

# WHAT HIDES IN THE SHADOWS?

by Daniel Lovat Clark

I had been acting as a finder of stories, a discoverer of truth, and some might say “spy” for a few cycles when I received a fascinating invitation. It was delivered by faeries to my tree in Cobweb Grove, a simple piece of paper and a large package. The paper seemed blank at first, but as soon as I brought it into the darkness within my tidy little home letters flared to life upon it.

“You are cordially invited,” it read, “to an exclusive event at the Duskrunner Casino. May Luck favor you.” The date, time, and address were written below, along with a symbol, three dots in a sort of triangle shape.

I had heard rumors of the House of Shadows, but knew nothing definite about them. Most of their number were of a tribe of dark-skinned elves called Svarr. They were said to be thieves, assassins, brigands...and spies. Could this be a sort of professional courtesy, a recognition from one fellow liberator of secrets to another? Or even a recruitment pitch? (I perhaps flattered myself more than necessary with this particular theory, imagining that my “spying” was of such an elevated caliber as to warrant such attention.) This Duskrunner Casino was marked with their emblem, and I was intrigued. Was this finally my chance to learn what motivated the Shadows?

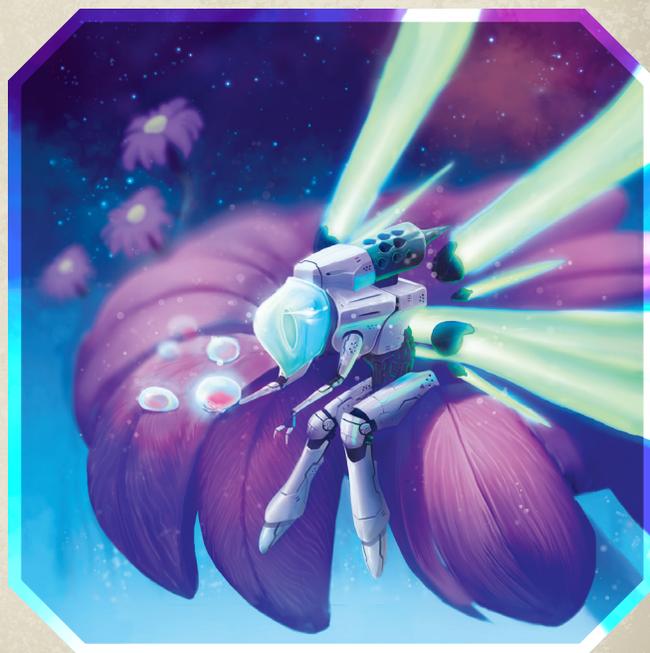
The package, when I induced the faeries to open it for me, contained a stack of wooden coins, all marked with the gnarled tree emblem of the Duskrunner Casino, in various denominations. Playing chips.

“Very well,” I said to the faeries. “I’ll be there.”



The casino was situated beneath the roots of a great skybrush tree not far from Cobweb Grove. A whole Svarr community had sprung up in that area since the last time I had passed through, less than a cycle before, and I found it quite a marvel. The Duskrunner Casino’s windows gleamed with friendly golden light in the evening shadows beneath the trees, and the other elf buildings clustered against the bark or along cobbled lanes in every direction.

When I came inside, I found that the Duskrunner was a dim, noisy tavern with plenty of tables for gambling. The walls were hastily-assembled, the floor nothing more than a dingy carpet over bare earth, and no two chairs matched one another, nor the tables they clustered round. Every piece of technology I saw seemed to have been scavenged or outright stolen from a different tribe or city around the Crucible, all extensively repurposed by the elves. I saw a Brobnar blowtorch used as a lantern; a Martian blaster that seemed to be mixing drinks; and a Logotarian robot, whose many arms well-suited it as a dedicated dealer for a card game, built right into the table. The faeries fluttering everywhere, of course, were supposedly the



creations of the Architects, usually on some inscrutable mission or another in the wild part of the worlds. But here they delivered drinks and carried money to and from the customers.

