

Shadow Era

The Adder's Grin

By Thomas King

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Rogues may not be jacks-of-all-trades, but they've mastered several. They are assassins when someone needs to die, spies when someone needs information, saboteurs when someone needs an advantage, and thieves when no one needs them.

Lance Shadowstalker was well over-do. He expected to have been done and left the city of Calvette weeks ago, but his target, Lord Bralin, was more careful than anticipated. He was a cunning lord, too cunning for certain people, and Bralin knew his head was sought after. Lance had entered into Bralin's modest castle under the guise of a traveling scholar who offered to teach the lord and his advisors about the far west from which they receive little news of. In exchange, the lord offered a small guest room to the scholar and a kind payment when his teachings were finished.

Lance spent the first couple of days touring the castle grounds, casually reconnoitering the target's surroundings, small as they were, looking for entrances and exits, guard posts, noting servants' schedules, even counting the paces of hallways and corridors. Such a castle was easily guarded; even windows a man could climb through had a sentry posted to watch. And there were fewer places to hide, and almost no way of moving unseen. Lance would have to get to Bralin with his masquerade, but even that was easier said than done.

Guards outside Bralin's chambers checked everyone who would speak to him, even his own advisors. No weapon could make it inside, not one of steal at least. But even poison was averted; Bralin had special servants taste every bit of food and sip all drinks. He was a lord who knew death was after him and he wasn't taking any chances. Lance endured guards constantly eyeing him, even following him if he happened to wander into certain areas of the castle, and one stood outside his door at night. A previous attempt on Bralin's life left him no choice but to suspect everyone and protect himself from everything.

But Lance wasn’t about to give up. Every fortress has weaknesses.

A late evening, nearly two weeks after Lance expected to have already left Calvette, he was summoned to Bralin’s chambers. He only carried with him one of the books of western law he was asked to bring. When he came to Bralin’s door, the guards checked him for weapons. Hearing the noise of the guards’ armor, Bralin called through the door, “Hurry up, and let him in.” *I think the old fox is actually beginning to trust me*, thought Lance. He restrained a wry smile that twitched at the edge of his lips. The guards opened the door, and inside Lance could see one of Bralin’s tasters serving him his evening tea, a medicinal brew he drank each night.

“Lord Bralin,” said Lance, nodding his head politely with a gentle smile. It was the sort of character he was playing for his unwitting audience.

“Ah, my good scholar. Excellent, you have the book,” Bralin said, eyeing the book with a familiar gleam in his eye. It was the look when he was up to his cunning ways.

Lance watched casually as the servant tasted Bralin’s tea. A mere sip was all he took of the drink, and Bralin only gave a brief glance long enough to see the deed done. Not even waiting to see if the young man started convulsing or foaming at the mouth, Bralin took his tea and sipped of it as well. *He’s letting his guard down.*

“Take a seat, my boy,” Bralin motioned to a chair by the window. Lance moved the seat near the bedside and sat with the book across his lap, growing more curious about old Bralin and what he was up to. “Now, you’ve read western laws from this book before, does it contain all of them?”

“Many, but I’m afraid no book would hold all of them.” Lance smiled his practiced and perfected smile.

Bralin waved away the servant. “Does it note the laws of annexation?”

“Yes, what there is anyway.” *This is the sort of thing that put a price on your head*, Lance thought, opening the book and

turning the pages searching for the right section. “Was there something in particular you wanted to know?”

Bralin fell silent, peering at the book. Lance waited, and he felt a quiet fear stir inside him, wondering what Bralin was going to say. At last, Bralin stirred, as if coming out of a daze, “It’s a bit late I think,” he said with a smile. “Why don’t you leave the book here and get some rest. I’ll be sure to have it returned to you, just as you left it, in the morning.”

Lance was tempted to say no, he thought his character might even say no, but he needed to let him have the book or risk his mission’s success.

Handing the book over, Lance said, forcing another smile, “I hope you find it a good read, my Lord.” With that, he returned to his quarters. Whatever it was Bralin was up to, it would more than likely never come to fruition; Lance only needed to finish the job to ensure it.

