?"

"I've had better days." Snow sighed and turned away, just as Talia came running up the far street.

"Don't tell me you lost him."

Despite her annoyance, Snow grinned at the sight of poor Talia, bundled tight against the winter cold. Talia had grown up in the deserts of Arathea, and viewed snow as a punishment delivered personally by vengeful gods. She wore a thick wool cloak, and a knitted scarf covered her mouth and nose. Only her hands were bare, so she could better grip the various weapons hidden about her person. At the moment, she had one hand tucked beneath her arm for warmth while the other held her hood low to protect her face from the wind.

"I haven't lost anyone." Snow crouched to scoop a handful of slush, crushing it into a ball. She tilted her steel snowflake, allowing a single drop of blood to fall onto the slush. Tucking the weapon away, she whispered a spell to harden the ball to ice. "I just thought it was more sporting to give him a head start."

Her head pounded as she cast another spell. She blinked back tears, turning it into a wink when she caught Talia watching her. She switched the ice to her other hand and hurled it into the air. At its peak, the ice jerked to the east as if caught by the wind, though the air was still. It plummeted back to earth, the blood magically guiding its flight more than a block past the gate. The crowd at the gate hid Hansel from view, but Snow heard the impact, followed by loud swearing.

More shouts followed. By the time Snow and Talia made their way past the crowd into an alley between a butcher's shop and a tavern, Hansel was ready. He aimed his bow at Snow, the string drawn back. "Where is my sister?"

"I don't know," Snow said. "Let's go ask the nice guards at the gate if they've seen her."

The bow didn't waver. Snow glanced at Talia.

"She fell off a roof and broke her leg." Talia stepped sideways, away from Snow. "I tied her up at the hitching post a few blocks over. Danielle said she'd send men to collect her."

“Wait, you just left her there?” Snow asked.

“I had to make sure you didn’t get yourself killed,” Talia shot back. Snow jabbed a finger at Hansel. “I found him all by myself, thank you.”

“And now he’s got a bow aimed at you!”

Snow shrugged. “We can’t all throw people off of rooftops.”

“I didn’t throw her!”

A brown shape swooped from the wall. A small hawk flew through Hansel’s drawn bow, its claws neatly plucking the arrow from the string. He jumped back, releasing the string so it snapped against his arm.

Snow smiled. Her choker flared to life.

Hansel turned to run, but his feet slipped on the magically-slick ice. He rolled over and pulled a knife from his boot.

Snow gestured, and an icicle snapped from the eaves overhead. It shot down as if launched by a crossbow, piercing his arm. He screamed, and the knife dropped to the road.

Talia had her own knives out now. She kept one raised as she approached, as if daring Hansel to try something.

Snow leaned against the wall, closing her eyes against the pain throbbing beneath her skull. The worst should pass soon, but it would be at least a day before she fully recovered. She wiped her face. “I assume the hawk was your doing?”

“Oh good.” The cheerfulness in Danielle’s voice carried quite well through Snow’s choker. “I was afraid he wouldn’t reach you in time.”

Talia sheathed one of her knives and tossed the bow to Snow. Hansel grabbed her wrist, but Talia took his fingers in her hand and twisted, flipping him onto his stomach and eliciting another shout of pain. By the time the guards arrived, she had taken an array of blades from Hansel’s person.

Snow plucked one of the mirrors from her choker and tossed it to the closest guard. “Talk to your princess. She’ll explain.”

She waited long enough to make sure the guards had everything under control, then grabbed Talia’s hand and tugged her away. “Come on. The bakery should be open soon. I want cookies.”

“What about your mirror?” Talia asked.

“It will find its way home eventually.”

Talia shook her head, smiling despite herself. “You enjoyed this.”

“Didn’t you?” Snow asked, giving her a sidelong glance. Talia had tugged her scarf down beneath her chin. Wisps of black hair framed a stern face, but amusement crinkled the corners of her eyes. Snow

grinned. "It reminds me of the time Queen Bea sent us out to find that frog who was impersonating a prince to harass young maidens."

"I still say you should have let me cook him," said Talia. "Fresh frog legs, soaked in butter and sprinkled with nadif spice--"

"I'll take the cookies, thanks." Snow made a face. "You keep your frog."

"Snow? Talia?" The urgency in Danielle's tone caused Snow's stomach to tighten.

"What's wrong?" Snow yanked the largest mirror from her choker, rubbing the glass clean with her sleeve. It was hard to make out much detail in the tiny glass, but Danielle looked like she was fighting tears.

