

A man with a shaved head and a goatee, wearing a black trench coat, stands in the rain. He is holding a handgun in his right hand. The background is dark with vertical streaks of rain and some light particles.

GRAEME
SMITH

SOME DAYS
THE LAST
THING YOU
NEED IS A
GOOD GUY.

JACK
SHADOW

SHADOW DANCE BOOK 1

Shadow Dance – Book 1
Jack Shadow

by

Graeme Smith

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Acknowledgements

There are three quotes I use at the front of 'Jack Shadow'. To the best of my knowledge Mr Herodotus has no issue with me using his words. Jack's are Jack's, and since he hasn't killed me yet I guess he's OK with my quoting him. But John Leonard's were a different matter.

One of America's best loved literary, film, theatre and television critics, Mr Leonard passed away in 2008. The quote of his presented here is used by kind and generous permission of Sue Leonard. I cannot thank her enough. Jack would have been less without John's words.

Characters come from strange places. Where they finish isn't always where they were going when they set out, and it isn't always all the writer's doing. Jack is no different. So:

To Sher Reese. Who was the first one to tell me Jack wasn't all Bad – because he was funny. My thanks indeed for you telling me to keep him going.

To Lady Cheryl – who proved Jack really was a Bad Guy. She hated him :-).

To the real Prowess Rayna – who may not really (at least as far as I am aware) be a Shapeshifting empathivore, but really is an amazing concert pianist. My thanks for letting me use a little bit of you here. And, as ever, to my long suffering pre-release readers, both alpha and beta. I owe you no small debt:

To Kaptain K, to Lady A, to the real Kohkoh, to the real Sonea, to Lady Leanna, Lady Talon, Lord Jim and Lord Tranq, to the long suffering Bright Fantastic of InWorldz who come to the Blarney to hear me read, to Lady Tanya, my thanks. And don't go away. The not-summer night sky is screaming.

And to Books We Love. To Jude, the extremely not-obscure. To Jamie. To my fantastic cover artist Michelle Lee – and to my Editor. Who must have done something evil in a previous life to suffer me – and who deserves a place upstairs for putting up with me :-).

And to Lady Gail. For Vladivostok –and the Rickenbacker Falls!

* * *

Very few things happen at the right time, and the rest do not happen at all: the conscientious historian will correct these defects.

—Herodotus, The History of Herodotus

Isn't it amazing the way the future succeeds in creating an appropriate past?

—John Leonard

History. Just a big damn pot, and sometimes it needs stirring. Me? I'm a spoon.

—Jack Shadow

Prologue

Lead Guitar in a Lead Zeppelin

The name don't matter none.

Jack Shadow. ShadowJack. Like the lady said in the song, the name don't matter none, 'cause it's all the same. I do my job right, you ain't never heard of me. Never met me. And them that do meet me—mostly they don't tell anyone.

Ever.

If it can hurt you, I likely used it some time. I'm the guy you passed in the street, the guy you never saw. Maybe I bummed a cigarette. Maybe I dropped some change in your tin. Maybe you were my friend. Maybe I killed you.

Maybe both.

Yeah, yeah. I've heard 'em. Every one of 'em. They all start out the same. The jokes. "See ... this guy walks into a bar...." Well, that's not me. That guy, I mean. The guy who walked into a bar. I'm the guy who walked out.

No. It's not amnesia. Or at least they don't say it is. Near as anyone knows, I just don't have a past. Near as anyone knows—or admits to. I don't walk round a corner, and some guy from a car shoots at me because long ago I—well, sure. Guys shoot at me. Hell, women too. But not for long ago. Mostly for last week, where 'last week' is any week you choose. No, I just walked out of a bar. Or so they tell me. The Dragon.

The Dragon? Look it up. It's all out there. 'Order of the Dragon'. Hell, 'Sárkány Lovagrend' if you speak Hungarian. Which I don't. Yup, the Internet's a wonderful thing. Guy who had the idea was Dragon. The Dragon loved it so much, they gave him a Special Commendation. I know that for a fact. They sent me to deliver it—the Commendation.