The following morning, as Bralin said, one of his advisors came to Lance’s door with the book in his hands. “My Lord thanks you for indulging him,” said the advisor Renstack. As he handed the book to Lance, he continued, “You have stayed here for some time now, and we have been ever grateful for you sessions.” He produced a small purse of coins from his pockets. “Here is the rest of your compensation, scholar. If you’d be so kind, we hope you’ll be on your way by tomorrow morning.” Renstack offered only a petty and hollow smile, then, went on his way.

Lance closed the door and began pacing around the cramped room. His time was up, and just as he was piecing together his plan. Bralin was beginning to trust him, and at the same time letting go of his caution. Lance was sure he could find a way to use Bralin’s trust to finish him. In time, he might even have the guard searches waived. But now, there was no time to devise the plan, let alone execute it.

Lance needed to improvise, take the quick and dirty route. He wasn’t going to casually walk from Calvette as he’d hoped.

That evening, Lance prepared his things. When he next returned to his room, he would need to flee the castle. He wore his normal garments, a simply blue tunic and wool pants, but in his pockets he stored a wire garrote and a small pinch of poison wrapped in cloth.

He stood facing the door, readying his mind and body. Lance had reached the point of no return. On the other side of the door was a guard, the first roadblock. Lance had spent years training as an assassin, and from here he would need to call upon nearly every skill he learned to get the job done and make it out.

Lance stepped forward and opened the door without the slightest noise. The guard stood just to the side of the door, watching down the hall. Lance, in one motion, slipped the garrote over the guard’s helm and around his neck, pulling him into the room and closing the door with his foot. The guard couldn’t make a whimper let alone a cry for help; even as he tried to unsheathe his sword, he only fumbled and the blade slid safely back into the scabbard. Running out of breath, the guard flailed, trying to grip something, trying to fight back, but soon his movements ceased. Lance waited another moment to be sure then carefully lowered the guard to the floor. He moved the body out of sight then entered the hall.

One down, two to go.

Lance made his way to the kitchen where Bralin’s tea would be prepared. Inside was the servant making the tea and another cleaning up. Lance casually walked in and nibbled on some bread, as he had done several times before. The castle had regarded him as a servant and he had the privileges of one, such as they were. One of his early plans was to simply enter the kitchen and poison Bralin’s food and let them serve it to him, but that was thrown out when he learned of the tasters. After several minutes, with the tea nearly done and ready to be taken to Bralin, the cleaning servant had left to clean up the dining area.

Lance moved forward, no intent in his eyes, lest the servant notice him. But the servant was occupied with finishing

the tea and hadn't even noticed Lance enter the kitchen. In an instant, Lance had the servant's neck gripped in his strangling wire and he forced him away from the table. The young man kicked, trying to knock something down and alert someone.

"Seems it was truly your fate to die for your Lord, one way or another," said Lance into the young man's ear. It wasn't much consolation for killing him, but was all he could afford. Before long, the servant was dead. Lance quickly hid the body in a pantry, leaving the garrote with him. He straightened himself up, poisoned the tea, then, took the tray and left.

He walked coolly through the halls, and no one, guard or servant, paid him any mind. Lance made his way to Bralin's chambers ready to explain to the guards why he served Bralin instead of the usual servant, but when he arrived, they simply checked him and let him in, not a word spoken.

Bralin on the other hand immediately inquired. "Is that my tea? Why are you serving it, where's—,"

"He was feeling ill," Lance turned his voice to thoughtful caring. "He didn't want to serve you coughing all over it, but none of the other servants answered his bell. I offered to do it instead. I know you've already paid me, but I don't mind one last service, my Lord, and free of charge." He squeezed out his most compassionate smile and poured the tea.

"You intend to taste it as well, don't you? You know someone might try to poison me, and you'll have to take the poison instead," Bralin said, with a teasing tone.

Nodding, Lance replied, "Ready and willing, for my Lord."

