

## Chapter 1: Night Shadows

Time: 11:37 p.m.

Location: bench in the back of a courier truck, on the highway.

Objective: Escort a small caravan to 3582 West Revindell Street, Apartment 3, Boston, Massachusetts.

Caravan consists of one horse-trailer pulled by pick-up truck, followed by courier truck.

Contents: Writing Desk, Mechanic's tools, Ornate Wooden chest (contents undisclosed), four-poster bedframe (European antique), seventeen boxes of books (subject matter unknown), various household furniture.

Employer: House Calaire of Massachusetts.

Allies: Sir Gadston, Knight of House Calaire (riding within horse trailer), two guards (one for lead truck, one for courier truck, two drivers (likewise).

Payment: 3,000 dollars, one decoction of inspiration (8 ounces).

Employer's condition: No questions asked.

Personal condition: Pet raven to accompany caravan.

Blake reviewed the job details in his mind as the caravan sped on down the highway. As per his contract, he was forbidden from asking questions, so they crowded his mind, unanswered. Why so many guards for what was essentially a moving van? The rest of the personnel were fully employed by House Calaire, but why hire a Tenebrin shade-slinger as well? Guards like Blake don't come cheap. Perhaps House Calaire was simply another of the many paranoid noble families that coddled their own young.

As Blake mulled over the possibilities, his pet raven flitted around the furniture. It wasn't explicitly stated in the contract that he couldn't examine the goods, an oversight on their part, but he respected his employer's privacy and spent no time investigating the inventory. Rin, his raven, made no such promise, and thus found herself digging through the writing desk and looking for objects of interest. Whenever something shiny or rare caught her eye, she crowed eagerly and showed it to Blake. Currently, her attention was diverted by a collection of scented markers. The purple grape one was her new favorite treasure, though Blake expected it to be replaced within three minutes. While he did not share her curiosity, he could feel his companion's excitement through their shared mind link. There was a sudden bump in the road, and Rin slipped. The marker slashed across her wing, leaving a faint purple streak.

Blake felt Rin's mind spike with surprise, and then watched as the raven twirled around in circles, trying to catch a glimpse of her purple wing. It wasn't easy. Rin's matte black form was so dark that any details of her body were impossible to make out, giving her the appearance of a living silhouette. The purple streak would thus only be visible at odd angles where the light hit it just right. Rin spun faster and faster until she remembered the mirror. She tugged off the protective blanket and danced around in front of it, trying to find the best angle. Her voice echoed into his head through their mind link, "I'm pretty, yes?"

Blake's reply was simply, "You are more colorful."

"And I smell good!?"

"If you appreciate grapes."

"And I am amazing!"

“That wasn’t a question, was it?” asked Blake. Rin gave him a mischievous look. She held out her wing and bent it so the light bounced off the purple streak into his eyes. As he winced away, she responded, “No! Fact!”

She swooped back up towards the desk drawer and started to claw at the marker again. “Color me!” she ordered Blake.

“No.”

“Yes!”

“No. You’re making a mess. It’s impolite to play with another person’s belongings, and we need to look professional, not colorful. Sir Gadston would not look kindly on this. Put the marker away and clean up.” The raven crowed in denial, but sheepishly dropped the marker back into its drawer. Rin refused to do anything else however, so Blake closed the drawer and re-covered the mirror. Once satisfied, he returned to his seat. Rin glared at him for a few more seconds, but then flew over to his lap. Blake, knowing the signs, consigned himself to pet her. Slowly, the raven relaxed..

Suddenly, the driver slammed the breaks and Rin tumbled out of Blake’s lap, crowing loudly.

“Obstruction on the road. Looks like a crash. I’m going to investigate,” came a voice from the small radio on Blake’s belt. He recognized the voice as that of the guardsman Luc from the leading truck. Blake inserted his wired earbud and stood up. Rin, respecting the situation, remained impressively quiet. Sir Gadston’s voice, deep and commanding, came next through the radio,

“Approach with care. How many injured?”

“I see two bodies, not moving. Blazes, this crash is a mess. Wait, hold on.” Blake heard a third muffled voice, too distorted to make out.

“Sir, are you alright? Wha-“

Bang! The radio went dead, but that wasn't necessary anymore. A storm of gunfire punctuated the air, echoing loudly around the inside of the courier truck. Gadston was bellowing into the radio as the other guards shouted in alarm. Blake remained silent. The terms of the contract were clear: stay out of combat unless the courier truck was compromised. He was the surprise cavalry.

Blake positioned himself three feet away from the back doors of the truck, still silent as gunshots and shouts roared outside. Underneath it all, he heard the hum of two more engines coming up behind the caravan. Blake alerted Gadston through the radio, “More enemy units coming from behind. Preparing to engage.”

Rin spoke into his mind, “Need my help?”

“Yes.”

“Pulse or flare?”

