

The Job Interview

A Shadow World Supplemental Scene

“...and this is the main training facility, where you’ll be evaluated before being assigned a probationary patrol team.”

David looked around the converted warehouse. “Lovely.”

The Lieutenant’s eyes narrowed at his tone. “We’ve been in transition,” she said coldly. “Prime Arrabiccì recently turned over the Elite to a new Second and there have been a lot of changes with more to come.”

He paused. “Why weren’t you promoted to Second? I thought you had been in the Prime’s service since he took the Signet.”

The cold turned to ice. “The Prime had his reasons.”

“Right...such as the fact that gang wars have been tearing this territory apart and his old Second could barely keep a patrol schedule straight...before he was beheaded, that is?”

Faith crossed her arms. “Second Riggs was an excellent warrior but he freely admitted his leadership experience was limited. The Prime realized he needed help but by then Riggs was already dead.” She leveled a look of near-loathing on David and added, “I’m sure if you have suggestions for improvements the new Second will be happy to hear them.”

David smiled. “I’ve heard the stories, Lieutenant. He’d cut my balls off and choke me with them.”

Now she smiled with false sweetness. “I can’t imagine why.”

Then she quickly returned to all-business and resumed the tour. “This way to the armory.”

He followed her through the broad expanse of the training room, which did look like it was in the middle of being redesigned—there was a new lighting system going in, and crates of some sort of equipment in the back that two Elite were in the process of unpacking. One appeared to be some kind of wood flooring and the other, weapons.

“Swords?” David asked. “I thought wood-tipped bullets were the new fashion.”

Faith started to snap at him, but saw that the question was genuine and gave him a genuine answer. “The new Second believes that they are impractical and that the design won’t be able to keep up with weapons development. Something to do with the rounds fragmenting.”

David paused again just outside the door she’d led him to. “He’s right. There are only certain guns that can fire them without the bullets completely disintegrating. The newer firearms the military are phasing in can’t use them, so chances are in a decade they’ll be useless to anyone with a new model gun.”

Faith’s eyebrow lifted slightly. “You know your weapons.”

He shrugged. “I know physics. Wood isn’t hard enough to survive being shot through a gun barrel without blowing apart.”

He thought, just for a second, he might have impressed her. She was a lovely woman, in a sexless sort of way—finely honed like a sword herself, severe. He wondered what she’d look like out of uniform.

Probably best not to find out.

She was a little angular for his taste anyway. He preferred women with actual breasts.

“In here you’ll find your standard-issue gear,” she was saying. “Each Elite has his own compartment here on the wall. When you sign onto your shift you pick up your weapons, then return them at the end of the night.”

David eyed the rows of swords, knives, and stakes hanging on pegs and hooks, each set with a number clearly painted above it. Most of the weapons looked new. He walked along the wall until he found his own: 31.

“I have my own sword,” he said, taking down the blade that had been assigned to him and scrutinizing it carefully.

“All non-issued weapons have to be cleared with the Second,” she replied. “Now, if you’ll excuse me I have a patrol meeting to attend to. Your first shift starts tomorrow at sundown—you know the way to the barracks.”

“Wait,” he said. “Am I allowed to take these out into the training room to try them out?”

“Just be sure you don’t leave the building with them unless you’re on duty.”

He turned back to the blade as she left. David frowned. This wasn't going to do—it was too light, too short. It looked vaguely Japanese in design...a folded blade...he'd never used anything like it.

David took the sheath down and buckled it to his belt, along with the knife and stake, experimenting with where they hung. The long coats he'd seen the other Elite wearing made sense—there was no way they could walk around the city with this kind of steel and not be noticed by everybody.

Sighing, he returned to the training room and moved off to a corner where anyone walking past probably wouldn't notice him. He drew the sword, expecting it to feel wrong—no standard-issue blade would be balanced properly for a left-handed warrior...but when he curled his fingers around the grip, he found it was perfect, as if it had been made for his hand.

David swung it through the air a few times to test the balance, and it was amazing—someone had known he was left-handed, but how? No one had asked. This group didn't even run trials; their numbers were so low and the death rate so high that there simply wasn't time. They took whoever signed on. The new Second had only been here a couple of weeks but already the casualties had dropped significantly. Perhaps the stories David had heard weren't as far-fetched as he'd believed.

"You must be the new peacock," came a voice.

He turned, instinctively holding back his start; he hadn't heard anyone approaching, but the vampire watching him was far closer than he should have gotten without David even sensing he was there.

David eyed the stranger, who would appear, to a human, a boy of perhaps seventeen, with wide eyes in a strange color of pale blue that was a little bit purple and dark hair down almost to his waist. He wore the same uniform David did, and similar weapons, though since he was a good six inches shorter than David his sword wasn't quite as long. He looked rather fragile, in all honesty.

"No wonder this place is falling apart," David said. "Arrabiccis should know better than to hire ballerinas."