See, you can't have good ideas being talked about. Ever.

Mind, I said it was out there, about the Dragon. Never said it was true. It isn't. None of it. That's the Dragon way too.

Oh, they looked, the Dragon. They really looked for me. Me before the bar, that is. And there isn't much the Dragon can't find if they want to. But there it is. What they told me, one day I walked out of a bar. Were there piles of dead bodies behind me? A stacked deck I was dealing, or one I was dealt? I don't know. I walked out of the damn place. I never walked back in. Just ... just away.

But they were waiting, and they took me. The Dragon. They tell me they do that a lot. Wait. Till the time a beat of a gnat's wing can topple an empire. Me? I guess I'm a gnat.

I walked out of a bar. The rest ... the rest will be history. Some day. Not that I'll be in it. Nobody remembers the gnats. Not if they did their job right.

What's a gnat? It's like they say: if you gotta ask, I can't tell you. But maybe a story would help. Not that it ever happened, of course. You comfy? Of course you are. I took care of that.

As airships go, it flew like a lump of lead. That might have had something to do with me shooting the Captain and both deck crew, and locking the hydrogen release valves wide open.

The ship had taken off with some big-ass ceremony. A guy with more money than sense had paid some guy with more sense than money to try to do what the Hindenberg had told people not

to do. So the guy with no money had done some thinking, then some other guys did some making. Now the guy with no money had money and the guy with lots of money had an airship. Big-ass airship, big-ass launch ceremony. So with all the smoke and mirrors, it hadn't been hard to get on board. The flight from London to New York meant the blimp had to go real high, to catch the jet stream. I figured there'd be time.

OK. So you're thinking the big shot, right? Hell no. He had the smarts to think maybe being on the maiden voyage wasn't such a hot idea. So he'd got on with all the cameras flashing and then sneaked off out the back. Left some dumb look-alike stand-in with the reporters to make happy faces and tell them funny stories. No. There was a band on board, to keep things poppin'. The Dragon wanted to make sure the bass player never made it to New York.

Why? Damned if I know. They don't say, and I don't ask. It's a job, that's all. Just another job. That's the Dragon. Some say it's all about the balance. Some say it's the harmony. Some say Dragon's just a bunch of mean sons of bitches out to rule the world. 'Course, most of them as say that won't say it any more.

Not ever.

Me? I say it's just a big pot, and sometimes it needs stirring. Nobody needs to tell the spoon nothin'. I'm a spoon.

So I did what needed doing, and now the ship wasn't going anywhere but down. Along the way, some people got brave. So they got dead. No big. At least it was quick for them. But the chute I had was only good at low altitude and the damn ship was dropping real slow. Time to kill. So there I was. Sliding down the sky jammin' real bad *Nobody's Fault But Mine* on a dead guy's axe, till I could pop a window and open my chute.

Real bad? Hell. I never said I could play.

That's what it's like in the Dragon. Sure, they tell you you're a hero. Saving the world. And if you believe it, what do you get? Well, you get to play bad lead guitar in a lead zeppelin.

I ain't no hero. Like I said: I'm a gnat.

So there it is. Let's try that joke again. See, this guy walks out of a bar....

I can tell you're wondering. Why we here, you and me? Why we talking? Why am I telling you all this?

Well, see, every job needs that moment. The moment you bang the side of the pinball machine and rock the ball, without ringing tilt. A distraction. So. Consider yourself distracted. But don't take it personal. It's just a job. I'll make it quick.

Oh, and don't worry. I won't feel a thing.

Chapter One

36-24-36 Caliber Pistol

If this was some comic book, I'd have a secret radio transmitter hid behind a fake bookcase. Right. Like I live anywhere long enough to collect books. But that's the movies. Yes, or the comics. The Dragon? Dragon ain't like that. The Dragon, you're in a cab, and suddenly the driver starts tellin' you about a job. And when you look for the driver again, they ain't never there in the taxi rank. Or maybe you get home and take your jacket off, and there's a bit of paper in it that wasn't there when you went out. One you never noticed being put there. One I never noticed, and I'm real good at noticing.