“Flare. Behind all the furniture. The room needs more contrast. After that, stay out of sight.” Rin obeyed without further word. She fluttered her way to the front of the room, hit the switch to turn off the overhead lights, and flared. Light burst into the room, enough to have temporarily blinded Blake had he been facing her direction. As light crashed into the various furniture, long shadows burst into being, painting the walls with black lines. Blake reached out for these shadows and willed them to rise up to his hands. At contact, the shadows spread up and wide, making a black wall between himself and the door. The displaced light retreated into the spaces left by the shadows. Footsteps raced around the courier truck, hiding beneath the gunfire. As their owners joined the skirmish, Blake drew on more shadows, making the shadow-crafted wall thicker. He turned on the radio microphone to state, “Blake, engaging”. There was a moment of silence, then finally, he heard a pair of hands at the latch outside.

The door swung open and he heard the gasps of two men. Blake couldn't see them through the shade-wall, and they couldn't see him. It was as if the back of the truck opened up into the void. In their hesitation, he struck. Blake kicked the wall, knocking it forward onto both assailants. They fell back against the concrete as the wall faded into a black mist. In time, the shadows would retreat to their proper place.

Blake leapt out of the truck, pulling enough shadows from the mist to form a five-foot pole. As soon as he touched the ground, he slammed the pole into the closest target's chest. Rib's cracked beneath the strike, but he still kicked the man across the face for good measure. The second target, a scowling goblin, was quick on his feet and rolled away before he met the same fate. It danced back out of range of Blake's second swing, then charged forward with a reckless tackle. Blake met the charge with a knee to the goblin's face. His knee would be bruised by the large number of teeth it made contact with, but it was a worthwhile exchange. The goblin's shriek pierced the air, rising above the gunshots. Blake silenced him with a follow-up thrust into his jaw, and another swipe across his face.

Blake spun around to survey the area. The highway ran along an open stretch of fields. The two lanes were bounded on each side by a railed fence and a drainage ditch. Behind the courier truck was a large van and a pair of motorcycles. More gunshots echoed from the front of the caravan. Blake made a quick assessment: Enemy units faked the car crash, surprised the lead guard, and then followed up behind with the van and bikes to trap them. Most of the reinforcements rushed ahead to distract the guards, leaving a pair to loot the courier truck. Efficient planning, but not very adaptable. No plan survives first contact with the enemy, and no enemy survives contact with a Tenebrin mercenary.

Blake leapt off the road down the drainage ditch to the right. It would provide cover and more contrast for shadow-crafting. About twenty-five feet ahead of him, two more enemy units crouched

behind the railed fence, exchanging fire with the truck driver through the side window. They already peppered the door with bullets, but the reinforced plating was holding. For now.

The Tenebrin waited until the driver ducked away from another volley before acting. He slid further down the ditch and circled around quietly, reshaping his shade-pole while doing so. The shaft shrunk down to one foot in length, leaving the rest of the mass to collect into a large hammer head. Once he was behind the two targets, he grasped the hammer with both hands, and hurled it at the left assailant. It spun twice in the air, the shaft leaking shadows quickly, and the head crashed in between the target's shoulder blades. The target cried out as he was slammed into the fence. Before the second had a chance to react, Blake grabbed their shadow and yanked, pulling the target down into the ditch. He crafted the shadow into another hammer and dispatched the fumbling man. Four down.

Blake turned his microphone on and hailed the driver, "Both targets neutralized. I'm coming up the ditch, don't fire." Even with that warning, he ascended carefully. That was his first mistake this evening. As Blake came up to the fence line, a bullet smashed through the truck's windshield and threw the driver back against his seat. He slumped over, motionless. More bullets whistled around Blake, so he ducked back behind the fence. He dove down the ditch as shots hit the fence railing and ricocheted off at various angles. Once safe, he considered his options. The shots had come from nearby the first truck's driver, so he must be dead too. If the assailant were smart, he'd swing the door open and use it for cover. No way of sneaking up behind the assailant, and charging head on would be too risky. Time for a diversion.

Blake ran about twenty feet along the ditch towards the front of the caravan, tearing off his cloak in the process. Shadows trailed after him, condensing into a large sphere in his hand. He tied the cloak around the sphere, and then climbed his way up the ditch again, crouching low to stay hidden. He peeked between the ditch and fence bottom. He was right -the target was hiding behind the lead truck's

door. Blake could hear the rifle scrape against shattered glass as the target scanned the fence line through the window. When the target was looking far off down the line, Blake threw the black sphere and cloak over the fence into the target's field of view, then leapt over the fence. The target jerked his rifle into position and sent a flurry of shots into the cloak, then noticed the charging Tenebrin. Before he could shift his aim, Blake was on top of him. He slammed his fist into the target's face, tore the rifle out of his grasp, and bashed him three times with it. Five down.

Blake looked down at the gun in his hands. This would make his job a lot more efficient. He wouldn't need to run up to each target or bludgeon them repeatedly. Just a simple trigger pull, and another mission complete. It was the logical choice, but a faint twinge of disapproval washed over from Rin's mind. He left the gun beside its fallen owner.

