Shadowjack

Roger Zelazny

I passed through mountain fastnesses, skirting the realm of a certain Lord Belring, whose reputation I’d no desire to test. It was unfamiliar territory for me, and when I saw the grinning warning below a gargoyle-mounted keep, I decided I had no need to pursue an acquaintance there either.

Ye who would wish to live

tread no further than this line

lest you would care

to wear a smile like mine—

But there was a stirring on the ugly farm above me. For a moment, I simply watched, uncertain whether my eyes were playing me fair…

…A moment only. I enjoy a grisly spectacle as well as the next man, but I’d no desire to become the object of one. When the things went airborne, I hit for cover, with an eye for the shadows that would shield me.

I located a small patch of gray as they swooped toward me and circled above.

My images darted within that place—but the place was not all that large, and the shadow itself was wavering as their wings beat above me, partly blocking a dim light from the castle…

…and there were too many of them. Enough to strike at each flickering Jack and the one substantial one. When the arms I could not avoid came at me, I let go my images and drew the remaining force the shadows had lent me back into myself.

I have always preferred stealth to violence. It is indecent to be outweighed, outnumbered and still have to fight. Violence, like disease or a bad debt, is better to give than receive.

I believe that my strength surprised them.

Unfortunately, their massed bodies totally obliterated the shadow and I was reduced to my own resources. These, too, I spent…but it was not my death that they sought. I did not know whether to be heartened or totally apprehensive at this. I struggled on, hoping for an opening for flight, for another patch of shadow…Alas!

Half-senseless, I was taken, borne aloft, flown through the darkness to that dark height from which the things had come.

As we dropped toward it, I could see that it was old, and I could taste the flavors of the delicate sorceries brewed within it.

When I was hauled into the presence of the chef, I had to admit it was an improvement over the gnarled wizards I occasionally encountered…

“So you are Shadowjack,” she said. “I know your reputation. I apologize for the abrupt means by which I sought your acquaintance…

“…I have to admit I find your appearance more pleasing than I had anticipated. I’d visions of a dirty little skulker in shadows, and you are far from it. Perhaps this is going to work out better than I thought.”

“I’ve a mind to accept your apology,” I told her, “since I, too, had a few visions enroute. They are exceeded however, in an unexpectedly pleasant direction.”

“I am Vara Lylyra,” she said, bidding her stony sentinels return to their niches. “This is my place of power. I detected your approach but recently, and had to move quickly. I will show you about—there are matters I wish to discuss.”

The tour eventually took us to her bedchamber, and I wondered as to priorities—discussion first, or—?

“I require the services of the very finest thief available,” she said, “to steal the Eye of Iskat.”

“Oh?” I said, as she moved nearer, flame and sword-metal masked by perfume and softness. “What is the Eye of Iskat?”

“It is a gem of wondrous potency,” she replied. “It enhances one’s natural powers enormously. It is currently in the possession of Lord Belring of the Corners. He keeps it in his Court of the Hundred Towers. Do you know it?”

“I have heard of it,” I replied. “Each tower is said to contain a bell which begins ringing if someone sets a foot within it. An effective system.”

“Yes, that is the place,” she said, moving even nearer. “I would like you to go there and fetch it for me.”

“I have also heard something about a guardian in that place…”

“True,” she said, embracing me lightly. “The old sorcerer has created some sort of brittle beast-man called the Vorkle. It tends to be somewhat transparent and difficult to see. But you, of course, are now forewarned…”

“The jewel is hidden in one of the towers?”

“I believe so, though I cannot tell which.

“That is the task I would set you, Jack. Have you an interest in it?”

I looked into her eyes.

“I have an interest,” I said.

We found our way to the most useful item of furniture and I pursued my interest with great diligence.

“Jack, darling—you will be going on my errand then?” she whispered, when I thought her mind might be on other matters.

“I will be going,” I said.

Later, when I was certain she was asleep, I set about doing just that—going. I gathered my garments and departed the chamber with my most professional stealth.

From my quick tour of the place, I recalled a window situated opposite a crag, beyond which I might make my escape. I was not anxious to mess with transparent beings in dark places, overseen by a sorcerer with a reputation of madness. No…

It was time to bid the Keep of Lylyra good-bye. Despite the manner of my arrival, my brief stay was hardly unpleasant. If the lady had only wanted something simpler, I could have been persuaded to remain longer…

I made my way to that place, and from the lining of my cloak I withdrew the fine, stout line which had served me so well in the past. From a sheath in my boot came the collapsable grapple which I snapped open and tied into place.