So I can hear you askin'. What if somebody wants something done, and they can't do it themselves? What if they just make like they're Dragon and try to get someone like me to do it? Sure. Someone could do that. But anyone smart enough to know about the Dragon had better be a bit smarter. Smart enough to know if they did something that dumb, the Dragon would look for them. And find them. And—well, and.

I get back to the dive I'm staying in for now, and there's no bookcase and no secret radio transmitter. I didn't take no cab, and there was no piece of paper in my jacket when I took it off. Or I guess there wasn't. Because I never got to take it off. Because what there was, was a blonde. A blonde with a glint in her eye, a gun on the table next to her and legs that should have needed a passport for how long they kept going. She got as far as 'Jack'. As in 'So you gonna shoot me, Jack?' Probably because my gun wasn't on no table. That wasn't good. The guy on the desk would have told her Steve Metcalf, up in room 14, was a nice enough guy. The Dragon would have been and gone before I got there. So I answered her question.

Dead bodies are a bitch to get rid of. Or they should be.

I figure this one shouldn't be too hard. The jerk in 17 had so much skirt walking in and out, no one was going to notice one more. Or wonder why they hadn't noticed this one. She had a bit more class than his usual hook, but the fire would take care of that. So I take her gun, go down the hall and put a bullet in his head. I turn the gas on a crack, put his fingers all over a cigarette, and light it. I leave it lying in an ashtray then go back for her. I figure I give him my gun, put hers back in her hand and take a walk. No big. Another boom in the Big Apple.

Should have worked out fine.

Like I said: if this was some comic book, there'd have been some Clue. A lipstick kiss on the mirror. A note. A little tape recorder that said it would blow itself to bits five seconds after it was done saying something dumb. But like I said: this ain't no comic book. All there was, was what there wasn't: the blonde.

Most people I shoot, they don't get up. But most ain't none. The ones that don't, they're trouble. Dragon trouble. So I slipped her gun in my pocket. I went back to 17 and stubbed the cigarette, dropping that in my pocket too. I cleaned 14, which mostly meant making sure what was there was all Steve Metcalf and none of me. I took the clothes he'd had on when I started being Steve and he stopped, washed his shirt in the sink and hung it out to dry. Dropped his shorts on the floor. The job I was in town for was a quick one, so the Dragon hadn't had to do

anything clever. Steve was still in good condition in the bag. I dragged him out and put him in bed. Then I went back to 17 and lit another cigarette. Or rather, the jerk that lived there did. I pulled my own gear out of its sterile bag and dressed. I did the check—pockets, boot, jacket collar, belt. The rest.

Emergency kit. I never go anywhere without it. Mostly so I get to be the emergency.

I checked 17, and sniffed. Time to leave.

Yeah. I know. Boom. Hey, I never said I was nice. Here's a quarter, call someone who cares. See? I'll put it here. Oh, right. You can't reach it. Nerve paralyzers will do that—like the one I put in your beer. The Dragon say they make it from some tree in the South American rain forest. It acts quick. You just won't be able to move none.

Chapter Two

264 String Sidekick

When someone tries to blow your head off, stopping them is a good place to start. But stopping them ain't enough. It's generally a good idea to find out why they wanted to give you a blow job in the first place. And there's two ways to find out. One is to take a walk and see if anyone else has the same idea. The other is to go ask someone who might know.

I did both.