"I see. I wish I had more like you, willing to go that extra mile. I've not one guard I can say would serve me food or drink willing to take any poison in my stead." Bralin returned his smile, but his was genuine and honest. For a moment, Lance felt a little sorry for what he was about to do, but not enough to stop himself from doing it.

Lance took a false sip of the tea, with Bralin watching closely, not quite as trusting as he let on. Lance nodded, "Not as

good as usual, perhaps, but far from deadly.” He presented one last smile as he handed Bralin the little cup. The old man, his hair almost entirely gray and hands wrinkled, took the cup, lifting it to his dry lips and took a long sip. In the first moment, worry came across his face as his breathing became difficult. By the time he looked at Lance, still smiling his fake grin, worry had turned to fear, and his throat was completely closed, nothing in or out. Bralin tried to reach out, but Lance held back his arms, never letting go of his grin, which slowly became sincere.

As Bralin was starting to go, Lance finally spoke quietly, “You made some powerful people very unhappy.” The third assassination of the night, Bralin faded, his eyes fixed on Lance. *Time to get the hell out of here*, Lance thought, packing up the tea tray to leave as casually as he entered. He left a full cup on the small table, just as the other servant always had.

He struggled a moment with the door, but one of the guards outside opened it for him. “Thank you,” he said, smiling an honest grin. The guard nodded the same and closed the door, only glancing at the sleeping lord.

Lance quickened his pace back to his quarters. Before long either the servant in the pantry or Bralin would be discovered dead. At his room, he tossed the tray onto the bed and quickly changed clothes. Dressed in full black, with a hood and mask, Lance was hoping to slip into the dark of night and go unseen. With him was only a small satchel strapped tightly and containing a handful of devices and tricks to help his escape. That was when the bells started ringing. One of the bodies was discovered and the guards were mobilizing. If they hadn’t seen Bralin, they would soon, and then they would unleash hell.

Lance climbed out his window and up to the roof, swiftly and quietly. The guards hadn’t yet left the castle; they expected the killer to still be inside. On the roof, Lance quickly made his way to the other side and down the rampart where he would be in jumping distance of the next building. He paused, aiming his jump, then leapt like an animal to the next roof. As he started his way across it to the next roof, the castle opened and riders poured

into the city, each carrying a torch. Lance went into a full sprint, leaping from roof to roof. The city walls weren't far, but the guards were filling the streets and citizens were following suit. Suddenly, screams came from the streets, and Lance looked to see he had been spotted. People were pointing and screaming for guards.

Lance jumped down to cross a wide courtyard, but the commotion had drawn a guard there who immediately charged with his spear. Lance deftly leapt off a statue and in one motion attacked the spearman and twisted the weapon from his grip. He turned the spear around and impaled the disarmed guard. The guard let out a terrible scream of pain, but by the time he hit the ground, Lance was already gone.

As he climbed up the other side, riders were nearly caught up. One of them, a mage, began casting a spell. The wind kicked up, a shape formed above the mage, an orb of frosted winds. The mage then let loose a hundred arrows of ice. Lance tried to dodge and escape the hail, running as fast as he could on the flimsy rooftops, but as he leapt to the next roof, a long shard of ice pierced his side.

Lance gripped the ledge with one hand, but couldn't hold it. With the riders almost on him, he dropped to the ground and tossed a smoke bomb. While the riders scattered aimlessly in the streets, Lance double-backed to a large storehouse, crawling into the second story window where he could lay low and tend to his wound.

In the storehouse, Lance carefully removed the ice arrow from his side. *I don't have long before they turn around and head this way*, he thought, quickly patching his wound with a bit of cloth and a numbing salve to quiet the pain. He then covered the bandage in black to preserve his stealth. With the guards still searching down the street, Lance gave himself a moment to rest. However, a second company of guards had left the castle and was coming up the street. Lance got to his feet and quietly snuck out the window and down into an alley.

All eyes were on the rooftops, so Lance stuck to the ground. He passed quickly and quietly from one shadow to the next. If there was one aspect of his assassin training he mastered it was stealth. A few riders were approaching while others closed in behind; Lance tucked into a small crawl space under a wooden landing. There, in the thick mud, he waited for the guards to pass. After several moments, he crawled out, wiped clumps of mud off, and charged back into the shadows.