"It's Beatrice."

#

Snow had foreseen this day a year and a half before, when a mermaid stabbed Queen Beatrice in the chest with a cursed blade. Snow had done everything she could, magically stitching the wound and using every potion and poultice she could think of to help the queen heal. Her efforts had given the queen an extra eighteen months of life, but even magic had limits, and death could only be denied for so long.

"We're here," Snow whispered as they reached the palace, counting on her mirrors to send her voice to Danielle. "Is Bea--"

"She's still alive," Danielle said.

Snow allowed herself one moment of relief before turning to Talia. "There's something I need to take care of."

Talia whirled, her eyes wide. Snow had seen Talia angry before, but rarely had that anger been directed at her. Not like this. "Whatever it is, it can wait."

"No, it can't." Snow stepped away.

"Beatrice is dying." Talia's rage slowly shifted to disbelief. "What could possibly be more important?"

Snow shook her head. "Tell Beatrice . . ." Bea would have understood, but not Talia. No words could make this right with her, and the longer Snow stood here, the less time she would have.

Talia grabbed Snow's arm. "Beatrice took you in. She gave you a home after you fled Allesandria. She cared for you like her own daughter."

"You think I don't know that?" *And now it's my turn to care for her.* Snow twisted away. Anger she could take, but the pain and disappointment in Talia's eyes were too much. Talia would understand soon. "I'm sorry."

Talia's lips moved, as though she were searching for words. Instead, she turned her back and hurried down the hallway, the soles of her boots echoing on the tile floor.

"Talia--" Snow started after her, but forced herself to stop. Years of spellcasting had given her practice at pushing her own emotions and turmoil aside when she needed. Growing up with a mother who punished her for the slightest transgression, whether real or perceived, had only strengthened her self-control.

Most of the time, she simply chose not to use it.

Word of Bea's condition had obviously spread through the palace. Voices were muffled, the cheerful gossip of the servants replaced by somber whispers. Snow heard more than one woman weeping quietly behind closed doors.

She made her way through the palace toward the royal bedchamber. Given Beatrice's state, the room should be abandoned. Bea had been moved to a room on the ground floor after she became too weak to climb the steps, and King Theodore would be with his wife.

Once Snow reached the bedroom, she shut the door behind her and checked to make sure she was alone. She stepped past the bed to the fireplace, where a few coals glowed within the ashes. Taking an iron poker, she jabbed a brick in the back of the fireplace, opening a hidden panel in the wall. She squeezed inside and yanked the panel shut behind her until it clicked into place.

Sunlight shone from her choker as she made her way down a narrow stairway to the secret rooms hidden beneath the palace. Her light gleamed from weapons of every shape and size as she made her way through the armory toward her personal library and, most importantly, her magic mirror.

Tall as Snow herself, made of flawless glass and framed in platinum, the mirror dominated the wall where it stood. As she strode into the room, the glass responded to her will, showing her Queen Beatrice.

The library was a mess, with books strewn about the floor and falls of hardened wax dripping over the closest shelves where her candles had burned themselves out. Snow grabbed a discarded cloak of white fox skin from the floor. These rooms were refreshingly cool in the summertime, but come winter they grew cold enough she could see her breath.

A mummified cat was tucked away in one corner. A bundle of roses hung from one of the shelves, their petals dried and wrinkled. She had rolled the carpet up against the wall, and the stone floor was covered in chalk scribblings. For months now, every time Danielle came down,

Snow had watched her fight the urge to scrub the library clean from top to bottom.

Pulling the cloak over her shoulders, Snow eased into the wooden chair in front of an old, heavily stained table. In the mirror, King Theodore sat beside the queen, holding her hand. His eyes were shadowed and shone with tears, but he had forced a smile for his wife. Danielle and Prince Armand sat on the opposite side of the bed, while Talia stood in the corner of the room. It appeared as though Tymalous, the royal healer, had already retired from the room.

Snow wasn't certain Beatrice could even see them anymore. Heavy blankets buried her from the neck down, almost hiding the faint rise and fall of her chest. Her skin was like wrinkled parchment. Her hair had thinned, and her body was little more than a shadow of the woman who had rescued Snow from Allessandria seven years ago.

In all of Snow's planning over these past months, her one fear had been that she wouldn't make it in time. That Bea would die suddenly, before Snow could reach her mirror.

Snow turned sideways, keeping the mirror in the edge of her vision. Her table held a single fat beeswax candle, dirty yellow and brittle from the cold. To one side sat a bronze mug, half-full of fairy wine. She took the candle in both hands, checking the silver wick that curled from the wax.