Walking down a street to see if anyone wants to give you a .357 headache isn't generally considered a smart thing to do. But pulling the emergency cord and runnin' to the Dragon to tell them some broad knows too much and you didn't drop her makes the walking thing look like genius. So I walked. I walked Broadway and I walked Lexington. I walked Central Park and I dropped by the Queensboro' Bridge on 59th. No, Simon wasn't there. No, not Garfunkel either. And nobody with an AK-47 wanting me to slow down—dead. So I took the A train like Ella said, and walked by the Apollo. But nobody played. Nobody took a shot at me at all. Which made a bad thing look worse. Most days, somebody wants to shoot me. If they can find me, at least. And today I wasn't trying not to be found. Someone had the word out. And the word was 'hands off'.

Damn. I hate the bloody piano.

I didn't need to practice. I knew how to get to Carnegie Hall. She wasn't playing 'til later, but that didn't matter. I knew she'd be there. A C-note persuaded the guy on the door he hadn't seen me. After that, she wasn't hard to find. I knew she knew I was coming when the notes changed to 'Dragonstar'.

Prowess was sat at the piano in silk that probably cost more than the guy on the door would earn in his life. She smiled. "Good evening ... oh. Who are you this week, old friend?"

That's P for you. It wasn't evening, and as far as I know I don't do the 'friend' thing. Not that Prowess ever listened. She'd rather hit a bad note than be impolite, and Prowess never hits bad notes. You get used to it. "Blonde. Legs like a long, cold glass on a hot day." Like I said: I hate the bloody piano.

"I changed this a little. Can you hear it? Just here ... like that?"

I sighed. "Blonde. Legs. Bad habit of not staying dead." I slapped the prop and two hundred grand of grand piano lid dropped hard on the rest of a million dollar piano.

"You have no soul, Shadow!"

A claw ripped through the air where my head was supposed to be, but I knew Prowess. I ducked, I rolled, and I jammed my gun into a mouth with more teeth than a chainsaw. "Blonde. Legs. Not dead enough. And Prowess? This one knew my name."

You may have heard of her. Prowess Rayna. Finest concert pianist you'll ever hear—if you give a damn about piano music, which I don't. Oh, and Shape-shifter. And empathivore, which I do give a damn about.

Ever wonder why you go to a concert, and you walk out feeling tired? Well if it was Prowess, that's easy. She ate you. Not your flesh. Your thoughts, your emotions—she ate you.

The energy keeps her fed, and the information she gets keeps her in silk. And pianos. So when I need to know something, I ask Prowess. Mostly with a gun in her mouth. That's just how we are, her and me. Well, most people and me. She's not really my side-kick. I just tell people she is when I want to piss her off. Which is mostly.

Prowess grew another mouth. She knew I wasn't taking my gun out of the one it was in. "You really don't, you know, Jack. Have a soul, I mean. A girl has to eat, and you just don't have a scrap about you." Prowess looked over my shoulder. "Oh, and you should probably duck, Jack."

The bullet slammed into the piano. Prowess screamed. I wasn't sure what pissed her off more—the damage to the piano or the noise the lead made as it hit the strings. I'd ducked, so I rolled again and came up, my gun aimed at the blonde. She grinned. "Jack. Didn't your mother ever tell you it's rude to point?" Then she grinned again. "Ah. But then you wouldn't know, right?"

I put three in her chest. Not because I thought it would do any good. More because there was a lot of it and it was an easy target. The blonde pouted. "Now Jack. That's just not nice. Oh, and Jack? You'd better run. They're coming for you." She winked. "I'll be seeing you, Jack."

I pumped another into the space she'd stopped occupying, just in case. But nothing screamed, nothing started dripping blood and everything was just another lousy part of another lousy day. I figured things probably couldn't get any worse, which is normally the time they start doing just that.

"She right, Jack. They're coming." Prowess wasn't looking to unhappy about whoever it was.

"Who's coming, P?"

"The Dragon."

Prowess was right. The not-dead broad was right. I was right too. Things really were getting worse. "I'm Dragon, Prowess."

"Yes you are. And so's she. But which Dragon?" Prowess looked like the question didn't make sense to her either, and she was the one askin' it. But eating thoughts can be like that. Emotions too, she told me.

I don't do those either. Emotions.