More gunshots rang out from the other side of the caravan, but his side was calm. Blake took the moment to check the truck driver's vital signs. None. That made two associates he hadn't saved in time. Granted, it wasn't his assignment to do so, but losing allies was never advantageous.

From the other side of the caravan, Sir Gadston bellowed a massive warcry. He must've drawn the attention of the remaining combatants. Time to regroup. Blake ran around the front of the truck. The truck still, thankfully, had its brights on, spotlighting the ambusher's faked car crash and the body of the first guard to die. As Blake ran through the lights, shadows leapt from their resting points and flowed behind him. He fashioned them into a simple club and shield.

Around the corner, Blake met with an impressive sight. Six bodies lay scattered across the highway while four assailants engaged a fully armored centaur. Sir Gadston had blood running down both sides from multiple bullet wounds, but they were only deep enough to enrage the knight. He charged forward at a trio of targets. Two dove desperately out of the way, but Gadston flattened the third with his giant riot shield, then twisted around to take two shots at the fourth target hunched

behind the fence rail. Each shot of his hand cannon seemed to crack the air apart. The bullets punched straight through the railing, with a thud from the other side confirming they found their mark. Two enemies remained.

As Blake closed in, one target unloaded their gun against Gadston's shield. The other was searching one of the bodies. With a victorious shout, he held his prize up and turned to take aim at Gadston. At the same time, Blake's mind was blasted by a warning shriek from Rin. He brushed it off and rushed at the target, but he was too late. There was a blinding flash coupled with a crack of thunder, and Gadston fell to the ground, convulsing.

The target who fired the last shot, a sneering imp, took a step closer to Gadston. With a smile, he squeezed the trigger a second time. Jagged electric-blue lines coursed up from the trigger, into the cartridge, and started down the barrel. Before it reached the end, Blake hurled his club at the imp's extended arm. The target screeched in pain and dropped the pistol. Lightning launched into the sky as Blake leapt at the imp. He grabbed the imp by his broken arm and spun him headfirst into the fence rail. One remained.

Blake turned around to face the last target, only to get thrown off his feet by a vicious tackle. Pain didn't worry Blake as it would most people, but it still stunned him as he crashed to the ground. The last assailant jumped on top of him, swinging wildly. Blake's mind raced for a countermeasure, though his options were limited. His shield-arm was pinned by the man's knee, and his other arm was twisted beneath him. The next punch made his vision go blurry. And then Blake had a plan. As a fourth punch came down, the shade-shield shifted form. It dissolved into a puddle of shadows, curled up around Blake's elbow, and jutted out as an elongating pole. The end of it caught the man's right shoulder, throwing him backwards off Blake. The man staggered back, gasping while his left hand pressed against



his bruised shoulder. Blake pushed himself back onto his feet and readied his newly-formed staff for the target's next attack. The man snarled, raised his fists, and took two quick steps forward.

BANG. The man's eyes widened in shock for a brief moment, and then he collapsed. Behind him, Gadston wearily held up his hand cannon, his spare hand bracing him against the ground. The air was finally devoid of gunshots and shouts. Blake walked over to Gadston as the centaur struggled to his feet.

"Twelve targets neutralized. Both drivers are dead, as well as at least one of the guards," stated Blake. The centaur shook his head in dismay and responded, "Guardsmen Pyke is wounded, but alive. We'll both be needing medical attention. That last shot didn't get past my armor, but I've got at least seven more bullets stuck in me. Thank you, by the way, for the save."

"I can't get paid if you're dead."

Gadston chuckled lightly at this, even if only to relieve tension from the battle. His eyes glanced about the scene, and his laugh died.

"We'll have to push one of the crashed cars out of the left lane to get our trucks passed. I'll call law enforcement to handle the mess. Though, we will be taking our fallen comrades with us. We can place their bodies with me in the trailer," said Gadston.

"Sir, why not put them in the back of the pick-up?"

"That would be disrespectful."

"Understood." As they spoke, Rin flew out of the courier truck and landed beside the lightning gun with a concerned screech.

"Now, one more thing," said Gadston. "How did these lowlives get a hold of a magecraft gun? That's serious contraband for a bunch of highway robbers."

“Uncertain, sir,” Blake replied as he picked up the gun. Rin flitted onto Blake’s shoulder to keep studying it. Blake looked it over until he found the tell-tale markings on the bottom of the pistol grip. An ancient rune, assumedly for lightning, was etched into the metal with blood -fairy blood, a necessary component in all permanent enchantments.

“Well, bring it with us; we’ll turn it in at Boston. Now, help me clear a path for the trucks.”

Gadston started off towards the front of the caravan as Blake and Rin exchanged thoughts. Rin agreed -they had to hold onto this. He stashed the gun in the courier truck and walked after Gadston.