The boy didn't react except to smile. There was something sly in that smile, almost...David wasn't sure what to call it, but it made him feel strange, acutely uncomfortable, as if the boy was seeing far more than he should.

"Any good with that?" David asked, trying to cover his reaction, indicating the sword.

"It's new," was the answer. He had a faint accent, David noticed, a muddled Irish. "I don't have a lot of experience with it. But I'm pretty good."

“Care to demonstrate?”

The boy tilted his head slightly to the side, and again David felt...measured, weighed, and...strange. David had met all sorts of vampires in his time, but there was something he couldn't quite put his finger on about this one, something...

The boy lifted a shoulder in an indefinite shrug. “Why not?” He pointed at the floor. “Training circle,” he said. “Ever use one?”

David rolled his eyes. “I'm not a complete amateur. We spar inside the line. It's not exactly brain surgery.”

They stood across from each other inside the circle and each drew his sword; David wasn't used to this kind of blade, but as he'd said, he was no amateur. The boy didn't look like he could outfight a poodle.

That is, until he was holding the sword.

Something almost imperceptible shifted in the boy's demeanor, as if along with unsheathing the blade he'd drawn himself out of hiding; his energy changed, that fragility evaporating and his pale eyes hardening.

In that moment David knew he was doomed.

David's mind had time to register that the boy's sword was not, in fact, the same as his own—definitely not standard Elite issue—before the fight was on.

Blade slammed into blade. David was shocked at the strength that met his stroke, but he didn't have time to let that shock show; he spun backward and parried, but within a few seconds he knew he was outmatched. The boy moved faster than any vampire David had ever fought before. He had a lethal grace that was frankly astonishing—and before David even knew what was happening, he felt the sword being knocked from his hand and watched, dumbstruck, as it clattered to the ground...just before his opponent kicked him hard in the ribs and sent him sprawling.

Gasping, tasting blood, David stared at the ceiling trying to blink the stars out of his eyes, and nearly choked when a boot came down solidly on his neck.

The point of the sword—whose craftsmanship David saw was masterful, the blade carved intricately with some kind of script—hovered just above David's face.

“This is Ghostlight,” the boy said quietly. “Pray you never see her this closely again.”

“How...did you do that?” David panted.

An eyebrow raised. “How did I beat you? You’re shit, that’s how. You have the grace of a wrecking ball. With a body like that you should be taking three heads a minute, not falling on your ass in thirty seconds. If you intend to be of any use to me, boy, you’ve got a lot to learn.”

David stared up at him. “You’re...”

He lifted his free hand and attached a silver insignia to the collar of his shirt.

David groaned. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

The Second lifted his foot from David’s neck and took a step back, swinging the sword—Ghostlight—around and sheathing it smoothly. “Deven O’Donnell, Second in Command of the Western Elite.”

“I’m—“

“I know who you are.”

“I have—“

“I don’t care,” the Second cut him off. “I’m sure you’re very impressed with yourself, but you have not impressed me so far, and I am the one that matters here. Now get up.”

David stood, eyes still locked on the Second, who was staring back at him with disdain. Now that he’d had a moment, David could see how muscular the vampire was, how powerful—he held himself like royalty, just like Arrabiccì did, but where the Prime brought to mind an aged but still-virile military commander, the Second was some kind of wild creature more than willing to sharpen his claws on David’s jugular.

The Second walked around him in a slow circle, and again David felt uncomfortable—he’d been looked over by plenty of people, but there was an intimacy in the Second’s gaze that David wasn’t sure how to deal with. It was as if the appraisal involved removing layer after layer of David’s personality and history and left him feeling something he rarely ever felt: vulnerable.

Finally, he stood in front of David again, eyes traveling from David’s feet up to his face, almost lingering.

David saw something like humor flicker in those eyes. “Is the room too warm for you, Elite?” he asked.

David swallowed. “No, sir.”

“Your ears are red.”

“Forgive me, sir, I don’t really have conscious control over facial blood vessel dilation.”

Another smile. “I’ll keep that in mind.” After another long look, he nodded once, as if to himself, and drew his sword again. “*En garde.*”

“But, sir...I’m not on duty until—“

“Did I ask you for your work schedule, boy?”

“No, but—“

“Are you incapable of following orders?”

David couldn’t stop himself. “Only from people who need to stand on a stool to look me in the eye, sir.”

He really should have expected it, but still, the impact of his back with the ground caught him completely off guard, as did the boot on his neck.

The Second stared down at him for a long moment without speaking. David was fairly sure he was about to be thrown out of the Elite before he’d even started his first official shift—maybe that would be best, given how things were going.

But to his surprise, the Second finally smiled...this time wickedly. “Oh, this is going to be fun,” he said, stepping off of David’s neck again. “Now, get up.”

He offered a hand, and David regarded it warily for a moment, but the dare in the Second’s eyes was more than simply intimidating, or infuriating...it was irresistible.

Yes...this is going to be fun.

David grinned, reached up, and took his hand.