A quick spell ignited the candle. She wrinkled her nose as the initial puff of smoke carried the smell of burning hair through the library. She had spun Beatrice's hair into the wick more than a month before.

A puff of breath guided the smoke toward the mirror. "Mirror, mirror, proud and tall. Mirror, mirror, seeing all. Help me reach the dying queen. Help Beatrice to hear my call."

Talia would have teased her. Snow had never been much of a poet, but the clumsy rhymes helped her focus her magic. She blew again, and again the black smoke dissipated against the glass. Snow closed her eyes, pushing back against the pounding in her head. The third time she tried, the smoke passed through the mirror into the queen's room.

Snow carefully returned the candle to the table. She watched the mirror closely. The smell of burnt hair had mostly faded, and neither the king nor the queen appeared to notice the thin trail of smoke drifting over their heads.

She reached over to pick up the mug of wine, finishing the contents in three swallows. Everything was prepared. Now there was nothing to do but wait.

The candle had lost a quarter of its height when Beatrice's breathing changed, becoming strained. Theodore's fingers tightened around the queen's hand. He kissed her knuckles and knelt beside her, whispering so softly Snow could barely hear. On the other side of the bed, Danielle, Armand, and Talia crowded close. Armand's cheeks were wet as he put his free hand on his father's shoulder. Danielle called for Father Isaac, who stepped into the room, praying softly.

Snow swiped tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. Between one breath and the next, Beatrice's body appeared to relax. For the first time in months, the tension left her face.

The candle flame flickered higher, becoming a deep red. Snow pressed her fingers to the mirror. The pain in her skull flared as her spells responded to the queen's death. "Follow the trail, Bea."

The smoke, nearly invisible in the shadowed room, should have shone like a beacon to Queen Bea's spirit. Snow had tested the spell dozens of times over the past months, calling the souls of mice, rats, birds, even an old hound she had discovered half-frozen in the streets . . . but never a human.

The flame began to shiver. Bea had discovered the trail. "It's me," Snow whispered. "Stay with us."

The mirror would hold Beatrice for now, though it wasn't an ideal solution. It was one thing to trap and hold a soul; the true challenge had been teaching herself how to create a body. She glanced at the discarded books, tomes that described everything from the making of fairy changelings to a spell that could form a new body from flowers, of all things. Snow had combined the different magics into her own--

The flame stilled.

"Bea?" Snow stood, toppling the chair. "Don't turn away."

Bea would be disoriented, like most souls newly freed from their bodies, but the touch of Snow's magic should have been familiar. She brought the candle closer to the glass, thickening the thread of smoke passing into Beatrice's room. "I know you can hear me."

King Theodore straightened, sniffing the air, but Snow ignored him. Her heart pounded her ribs as though fighting to escape. This was taking too long. In every test, the soul had moved into her mirror as the body exhaled its last breath. Either Beatrice was unable to find her way . . . or else she was choosing not to follow. "Think about your grandson. This is your chance to stay, to be a part of his life and watch him grow up."

Nothing. Snow passed her fingers over the candleflame, which doubled in size. Every spirit for miles around should have been able to

see it. "Beatrice, please. We need you. Don't--"

The flame quivered and died.

"No!" A thought was enough to renew the flame, but it was too late. The trail had been broken.

Beatrice Whiteshore -- the woman who had saved Snow's life, who had given her a home and purpose and a family -- was gone.

Snow pulled her hand from the mirror. Her fingers were numb, and cold enough to leave frost outlines on the glass.

She stumbled back. Her hip bumped the table. Her vision blurred, and she closed her eyes against the stabbing pain in the back of her head, the price she paid for overexerting herself. It was nothing compared to the pain of her failure.

It should have worked. It *had* worked, in every test she had performed. So many spirits roamed this world after death, refusing to heed the call of whatever followed. Snow had encountered them again and again: jars enchanted to hold the souls of the dead, ghosts who moved from one body to the next . . . she had once seen an entire army of the dead rise to serve their master.

Danielle's mother had remained with her, surviving in the hazel tree Danielle planted in their garden. She had gifted Danielle with a silver gown and glass slippers, allowing her to attend the ball where she met Armand. She continued to defy death to this day, living on in the enchanted glass blade of Danielle's sword, all for the love of her daughter.

What of Snow's own mother, Queen Rose Curtana? Rose's ghost had lingered for years, searching for a way to regain her power. She had plotted with Danielle's stepsisters, hoping to possess the body of Danielle's child.