With the city wall nearing, Lance once again climbed up a building’s side and up to the roof. He went straight into a sprint to get as much distance before being spotted, and sure enough, calls started echoing in the streets. Lance ignored them and made for the tallest building adjacent the wall. Even there, the gap was intimidating, and Lance wasn’t sure he could make it. Riders were in full gallop, catching up to him below, and archers unleashed their arrows, but Lance kept his gaze forward. Reaching the last building, he nimbly swung to the tower’s peak, drew a metal claw from his pack, and then leapt with every bit of strength. He stretched out his arm, holding the claw to catch the wall. With a force that knocked the wind out of him, the claw latched onto the wall. With every arrow and spear being thrown at him, he climbed up and over the top. A massive fireball, launched by the mage, flew over his head as he crossed the wall and started down the other side.

The forest wasn’t far, and once in there, there would be no hope for the guards to catch him. At night, the woods were a land of nothing but shadow.

While the main host of guards crossed the city to the nearest gate, a few guards had already been patrolling the outer wall. Two of them spotted Lance as he dashed towards the forest’s edge, one blowing a horn to summon others. Nearing the woods, Lance climbed into a tree while the guards charged on horseback. As they came upon him, Lance let loose two throwing knives, each guard catching one in the throat. Lance turned and started leaping from one tree to the next, catching branches with the metal claw.

“Don’t lose him!” cried another guard galloping forward with another two behind him. He stopped only a moment to see the other guards fall dead from their saddles, then pursued Lance best as he could. He could hear the branches creaking as Lance climbed them.

Lance suddenly ambushed the guard, dropping down on top of him with dagger drawn. Before the guard could defend himself, Lance had opened his throat. He leapt back into the trees and vanished as the other two caught up. They looked back to the woods, but Lance and the sounds of his aerobatics were gone. A light wind blew through the trees, and all that the guards could see was endless darkness.

A week had passed since Bralin’s assassination, and news spread faster than a plague. King Alistair Raim, the man who arranged the assassination, entered his bedchamber to begin a new plot in his never-ending campaign for power. As soon as he closed the door, a voice spoke out, “Job’s done.”

Alistair looked around, and in the blink of an eye there appeared his assassin, Lance Shadowstalker, perched on the windowsill with his mask pulled down. Alistair, not even slightly unsettled, replied, “So I’ve heard.” With a wily grin, he continued, “Turned out to be quite the mess. I thought the whole point of using poison was to go unnoticed?” Alistair walked to his desk on the far wall and poured himself a mug of wine.

“Things didn’t go exactly as planned,” Lance retorted with a slight tinge of annoyance.

Alistair looked back at him, lightly smirking, “Ah well. None-the-less the job is done. Bralin will never again be a canny thorn in my side. And in the mean time, Calvette will remain a mess,” he mused, taking a long swig of wine.

“How wonderful for you,” replied Lance dryly. “If you don’t mind, I’ll take the rest of my payment.”

Alistair put down his drink and removed from a drawer a small purse of gold coins. He moved composedly to the windowsill and held out the purse. As Lance grasped the purse,

Alistair tightened his grip, unrelenting. Before Lance could protest, Alistair spoke, “What say you to working full time? I could use more like you.”

Lance suddenly recalled similar words spoken by Bralin. Yet Bralin, the one he started to favor, was dead, a deed Lance had accomplished himself; and Alistair, a man of unnerving guile, was the one offering Lance a future.

“There are things stirring in the world,” continued Alistair, with a hard, stone-like expression. “The appearance of dark elves, raging elementals, and whispers of terrible beasts from the south. Something is on the horizon, and I need every capable hand to ensure survival.”

Ours, or just yours? Thought Lance.

“You will be well paid of course. A man of your talents is worth a lot of money.” With a wide grin, he released the purse.

Lance quietly stared at the purse. He wondered, against the dark things gathering in the wild, what could he do? It was a question that Lance Shadowstalker was curious to answer.