My cast went true, falling into a tight cleft. The grapple seated itself securely when I drew back upon the line. Then it was only a matter of securing my end to the bollard-like projection which had caught my eye earlier. The rest was straight from Thieves College, where I had once taught Entry & Egress 701…

As I mounted the line and regarded the wavering prospect, I was struck by the fact that it was a lot dimmer than it had been moments before. Mists had risen among the rocks. No matter. I could still see the line, I could trust my balance…

…but as I advanced, the mist continued to rise until it boiled about me. I wondered at the unnatural speed with which this occurred.

Something was definitely amiss in the area through which I moved. There was a break in the mists ahead—Somehow, I had been turned about! The road led to wings and a nasty expression!

Vara shook her head and regarded me almost wistfully. “This, thief, is how you keep your word? I am disappointed. Pity. I would rather you served me willingly. Guards! Show him to a cell!”

As I was introduced to my new lodgings, Vara regarded them with disapproval. “It is said that you have a way with shadows,” she stated. “Something must be done to prevent your employing them here.”

She raised her hands. As she spoke, her form began to glow. Waves of light swept over her, collecting finally about her hands. I was half-blinded by the brilliance of her working, and I sought to shield my eyes from the light.

Blazing bands took form about me, removing any possibility of my making contact with shadow.

“Is mine not a lovely light?” she said, smiling. “These are fetters you cannot slip. I will leave you now to contemplate your ways. Adieu.”

Whenever I am spoken of in shadow, I know what is said… In the shadowy confines of her chamber, Vara regarded me in her crystal and muttered her displeasure at the faithlessness of men. Then her eyes grew bright. “A doppelgänger!” she said, clapping her hands. “I will send his double—with all his skills and none of his mischief !”

Then she began a fresh spell, and I felt a pang in my breast as she did so. This was dangerous magic indeed—for the duplicated. The longer a doppelgänger exists, the weaker his principal becomes, until finally…

It would be identical to me in physical respects, though lacking those charming intangibles which make me what I am. I worried within my fetters of light. I could begin to fade as it exerted itself, lapsing finally into total nothingness…

As she charged it with the errand I had declined, I realized that I would have to escape soon…

…I would have to escape, pursue it and be merged with it…

As it tore off through the night, heading for the Court of the Hundred Towers, I hit upon a dangerous course of action. I struggled to recall the spell Vara had used to bind me… It came back to me then, and I rehearsed it in my mind. I knew of no way to diminish the light-bands…

…But I might be able to overload the spell by reinvoking it.

I began to speak, and the brightness increased about me. Vara would soon become aware of my tampering with her working, but it might not matter by then. I shielded my eyes, completed the spell, started again…

Vara had to know what was occurring…

By the time they reached me, it was too late. The rings had wavered and broken and the cell was filled with pure light. If the final flare did not hurt me, it would certainly slow them down for a time.

I heard them enter, cry out and fall aside as the spell was shattered and I found myself still standing.

Weak, though… I was very weak as I rushed from that place and made my way out of the castle.

The gargoyles sought me, but I had already reached a well-shadowed vicinity. None could find me there against my will.

When they finally gave up, I continued on my way toward The Corners—a place where several kingdoms abut—near where Lord Belring holds his court. Weakening with every league, I struggled to make haste, wondering how my doppelgänger was faring in the court of the bells…

Monolithic, I regarded the heaped campaniles of the court, the great bells visible in many of them. Most were still, but a few had begun ringing, indicating that my double had commenced his search among the towers. I hurried ahead.

Somewhere within that place was the other Jack, and I had to find him before the Vorkle did—find him, while avoiding the Vorkle myself—and figure a way to achieve our merger. Another bell began pealing as I made my way into the court. I scanned the skyline in that direction and caught a glimpse of a figure strangely like myself leaping from one tower to another…

I began the pursuit. By now, the ringing of the bells was a palpable thing. Each new voice increased the din to the point where my ears began to throb. The matter would have to be concluded soon—I was aching.

I followed him. He was faster now, my weakness a sign of his strength. If only I could reach him, speak with him—

—But he could not hear me, even if I were to risk a shout. Another bell joined the chorus as I drew nearer. My ear-drums seemed to be bursting…

I threw myself down and tried to block out the sound of the latest bell. Its vibrations filled me. My double had escaped. I—

—I saw a movement. An almost-thing. A blurry patch of something at the window… It had to be the Vorkle. Approaching… Strong and silent and lethal… I had to regain my footing, flee… I struggled to rise, staring at the approaching creature. I summoned my remaining strength and drew myself to my feet…

It moved more quickly than I had thought it would. One moment it was on the other side of the room, the next it was almost upon me, glassy arms outstretched, fingers flexing, translucent muscles bulging with each movement.

I swirled my cloak as I cast about for the readiest retreat. My eyes fell upon the stairway leading to the bell tower…

I whirled and raced in that direction, feeling rather than hearing my pursuer, close behind.

