



In Shade and Shadow



IT WAS NEARLY TWO HOURS past midnight when the blackout struck Northvalley Crescent. The sudden collapse of an electrical pole had downed the power to some three dozen stately properties that branched off the narrow main road. Sunken in the depths of an overgrown vale, the unlit street seemed darker than the night sky above it.

The houses here were perched on sprawling grounds of wooded slopes and hillocks. Despite their mansionesque size, none were extravagant in appearance. The area's wealth of streetlamps usually served as an effective deterrent against all forms of unsavory activity, but in tonight's blackout, one home had already drawn a curious figure.

Outside of number twenty-four Northvalley, a man loitered on the sidewalk that hemmed the main road. He was swaddled in a dense overcoat that draped to his feet, his

neck roped in a wool scarf. He stood with a nonchalant slouch, but his eyes were avidly watchful of his surroundings. He took into view another murky character, who made his approach from the far end of the sidewalk.

The second figure was bundled in a similar coat and scarf and crowned with a wide-brimmed fedora; most strikingly, his burly frame towered close to seven feet high. His hands were plunged deep into his pockets and his face was half-buried in his scarf, as if he felt unusually chilled in the mild autumn weather.

The tall man stopped next to his partner. "Looks like the whole street is out," he remarked.

The shorter man nodded with a furtive glance across the empty road. "You did well."

"I toppled the whole pole. Did you hear it from here?"

"A dull thud. Hardly enough to wake anyone."

"Good." The tall man motioned toward the residence. "Let's get moving. We have only as long as it'll take them to restore the power."

Together, the men slipped through the gateway of the wrought-iron fence that encircled the property. They surveyed the driveway ahead of them, which climbed a steep hill to meet the mansion's distant silhouette. As they began their ascent, they veered off the paved path to walk alongside the thickly hedged north end of the grounds. Halfway up the hill, they halted and looked skyward.

Even in the stifling darkness, it was clear to see that the clouds above number twenty-four Northvalley that night did not behave the way of ordinary clouds. Ordinary clouds

do not churn and shift by their own accord, nor do they throb as if they were coursing with life. Ordinary clouds are not black like the heart of an abyss, nor do they glimmer with cadaverous outlines like the surface of the River Styx. However, these were not ordinary clouds.

The shorter man raised his hand, which became lit with sputtering black embers. In response, the rolling mass of clouds above the mansion jolted, like an idle puppet stirred by a tug of its strings. As he lowered his arm, the clouds obeyed him.

Swiftly, the clouds began to descend, disbanding into smaller billows of smoke that wove a veil to engulf the mansion rooftops. They were like specters spawned from the darkness itself, swirling with uncanny coordination, like a flock with a single mind. Their murmuring robbed the wind of its breath until the air seemed to cringe in agony.

Just after the specters had covered the second storey of the building, the two men were jarred by the rattle of an igniting engine. The instant they turned their heads, they saw a pair of high-beam headlights flicker alive in the distance. With the beastly roar of a motor and the howl of rubber on tarmac, a pickup truck burst out of the shadows at the top of the hill and careened down the driveway with manic speed.

The shorter man whipped back his hand, and the specters' descent ceased instantly. The sparks about his fingertips blazed to kindle an orb of flame black as a cinder. He lunged, hurtling the fireball toward the speeding pickup. But the truck thundered on without flinching in its

course. In a blur, the vehicle had passed, and the projectile splattered over the lawn with a vitriolic hiss.

The man shook the smoldering remnants off his hand and scowled ferociously. As the car swerved onto the main road with a stammering screech, it sped away, leaving the drone of its engine clinging to the silence for several seconds afterward.

“How could he have seen us?” the tall man sputtered.

“It was probably the shades that he saw,” replied his partner. “He must have been awake when I called them down.”

“What do you reckon we do now?”

The shorter man turned back toward the mansion and resumed his ascent. “He isn’t all we’re after. We search the house regardless.”

As the men advanced, the specters, too, gathered pace and continued to envelop the house within their writhing funnel. Now scarcely four meters ahead, the smoky specters could be seen with more clarity—they were distinctly skeletal, with empty concaves for eyes and fleshless jaws sealed in unbending grins. Chain-thin arms and claws dangled at their sides, though the rest of their forms were lost in mist like amorphous black gowns. They glided as if by the aimless currents of the wind as they trickled further into the grounds about the residence.

The men hastened over the peak of the hillside until they both arrived at the mansion. Under the specters’ pall, the house appeared like little more than a mirage. Its front entrance was carved into an ivied façade and preceded by

a flight of stone steps. Next to a great bay window was a half-opened garage from where the pickup truck had made its exit.

When the shorter man reached the door, a fleeting tug on the handle confirmed it to be locked, though this did not seem to concern him. As he brought an upturned palm to level with the door lock, a shadowy vapor stole over his hand.

