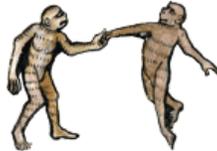


# The Greater the Shadow

Once, in a small, rugged village ringed by hills that rolled on like waves, there was a girl named Elen. The land was hard, but the people were harder, chiseling their lives from the stubborn earth. Elen spent her days tending sheep in the fields, herding them through meadows of thick grass where the wind whispered secrets no one had time to listen to. Except her.



One day, as the sun hung high, she found herself wandering further than usual. Her flock grazed, oblivious, while she explored. That's when she saw it: a tree, tall and solitary, rising in the middle of the meadow. It was unlike any tree she'd ever seen, its branches stretching skyward as though daring to touch the heavens. Its roots gripped the earth with a defiance she recognized in herself.

"Could it be climbed?" she thought, staring at the rough bark. Her hands itched to try. She took a step closer, then stopped. The shadow of the tree sprawled across the ground, dark and wide, creeping toward her like a warning.

The closer she moved, the bigger the shadow seemed to grow. It whispered things she had heard before — things people said when dreams felt too far away.

"Too high."

"Too hard."

"You'll never make it."

Elen's feet refused to move. She wanted to turn back, to retreat to the safety of her flock. But something about the tree kept her rooted to the spot, even as the shadow wrapped itself around her like a cold fog.

"Scared of a bit of dark, are you?" a voice croaked behind her. Startled, she spun around to see an old man leaning on a shovel. His clothes were patched, his face lined like the bark of the tree. Yet his eyes glimmered with something sharp, something alive.

"It's not just dark," Elen muttered. "It's... big. It makes me feel small. Like I don't belong here."

The old man chuckled, a sound like gravel underfoot. "Of course it's big. A shadow's as big as the tree that casts it. The taller the tree, the longer the shadow. That's how things are."

Elen frowned. "So it's always going to be there? The shadow?"

“Always,” he said. “But it ain’t your enemy, if that’s what you’re thinking. A big shadow means there’s something worth climbing. You scared of it because it knows you’re ready.”

“Ready for what?” she asked.

“To see what’s at the top.” He jabbed his shovel into the dirt and leaned closer. “You scared of falling?”

“Yes,” she admitted.

“Well, what if you grow instead?” He grinned, a gap-toothed smile full of challenge. “The shadow’s just the price of dreaming big. It’ll test you, sure. But it can’t stop you unless you let it.”

Elen looked back at the tree, its shadow still looming. Her heart thudded in her chest. But something in the old man’s words stirred a stubbornness she thought she’d lost.

“All right,” she said, more to herself than him. “I’ll climb it.”

The old man tipped his hat. “That’s the spirit, lass!”

She stepped into the shadow. The whispers followed her, louder now, echoing her doubts. The bark was rough under her hands, scraping her palms as she gripped the trunk. The first few branches were harder to reach than she expected, and her legs ached from stretching. More than once, she slipped, her heart lurching as her feet scabbled for a hold. But she kept climbing.

Higher and higher she went, until the wind thinned and the world seemed to hold its breath. When she finally pulled herself onto the highest branch that could bear her weight, she looked out and gasped.

The hills rolled away into the distance, meeting the sky in a haze of blue and gold. Rivers cut through valleys, glittering like veins of silver. She could see the village, small and unremarkable, yet still home. And beyond it, other meadows, other trees, their shadows spilling across the land like dark rivers.

It was beautiful beyond imagining.

The old man was waiting when she climbed back down, her hands blistered and her legs trembling. He didn’t say anything, just looked at her with a knowing smile.

“The shadow...” she began.

“Was never your enemy,” he finished for her. “It was just showing you how big your dream was. The bigger the shadow, the bigger the dream. And the bigger the reward for chasing it.”

She nodded, her thoughts swirling. “Will there always be shadows?”

“Every time,” he said. “And the bigger your dreams, the darker and wider they’ll be. But remember this: no shadow is stronger than you. Each one you face makes you stronger, wiser. As sure as the king’s crown.”

Elen looked out over the meadow, spotting other trees. Some were small, their shadows barely noticeable. Others towered like giants, their shadows stretching far and wide. She felt the old man's words settle in her chest, heavy and solid as stone.

"Thank you," she said. But when she turned, he was gone, leaving only the mark of his shovel in the dirt.

Elen didn't stop at that first tree. She sought out the tallest, most intimidating ones, the ones whose shadows dared her to dream bigger. She fell, scraped her knees, and sometimes sat in the dirt wondering if it was worth it. But each time she climbed, she grew stronger, her heart swelling with the view from the top.

The villagers noticed her confidence. When they asked how she chose her path, she told them the story of the shadow and the tree.

"The dream that scares you the most," she said, "is the one worth chasing. The shadow isn't there to stop you. It's there to show you the size of your courage."

Her words spread. Others began climbing their own trees, planting new ones, and turning the meadow into a forest. The shadows grew, but so did the people. Together, they transformed the land into a place of dreams, each tree standing as proof of someone's foresight to plant, and courage to climb.

Years later, Elen returned to the first tree she had climbed. Its branches stretched higher than ever, its shadow sprawling across the meadow like an old friend. She rested beneath it, her hands calloused, her heart full.

As the sun dipped low, casting long shadows across the land, she whispered to herself, "The greater the shadow, the greater the dream."

And with that, she closed her eyes, unafraid of the shadows yet to come.

— *William Zeitler*  
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