When I came to the room where the great bell was hung I sighed, for there were shadows, and more shadows…

I drew the shadows about me like an extra cloak and released them again. They spread about the room, image after image of myself, each fleeing, dancing, darting in a different direction. For a moment, the Vorkle stood like an ice sculpture, baffled at the display. But then he moved, turning—first one way, then another—flailing his arms, reaching out, grasping after, seeking to destroy one of my images after another. The huge bell swung to and fro, its peals deafening me to any noise the creature might be making.

I moved my images faster and faster, twisting, spinning, tumbling before him, about him. He turned and turned, seeming to grow more bewildered with each pass. Between the pealing and this action, however, I felt my strength begin to wane once again. Was I—the real me—becoming as transparent as this creature I faced?

His confusion increased as I moved my shadow-puppets with the last of my strength, causing them to advance and retreat from all directions. —But the bell! My skull seemed riven now by each stroke of the thing.

For a moment, I grew dizzy from the strain. My shadows returned to shadow and I felt my knees begin to buckle. I must have stood revealed for only an instant, but in that moment the Vorkle saw me and turned…

…He turned and took a step. I would like to take credit for the planning of it, for the subtle manipulation of my foe, but it was pure chance that bore the confused creature to that position at precisely that moment. The bell had swung to, but it was the fro that got him. With a sound like the crashing of a wine rack in a barroom brawl the bell connected with the Vorkle and his shards flew in all directions, as it tolled for him indeed.

As I regarded the creature’s remains, the skin on my neck crawled, as though I, myself, might at that moment be an object of scrutiny…and why not? My double was somewhere near, and the mad lord of this place could hardly be unaware of what had transpired.

If Belring had seen the destruction of his guardian, he would doubtless be heading to brew some new mischief.

I had a picture of him as he had been described to me—stocky and strong. If just a few minutes of his music had affected my mind so, I wondered what they might have done to his, over the years.

As a mumbler, a curser, he was first-class. I heard my name both in his musings and in the spell which followed. His magic troubled me more than a little…

Within a smoky mirror he conjured up my form, his warped sense of humor doubtless drawing delight from my difficulties. No true doppelgänger this lethal image, however. The new double was formed of elements which would prove instantly fatal to me were I to merge with it rather than the one I sought…

As he summoned it forth from the mirror, my thinning blood ran even colder. How could I possibly distinguish it from the other?

Somewhere in shadow, I heard him speak my name again as he sent it forth to work my confusion.

After that, I knew no more of his thoughts. The thing was on its way, to complete the work the Vorkle had started.

Had he only known how weak I had actually become, he might have saved his efforts. I did not believe I could last much longer…

Yet I struggled on, down mazes of corridors—seeking. My only hope now seemed to be to locate the Eye of Iskat. If Vara of the anthracite heart had spoken anything of the truth and the jewel could indeed heighten one’s natural powers, I might be able to employ it on my own behalf.

I came at last to a huge room filled with bells and chimes of every sort. There, I was forced to rest for a moment. They were all ringing—No—something strange…

I wondered as I regarded each of them in turn what it was summoning my attention. Where would that insidious old devil have hidden the thing? I was certain he was confident of his safety. Yet…

No good. I’d a strong feeling it was in this room, and that I was missing something obvious. I would listen again, at each separate bell. It seemed the only thing left to try…

As I regarded them, I wondered how near my doppelgänger might be. I wondered, too, where the other double was. It had had time to search for me…

Then, then, then…It struck me. A tiny bell near at hand was swinging but not ringing. Could its clapper have been set so as not to strike the shell? Of course—and the reason for that would be to protect something precious against fracture. I seized it and drew upon the clapper…Success!

…and as I turned, feeling victory glowing in my hand, I beheld both of them—my two doubles: the first wanting the jewel, the other my life. Both advanced upon me in a menacing fashion.

Both raised their hands and became like magnets, drawing upon the energies that held me together. I had been a fool even to wonder whether I might reason with my own. There could be no truce here…

But I was too weak to resist. Their combined forces left me barely able to move. Not even the jewel could help me now.

I fell to the floor and the stone rolled from my hand. There was one thing left that I could trust…

The jewel occupied the same patch of shadow into which I had let my arms fall. This much I had gauged correctly. A moment later, and the boot of one of my doubles came down beside it. Therefore…

The one wanted my life, the other the stone… Now I knew which was which, as he reached for it, there in the same piece of shadow I occupied. He was about to be enlightened—or should I say enshadowed?

My hands were not where they had seemed. One took his ankle as the other recovered the jewel…

Then drawing upon the shadow force, and focussing through the Eye of Iskat, I summoned back that part of myself which had gone into the making of the doppelgänger. It vanished as the energies returned to me.

My strength recovered, I rose then to confront the double Belring had cast. The jewel pulsed in my hand as the shadow forces swirled within me.

The double drew back as if it had been burned. It turned then and headed for the stair.