See, sometimes it isn't the answer that's the problem. It's the question. We're not there yet. The question, I mean. But the thing about being Dragon is, you don't ask questions. Not if you're a gnat. Not if you're a spoon. So just you sit tight. We'll get there. Get where?

The Question.

Chapter Three

Jack 2 Jack

Yeah. I could've run. After all, if the blonde-who-wouldn't-stay-dead said it, it must be good advice, right?

Sure it was. And there's a whole load of dead bodies would agree with you.

Ever tried to outrun a bullet? It can be done, but this wasn't the time. Besides. If they used bullets, there wouldn't have been anything to worry about. Bullets is patty-cake. They'd smack me round some, then patch me up and tell me not to go doing again whatever it was I'd no idea I'd done. That's the Dragon way. The way this was shaping up, there wouldn't be no....

The cut on my throat stung as it bled. Riftblades. Sharp enough to draw blood before they even touch you. As mine dripped red down my neck I knew I'd need a new shirt. I had an idea it wasn't going to pass expenses.

Prowess kept on playin' Dragonstar, but I figured the Claw wasn't a music lover. His shimmersilks did what they did best, which was to make you look at anything in the room except them. Chameleons blend in. Claws grab the corner of your eye and wrap it round themselves. Prowess didn't break a note, but one of her eyebrows raised. It's hard to fight when you don't have a thought in your head she hasn't eaten, so there isn't much she can't take down if she wants to enough.

Except me.

When I didn't raise an eyebrow back, Prowess just went on playing.

Claws are who the Dragon send when they're serious. They don't talk much. Mostly because after the Dragon pick them for training when they're three, their tongues are ripped out. So this one told me where to go the same way they all do, by making sure the riftblade was everywhere he didn't want me to be. I just went where it wasn't.

Outside, the car was waiting. The door swung open. The sap I'd been expecting slammed into my head, so I just let everything go bla—

* * *

An hour later

—ck. My eyes cleared, and I returned from sap-land. The room was still black. It could have been empty. It could have been full of Claws. The only way to find out was to do something stupid. I was already way past stupid and heading towards 54th-and-couldn't-give-a-damn. But then, I never had. Given a damn, I mean.

The long table stretched away from me. At the other end was the high-backed and carved chair. I'd seen it before, after I walked out of the bar. Seen it once. You were only ever supposed to see it once—when they recruited you. He's always the one you see—at least he is if you're a guy. You see him just that one time. Unless you get neck deep in some gardener's dream birthday present. I figured sniffing would be a bad idea. So I sniffed. The only smell was old

wood and the musty only a really old room can must. But that's what upwardly mobile deep-shit smells like.

I waited.

Sure enough, I didn't have to wait long. Just like last time the slow tap of the cane was getting closer. Even before he came into the room, I could see him in my head. The cane lifting. The slow step. The cane hitting the ground. The slow step. The tap. He'd been good once. One of the best. But he'd started to enjoy it too much. Doing extra jobs, just because. So they kicked him upstairs. That made it OK, doing it for fun.

I don't do fun. Like I said, it's a job. Just a job.

He came in and sat in the high-backed chair. Just like last time. The top hat. The silver topped cane. The black cape, the velvet waistcoat. He's like the Dragon. There's a hundred stories. A hundred theories. They're out there: books, the 'Net. One of them's got it right. Actually, that's a lie. None of them tell the truth. Not about him and not about the Dragon. But I'm Dragon. I'd say that anyway.

I nodded down the table. "Hey, Jack." That's not his name. It's just what you call him if you want to piss him off. A muscle twitched under his eye, but he didn't say a word. I wondered if he'd said any words to the others, those nights in Whitechapel. I tilted my chair back, and lifted one leg up onto the table. That was to piss him off too. But that wasn't the only reason I did it. It got my hand nearer the top of my boot. He didn't look up, but his hand slammed the silver topped cane down onto the table. Before the first echo had died the walls shimmered and twenty Claws stood with riftblades ready. Jack still didn't look up, but his other hand waved irritably. The Claws vanished, as though they'd never been there.