A plume of black mist and splinters erupted from the face of the door with a clamor of snapping steel. When the debris settled, the door lock had been mangled as if by an explosion, rent from its place in the wood, broken and scorched. The man delivered a crushing kick to the foot of the door and broke it ajar, the warped remnants of its lock clattering to the floor.

“Wait,” the tall man barked. “What about the shades?”

“Leave them,” his partner snapped, his boot already leaning over the doorstep. “No one can see them in this darkness anyhow. They will depart along with us.”

The tall man nodded, and the two entered the mansion, which seemed even darker than the grounds outside. From under his coat, the shorter man produced a peculiar utensil—a leather-bound shaft topped with a closed steel funnel, something resembling a disproportionate flashlight. He wrenched the lip of the instrument’s funnel, parting a disc of interlocking metal blades to bare a glass lens beneath; then, without as much as a flick of a switch, a flood of dazzling rays poured forth from the funnel and threw back the shadows. The tall man repeated the ritual with his own flashlight.

Now dappled by the glow of their lamps, the men's features became at least partially visible. The shorter man had a sickly complexion and eyes like sunken shards of jasper, shaded by curtains of flimsy brown hair. His mouth looked as if it had been carved by a knife, like an unpliant slit in a mask. The man's name was Noctell Knever, and his arctic expression alone bespoke his character.

The tall man slackened the coil of his scarf and tipped up the brim of his hat, unveiling his face. His eyes were deep garnet, buried under a thick and stony brow. His nose jutted like an ill-positioned hook that dangled over thin lips, complementary to the shape of his face that was whittled to a dull point at his chin. His most prominent feature, however, was his skin—it was bloodred, blotted with patches of dry, hard scales. When he peeled off his bulging leather gloves, he revealed obsidian-black claws in place of his fingernails. The man's name was Raven Gaunt—though his monstrous appearance made it difficult to call him a man at all.

The two intruders waved their lights across the few wooden fixtures in the room, which appeared to be a foyer. "What are we searching for?" Raven asked matter-of-factly.

"Nothing too specific . . ." Noctell drawled, eyes trailing the ray of his flashlight. "Since the fool escaped before we could pry any answers out of him, we'll have to find answers in his possessions. Naturally, anything of use to us would bear the Winghearts' name—Brendan's or his son's."

Raven cast a bitter glance across the foyer. "The man is a book hoarder, and this place is nothing short of a mansion. Finding anything of use here will take till sunrise."

“We’re not returning empty-handed.” Noctell directed a scowl over his shoulder. “Provided the power isn’t restored sooner, we have four hours until dawn. Search quickly.”

“We’ll split up to cover more rooms,” Raven added.

Noctell waved the beam of his lamp over the two doorways in view. “I’ll go straight,” he motioned ahead. “You take the other door. We’ll meet up later on.”

Raven listlessly obeyed his partner’s command and sauntered out of the foyer. Noctell steadied his light as he walked on, into an expansive living room. Much of the furniture here was antique, Victorian in appearance. Twin settees were arranged at opposite ends of a luscious carpet, accompanied by an assortment of armchairs and a stout wooden table. The stone fireplace, stoked with charred logs, had its mantle cluttered with tarnished bronze and ceramic trinkets. Bookshelves were abundant here also, scattered between glass display cases and vivid oil paintings that left no portion of the walls unadorned.

Noctell turned to the bookcase immediately at his left and skimmed its contents. Many of the books were impressively old, though few appeared to be organized in any particular manner. Shifting his attention impatiently, he found the volumes on an adjacent shelving unit to be arranged just as chaotically. He began tearing out the books at random, striving to uncover something of importance, but he found even the most intriguing volumes to be useless when he leafed them. Hardcover thudded to the floor like shot birds.

He discarded what seemed like the last of nearly a

hundred books and heaved an irritable sigh. Grudgingly, he conducted a final search of the room. His scrutiny wandered from a tidy stack of newspapers to four unopened envelopes and an erratically marked wall calendar. When none offered anything of relevance, he was drawn to a cabinet topped with a quaint red telephone.

Noctell swept open the upper drawer of the cabinet. From a mire of loose papers inside, he withdrew a tattered booklet in black faux leather—an address book. He scanned its entries with a sleuth's eye, but failed to see his target's name listed anywhere. Finding nothing else worthy of his attention, he strolled on through a second doorway, into what appeared to be a library.

This place was nearly double the size of the living room and far more commodious. No part of the walls was visible here, for they were submerged behind a seamless procession of bookcases that towered from the floor to the lofty ceiling. The chain of shelving was interrupted only by a vast window draped with tasseled red damask; a great round table sat nearby.

Noctell's paces resonated on the hardwood as he plodded to the opposite end of the room. He faced a bookshelf and scanned it downward from its unreachable peak. The books here appeared to bear more solid order, but their sheer multitude was devastating. If there were anything of value to be found among the myriad of volumes, it would take well past dawn to find it.