It was harmless to me now, and it reminded me too much of someone I knew for me to pursue it. I watched it flee. Somewhere, Lord Belring would soon be aware that I had his jewel and had avoided his final trap.

It was not difficult to guess at his reaction, which is why I hurried.

I made for a section of wall at the edge of the court where a long streak of shadow permitted a drop I could not have made otherwise. It was so good to be substantial again, I decided as my feet hit the ground.

I kept moving till distance dimmed the din of those damned bells and the place of the Corners was far behind me.

Darkness and silence floated outside the Keep of Lylyra. The heavy shadows were my friends.

Even within, they helped me. I slid like a ghost past the guards.

Then I headed up to the lady’s chamber for a final call. Are you watching, Morningstar? Not even the dust stirs about me…

I made a small noise as I entered the chamber, intentionally. She was awake in an instant.

“Jack? There in the shadows? It could only be you…

“You have returned, as I knew you would. Come to me, for I have missed you.

“It is good that you are back. I intend for you to remain here.

“Yes, hold me, dear Jack. I will see that you remember this moment for as long as you live…”

A blade flashed in her hand.

I watched the shadow-image fall. She rose quickly. It was time for me to move.

“Hello, Vara,” I said, emerging from shadow as my image faded.

“Phantom!” she responded.

“I brought the Eye of Iskat, as you requested, my dear.”

I turned its force upon her.

“…You see, I want you to remember this moment for as long as you live.”

She fell back.

“Dwindle, compress, darken.

“…As hard and black as your heart, my dear.”

I picked up the lump of coal she had become and tossed it into the fireplace.

“…Though you’ll still give a lovely light.”

I am certain Vara would have appreciated the finesse with which I managed that final encounter—were she able to view it dispassionately, that is. Had she possessed a somewhat different temperament, I am certain that I could have enjoyed her company for a long while. But then, of course, such a woman would not be Vara and I could conceivably find myself wishing for someone like the original. It was probably better for both of us that the only change the jewel could effect was a matter of form. —Jack, you’re getting sentimental. Life, after all, is a place where we steal for pleasure and profit, each in our own way; and we, of course, are but shadows who have stolen a little of light…

A Word from Zelazny

This story is a prequel to Jack of Shadows and appeared as a graphic story (comic) before this text-only version. “People sometimes ask me whether the title Jack of Shadows was intended to sound like a description of a playing card used in some arcane game, as well as representing my protagonist’s name and a matter of geography. Answer: Yes. I’ve long been fascinated by odd decks of cards, and I had an extensive collection of them at one time. ‘Ha!’ they usually respond on hearing this admission. ‘Then this business about the cards and the reference to shadows ties this story in at some subterranean psychological level with your Amber books, right?’ Well, no. The last time I was down in the catacombs I couldn’t locate any connection. I was simply attracted by the imagery. On the other hand, nobody ever asked me, ‘Why Jack?’ I could have answered that one: Jack Vance… I’d worked things out to find a title with ‘Jack’ in it as a private bit of homage publicly displayed. Now you all know… And yes, I did once do a short graphic prequel (“Shadowjack”) in collaboration with artist Gray Morrow, in The Illustrated Roger Zelazny.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This prequel began with artist Gray Morrow; he requested a new story about Jack of Shadows, “and he told me certain scenes that he probably would really enjoy illustrating, and gave a rough idea for a story he had in mind…I made it into a stronger outline, and stronger storyline, and sent it back. He took my story outline and roughed out the panels and sent me the artwork. I went through each panel and wrote the captions…that was a genuine collaboration. It was kind of fun.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

“…So this is the story that Jack built—with a little help from me on the paperwork. Picture him if you will as a Figure on a playing card. Make it a Tarot. Maybe the Broken Tower…”[[3]](#footnote-3)

“The world on which [this story] is set is distinctive in that one side of it constantly faces its sun. This daylight side is ruled by the laws of science…the dark side…by the laws of magic. …Jack is neither a darksider nor a daysider, but a creature of twilight, having been born in the grey area between the two realms. His power is not dependent upon place, but upon the presence of shadows, with which he has a magical affinity.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

“This story, set early in his career, brings him into contact with other darksiders in their places of power, where he must pit his cunning and his shadowforce against them.”

Notes

A bollard is a thick, low post to which mooring lines from vessels are attached. A doppelgänger is a person’s ghostly double. Campaniles are bell towers. Riven means split apart. Anthracite is hard coal that burns without flame. “…as it tolled for him indeed” refers to John Donne’s poem Meditation XVII, “never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

1. Forward to Jack of Shadows, Signet 1989 edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Media Sight Vol 3 No 1 Summer 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Forward to Jack of Shadows, Signet 1989 edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Last Defender of Camelot, Underwood-Miller edition, 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)