One came right up to me and escorted me to a "private table," where a cluster of Svarr elves, a goblin, and a small robot were playing cards. The largest elf, in girth at least, seemed to be the host or possibly the boss of all the others. When my faerie guide delivered me to my edge of the table and placed my chips before me like ramparts, this elf called the company's chatter to a halt.

"Well if it isn't Inka the Spider, ain't it just," he chuckled. "Welcome to my place. Name's Old Bruno." He didn't bother to introduce the rest of the table.

I thanked him for his hospitality. "I've never been to a Shadows casino before," I said. "I'm eager to learn more about you and your society."

"What's a Shadows?" asked one elf innocently.

"Never heard of him," said another.

"Honest, we was here the whole time," chirped a third.

"You want to learn about us, the Svarr? You'd best play a few hands," Old Bruno chuckled. He shuffled and began to deal out the cards, explaining the specific rules in play at the table (the game in question having innumerable local variations). I pushed my ante into the pot and examined the cards a faerie helpfully placed in a rack before me—each card being a little bigger than my carapace.

My cards were modest, and I bet modestly in the round that followed while conversation around the table flowed. "Now, I'm not saying that the Shadows have aught to do with me and mine," said Old Bruno.

"Honest truth," echoed one of his chorus, tossing a coin into the pot.

"But I heard what I heard, didn't I, and they're a faerie-tale with a grain of truth." Old Bruno won that first round and gathered the chips before him with a grin. "The Svarr favor the shadows and the shadows favor the Svarr. It's hard to be small and no mistake. Not that I have to be telling you, now, do I?" Bruno chuckled as he handed the shuffled deck to the elf on his right to cut, then dealt the next hand.

"So the Shadows is, what, some sort of survival mechanism? Defenders of the Svarr?" My cards were better this round, and I bet more aggressively.

"Nah, 't isn't like that." Old Bruno shook his head and folded. "Shadows is and isn't. Shadows isn't a place, a people, a thing."

"It's like the game, isn't it?" put in one of the other elves.

"Like the game," said Old Bruno, tasting the words. "Aye, isn't it just."

I won the hand, and moving all my chips back to my side of the table was quite the operation, even with faerie assistance. But eventually I managed it. "How so?" I asked, perched atop my pile of chips. My tender faerie helpfully anted for me.

Bruno mused as he dealt. "The game is the bluff. The misdirection. The game is knowing what you know and seeing what you see and trusting to luck for the rest."

My cards were mediocre and I folded immediately. As soon as I was out of the hand, Bruno turned his attention away from me and toward the rest of the table, laughing with his cronies and guests and not expanding on his statement. The message seemed clear to me: if you want to talk, you play.

So next hand, I anted and I stayed in, even though my cards were poor. I tried to draw Bruno out on his theme. "So the Shadows is just a game?"

"Nah. It's like this." He paused studying his cards, and his eyes went elsewhere. "The First Thief, right? When the people were just come to the world—our original world, of course, not the Crucible—and were suffering in the dark, they looked up and they saw that there was light and heat in the sky above, dancing in the stars. But it was kept apart from them, unjustly. So what did the First Thief do?"

"He nicked it, chief!"

"The First Thief made himself a cloak of starlight and climbed the tallest tree and snuck into the sky where the gods dwell. And when he got there he winkled fire out from right beneath their noses and brought it back down to the people, so they could have all the light and heat they wanted." Old Bruno grinned, then glanced at his cards and tossed a pair of chips into the middle. "I raise."

I nudged my own chip in to match his bet. "So, Shadows are thieves?"

"Nah, nah, nah," said Old Bruno. "You're still thinking of Shadows as people. Shadows is seeing what needs done an' doing it. Is taking what you can take and slipping out none the wiser."

My cards were terrible and Bruno won that hand, chuckling to himself and gathering up the pile of coins. While he shuffled and dealt again I tried another question.