He turned to a three-drawer table at the side of the bookcase. Its surface was bare, save for a potted ivy plant

with vines that straggled over the table's edge. Noctell yanked open the middle drawer to find a miscellany of household trinkets mixed in with scrawled-on stationery. As he scooped out the mess, noisily spilling a pair of scissors and a broken pocket knife, the sound of approaching footsteps reached his ears. He redirected his light to see Raven emerge into the library through a distant second entrance.

Noctell waited until his partner had come close enough before hollering to him: "Anything?"

"Nothing," Raven replied snappishly. "The house is monstrous. Either we waste an hour skimming the surface or spend a day hollowing out every bookcase and cabinet."

"We're not trying to find a cache of jewels," Noctell retorted. He leafed the papers in his hands mechanically. "Anything with a shadow of significance will suffice. Our chances are best if we limit our search to the library and rummage through any loose papers we see."

Raven allowed his gaze and his light to wander until they fell on an arrangement of furniture in the corner of the room. There was a fanciful, multi-drawer writing desk—an *escritoire*—covered by papers and paired with a high-backed armchair. "Checked that desk yet?" Raven muttered.

Noctell shook his head and followed the hulking shadow of his partner toward the *escritoire*. Raven batted a collection of ballpoint pens off the desk surface and gathered up the remaining papers. These were letters, some unopened, others tucked inside torn envelopes. Noctell paused, as

if in thought, then cast away the pages in his hand and tore open one of the unit's lower drawers. He stole out a generous mound of tattered envelopes and riffled through them voraciously, halting at the sight of a familiar name.

Noctell grinned as if he had struck riches. "Let's go."

"What?" Raven started at Noctell's brusque command. His partner handed him an empty envelope.

"This letter appears to have been sent by Drake Wingheart." Noctell beamed, discarding the rest of the envelopes in a fluttering rain of parchment. "His address is on it. We've found all we need."

Raven's brow twitched as his face came alight. "That'll do nicely." He swiped the envelope and sheathed it into a pocket in his coat lining.

"Looks like we're finally closing in," Noctell added wryly. "It can't be much longer before Handel and Wingheart are both ours."

"It's taken long enough as it is," Raven huffed. "I feel like I've spent half my life searching for a bloody address."

"No matter." Noctell padded away from the *escritoire*, into the sapphirine moonlight streaming through the library window. "It's nearly over with now. Be thankful that all our efforts weren't in vain."

Raven drew beside his partner and gazed out the window from under the brim of his hat. "Where now? Do we hail another cab out of here and find Wingheart's street?"

"The address points to another city," Noctell replied. "And we haven't a clue how far away it is. We're not going to stage a break-in in broad daylight, and we don't have

long until sunrise. We'll transport back to MorningStar, then we can plan our next steps."

Raven nodded, and Noctell reached beneath his coat collar. He extracted an ominous-looking pendant strung by a waxed black cord—a stone skull, made up of a spherical scalp and a notched cylinder for its teeth. Its two slanted eye holes formed a mocking frown that seemed unnaturally expressive for a piece of crude jewellery.

In thin fingers, Noctell wrenched the pendant's cylinder loose, then began to unscrew it. On the final turn, as the skull's teeth popped out like a cork, a flood of smoke-thin black ashes gushed out from the open cavity.

Like a silken hand, the ashes stretched and wound about the bodies of Noctell and Raven, sealing them in a cinereous shroud. The moment the cloud rose overtop Raven's fedora, it collapsed and dispersed to mist, leaving nothing behind. Consumed by the ashes, the men had vanished.



Cecil Handel lowered his binoculars. Far below him, Northvalley Crescent loomed like a canyon of shadows. His feet retained their grip on the thicketed hillside even while both his legs and arms coursed with tremors. The air, which carried scarcely a breeze, felt arctic against his face.

After narrowly escaping the assault on his home, Cecil had fled in his pickup truck to a secluded side street on the summit of the valley's eastern wall. From there, he had managed to keep watch of his house by the glimmer of its

intruders' flashlights behind its windows. When the lights had suddenly disappeared, so had his ability to perceive anything in the blackout.

Cecil turned to survey the dead-end road behind him where he had parked his pickup, still not easing his clasp on his binoculars. Though the houses here were dark, the streetlights were operational. He hoped that, at such an early hour, he would not be seen as a dubious loiterer; but he knew that this was, by far, the least of his concerns.

He knew what were the creatures that had descended on his mansion. He was familiar with them—perhaps too much so. He knew from where they had come; he knew the aims of the man who had sent them, and he feared gravely for the people who would be targeted next.

Cecil darted for his pickup, his shadow cleaving the still rays of the streetlights. *I dreaded this day*, his mind raced. He dove inside the car and slammed the door shut. *Sixteen years haven't made them give up.*

As the roar of his engine broke across the silent road, Cecil spun his pickup around and sped off ahead into the night.