Maybe they hadn't.

"Jack. Jack, Jack, Jack." Jack sighed. At last, he looked up. "You know, I offered. You do understand? To retire you, I mean." I shrugged. I didn't say anything. If I got lucky, he'd say. After all, just about anything he said would be more than I knew. Jack frowned. Well, the other Jack did. I just smiled. He frowned some more. "Sadly, they didn't accept my offer." Jack's teeth bared briefly. He probably thought it was a smile. "A shame. It would have been a worthy challenge." The teeth bared again, no more than a split second. "One, of course, you would have lost."

I tried to look knowing. If I got lucky, it would piss him off again. I reached back and scratched my neck, brushing the collar of my leather on the way. Jeans come and go, but apparently I'd had the jacket on when I walked out of the bar. The Dragon wanted to issue me a new one. I threw it away. It wasn't sentiment—I don't do sentiment. But the one I had fitted me like it had been custom made. I'd almost died a few times finding out how custom made it really was. Then there are my own modifications. My emergency kit. The mage who made it owed me, so he promised never to tell anyone else what he'd done.

I believed him. And saved him the effort of keeping his promise.

"Who is she, Shadow?" Jack glared down the table.

I shrugged again. "Someone told me she's Dragon." If I hadn't already turned the old apartment to matchwood, I'd have been getting a new one. Because the Dragon hadn't found out about the blonde when I went to see Prowess. From what Jack had just said, they already knew. Which meant they either knew about her being in the apartment, or they knew about her before. And didn't tell me. "So you tell me, Jack."

The silver cane lifted up, to slam into the desk. Then it stopped, hovering in mid-air. Jack lowered it to the table, gently. "They thought about kicking you upstairs, Shadow. But I helped

them see it was a bad idea. If she's coming after The Mast..." Jack stopped, his lips twisting like he'd just bit into sour with a capital S. "I mean, if she is a threat to our organisation, then no doubt you can resolve the matter. But if it's just you she's interested in, then your position will indeed ... change." Jack grinned. I could see he was happy about the idea. Looked like I wasn't a gnat any more. Now I was a goat. The one you leave out to attract the tiger. Thing is, whatever happens to the tiger, it doesn't tend to go well for the goat. Jack smiled. "Shadow? Don't disappoint me, now. Don't die too quickly." He got up. He picked up his cane. As he left, the slow tap-tap-tapping echoed through the room.

Just like Whitechapel.

The others in here? Oh, don't worry about them. They ain't part of this job. Well, not part of your part. Not anymore. Call them decoration. They can't see a thing. Or hear it. So go ahead. You can scream. Scream all you want. You've got reason. Not that you know what it is. Not yet.

You just think you do.

Also by Graeme Smith, from Books We Love:

SHADOW FCPEG'(Shadow Dance Book 4)

About the Author

This is me. Graeme Smith. Fantasy author. Mostly comic fantasy (which is fantasy intended to make you laugh, not fantasy in comics).

Having Graeme Smith as my pen name is convenient, since it also happens to be my real name. Although sometimes I think it isn't. Sometimes I think I'm just a remote set of hands for a keyboard. So maybe Graeme Smith is my keyboard's name, not mine.

When I'm not writing (well, or editing my writing. Or re-writing. Or editing my re-writing. Or... Quite. You get the picture), I'm doing other things. Maybe things involving mushrooms. And knitting needles (but the less said about my cooking the better). Maybe things like online gaming (If you know Bard Elcano, you know me. If you know a grumpy old dragon called Sephiranoth, you know me. If you know a tall, dark, handsome but brooding vampire, charming witty and brilliant - we never met. That's someone else.)

So there you are. Graeme Smith. Keyboard in disguise. Short, fat, bald and ugly (fortunately my wife has lousy taste in men). Time was, I worked on a psychiatric ward. Now I write about people who believe in magic and dragons, and who live where the crazy folk are the ones who don't.

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