"So, if Shadows were playing this game, how would they play it?" Old Bruno frowned, and I realized my error: I was still "seeing Shadows as people." I tried again. "What is the Shadows way to play this game?"

"This whole game is Shadows," said Bruno. "It's the bluff, innit. Misdirection. That tension of knowing more than but not enough, aye?"

"Not everything," agreed an elf.

"Got to take the jump," said another.

"And when it all comes crashing down, it's back to the Shadows and try again, you see? Hand after hand."

"I see," I lied. My new cards were excellent. I made a modest bet, thinking about what Old Bruno had said. "When the First Thief stole fire, was he cheating? Breaking a law?"

"That all depends on who you ask," said Old Bruno. He pushed more coins into the middle. "I raise. The gods, they were angry, but they couldn't find him, because the First Thief had stolen his own name shortly before. When they came down among the people they asked 'who is it among you who

gave you fire?' And the people just shrugged. 'It was Nobody,' they said."

"It sounds like all was well," I said, pushing additional coins into the middle. "Except for the gods, I mean. I raise."

"The gods weren't eager to be cheated by such a trick," Old Bruno agreed, putting yet more chips into the middle. "So they visited many trials and plagues down upon the people, until they would relent and give up the First Thief."

"Goodness!" I said. "And this is a hero figure to your people?"

Old Bruno laughed. "Mayhap he is an' mayhap he isn't. He's the First Thief, int'he? The people were right angry, too, for they'd been tricked all the same." He shoved in the rest of his coins. "All in."



I was trapped. Bruno had more money in his pile than I did in mine, so the only way to stay in the hand was to go all in myself, where the rules would forgive the difference. The old elf had the story right on the edge of what I needed to hear. But I was also not so naïve as to think at this point that the game was fair. If nothing else, the faerie who was handling my cards for me could certainly be sharing what I had with Bruno through a dozen different means, and Bruno had as much as told me flat out that the Shadows didn't think of cheating as dishonest. If I matched Bruno's bet, the game would likely be over, and I'd have no money left.

But then again, it wasn't my money; it was Bruno's in the first place, a gift to tempt me into his casino. I tapped my own stack of chips with one leg. "Very well," I said. "All in."

"You see, Shadows isn't just this game. It's every game, every con an' gaff an' gimmick. You know Find the Lady? The Shell Game?" I waved my pedipalps yes. "That's Shadows, too." Bruno chuckled and laid down a perfect hand, unbeatable. My own excellent cards were easily trumped. "You see, the First Thief didn't share fire with the Svarr, not at first. First he shared it with—well, it don't matter. And the gods, they came down to those people and were sore angry. And when the Svarr started using fire, well, 'they gave it to us,' and that was that. Bit of a rogue, the First Thief."

"Who-Goes-There," sighed an elf.

"Mooncurser," nodded another.

"Duskrunner," saluted a third, lifting his drink to the ceiling above.

They all drank, and I was out of chips, after only a few hours of play. All of the elves seemed in a celebratory mood, as if winning my money was a masterstroke of an elaborate plan. I bristled at the sight—not that they'd stolen my money, because they hadn't. But that they seemed to think I'd been so easily fooled. I wanted to shout at them "You didn't trick me! I knew you were cheating me out of the money and I played anyway because I wanted to hear your stories! I am the one who won, here!" But I kept my indignation to myself.

Old Bruno tossed me a coin on my way out the door. "Don't spend it all in one place," he laughed, but of course I immediately spent it to hire transport back to my home.

And when I got there, I discovered I had been tricked after all. Every drawer, every shelf in my little home was upended and tossed. Ink spatter was everywhere, and the tiny round footprints of faeries. Someone had spent the last few hours—hours they knew I would not be home—searching my lair top to bottom and apparently copying every single scrap of writing I'd ever penned.

And that, I knew, and realized, and felt all across my carapace...that was Shadows.