But Beatrice had turned away.

"Why didn't you stay?" Bea had been more of a mother to Snow than Rose Curtana ever was. If Bea had died naturally, taken by the ailments of age, that would have been one thing. But she could have lived for many more years. She should have lived. Would have, if Snow had been skilled enough to save her. If she had been strong enough.

Snow stared into the mirror. The glass showed only her own face. Black hair dusted with white. Red-veined eyes, swollen and shadowed. Faint wrinkles around the eyes, and laugh lines at the corners of her mouth. With every year, she looked more like her mother.

She picked up the candle. Clear wax burnt her fingers as it spilled onto the floor. She should leave. Find Danielle and Talia.

The thought made her wince. Danielle would forgive her for not being there with Bea, but Talia was another story. Talia was angry and hurting. She had known Beatrice a long time. Almost as long as Snow.

"You're safe now," Beatrice had said on that first journey to Lorindar. Snow had woken from a nightmare in the middle of the night, screaming loudly enough to wake half the crew. The smell of burning flesh had been so real. She had thought she was back in Allessandria, reliving her duel with her mother. Beatrice had held her, running her hands through Snow's hair and whispering softly, *"I'll look after you."*

Snow flung the candle away. It broke into pieces, splattering hot wax over the stone wall.

She stared at the broken chunks of wax for a long time. There were other spells. Spells her mother had known, magic Snow had never tried. Slowly, she reached down to take the largest piece of wax from the floor.

She pressed the wax directly to the mirror, drawing a simple circle. She adjusted her hold, using a corner to sketch the more detailed symbols of binding. A modified summoning circle soon took shape on the glass. She finished the final characters, working Beatrice's name into the runes, and tossed the wax aside.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall. Let Queen Beatrice hear my call. Seek her out where e'er she be. Mirror, find my queen for me." The words spilled forth without thought. The mirror changed, once again showing Queen Beatrice's lifeless body. Armand and Danielle knelt together at her side. Tears spilled freely down Danielle's cheeks.

Snow scowled and pushed beyond the image. That was but the body. Where was Beatrice's soul?

Light filled the mirror, bright as the sun. Snow squinted but refused to turn away. The light spread into the library. She felt as though she were falling into the glass.

She grabbed the mirror's frame with both hands. Wisps of fog curled from the glass. She peered into the light, trying to see what lay beyond, trying to follow Beatrice's soul wherever it had gone.

Never had the mirror responded so easily to her will. She felt as though she flew through the sky. In Snow's hands, the mirror could pierce Heaven itself if that was what it took to find Beatrice.

Sweat made her grip slippery. She tightened her fingers until they cramped. The wax runes began to flake away from the glass.

They didn't matter. The reflection of the runes remained in the mirror, their power pouring forth in pursuit of the queen.

She blinked to clear the tears from her vision. Her blood battered her

head from within as though straining to crack the skull. Her body felt numb, and she clung to the mirror to keep from falling. Through the pain, a part of her marveled at what the mirror had done, reaching out so far in pursuit of the dead. If only she could see beyond the light.

“Come back to us, Bea.” Silence swallowed her words. Snow wasn’t even certain she had spoken aloud. She could no longer make out the library around her. Nothing existed save the light and the place that lay on the other side. The place Beatrice’s spirit had gone.

The first crack made no sound. With her hands clenched around the frame, she felt the glass shift ever so slightly. Pain exploded behind her eyes as she tried to focus not on the light, but on the mirror’s surface, where a white line now curved across the center of the glass.

Beatrice was there. She was so close. Snow could feel the pressure from beyond the mirror, as though Bea was pushing to escape back into this world.

Another crack grew from the center of the mirror, curving up and to the right to create a triangular shard that might have fallen if Snow hadn’t moved her hand to hold it in place.

Lines spread in a starburst from her hand. Fragments of glass no larger than pebbles fell to the floor. Blood dripped down the frame, though Snow hadn’t felt the cuts.

The magic surged like a living thing. She imagined she could hear Talia’s voice, chastising her. How many times had Talia warned her against bending the laws of the universe too far? Push hard enough, and things were going to snap. Even her mother’s mirror had limits. Snow tried to end her spell, but it was far too late.

This was a hell of a time for Talia to be right.

The light faded as the cracks spread through the rest of the mirror. For a moment, Snow saw herself in the reflection, her features distorted by the broken glass. Herself, and something more.

“Oh, mother. What did you do?”

The Snow Queen’s Shadow, coming July 5, 2011.
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