



SHADOWRUN

Court of Shadows

Shadowrun line developer: Jason M. Hardy

Product development: Monica Valentinelli

Writing: Jason M. Hardy, Cassandra Khaw, P. L. King, Aaron Pavao, Grant Robinson, Scott Schletz, Monica Valentinelli, Pete Woodworth, CZ Wright, Russell Zimmerman

Editing: Jason M. Hardy

Playtesting and Proofing: Chuck Burhanna, Brooke Chang, Bruce Ford, Mason Hart, Francis Jose, James O'Laughlin, Robert Price, Jeremy Weyand

Cover art: Alyssa Menold

Cover layout: Tiara Lynn Agresta

Interior art: Bruno Balixa, Tyler Clark, Victor Perez Corbella, Laura Diaz Cubas, Kim Van Deun, Álvaro Calvo Escudero, Kat Hardy, David Hovey, Jeff Laubenstein, David Lecossu, Michele Giorgi, Brian McCranie, Victor Manuel Leza Moreno, James Mosingo, Preston Stone, Matthew Sweeney, Takashi Tan, Iwo Widulinski, Eric Williams

Interior layout: Tiara Lynn Agresta

Layout production: Tracy VanTilburg

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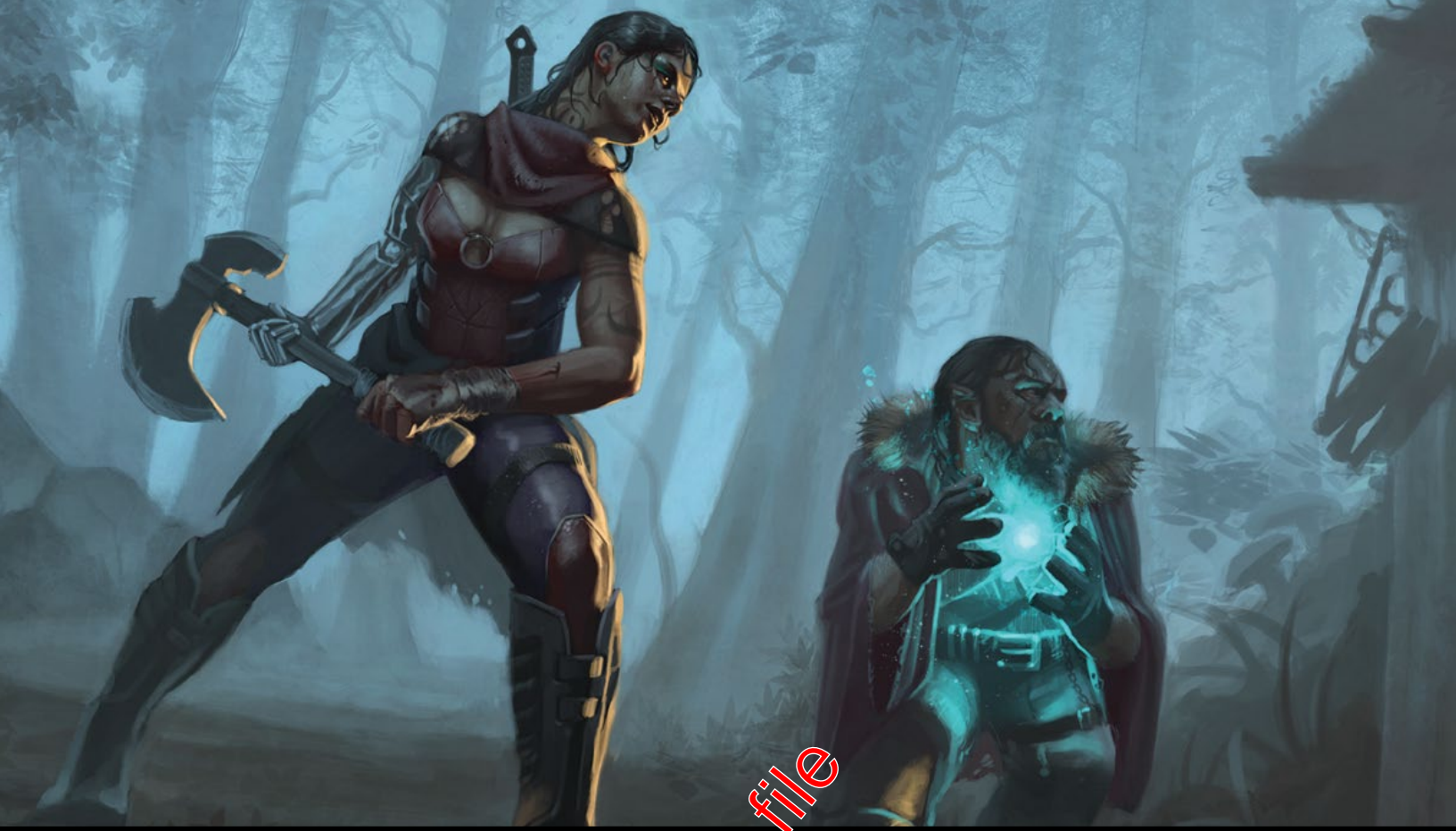
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Find us online: info@shadowruntabletop.com
(Shadowrun questions) <http://www.shadowruntabletop.com>
(Catalyst Shadowrun website) <http://www.shadowrun.com>
(official Shadowrun Universe website) <http://www.catalystgamelabs.com>
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Good Cards, Bad Cards

by R. L. King

Last night Scrum, Marley, and I all had the same dream.

If that's not bad enough, it turned out we'd all had it more than once.

Don't get me wrong—it's not like we all sit around in a circle talking about our dreams while we do each other's hair or anything like that. It just happened that while we were killing some time in a bar on the outskirts of Butte on the way to our latest run, Scrum wasn't his usual self. Normally you could count on him to be the first one to get drunk and hit on everything with a Y chromosome, but tonight he was staring into his glass in an uncharacteristic pose of deep thought. When Marley punched him in the arm and asked him what was up, he said, "I had a dream. And it ain't the first time."

"We all have dreams." Marley threw back the rest of his beer. For a little dwarf, he could drink most orks, including Scrum, under the table when he had a mind to. We figured he probably had a spell to keep him from getting a hangover.

"I don't," I said. "Well, hardly ever. Except the last few nights." That was true. My dreams, on the rare occasions when I had them, usually focused on cleaning my guns. Yeah, I'm just that kind of girl. "Funny thing this time, though—all of 'em have been the same."

Scrum looked up, surprised. "Hey, yeah, me too."

"Don't tell me—lots of sweaty, naked threesomes?" Marley asked, but I didn't miss his odd expression. He was watching both of us more closely than he should have been.



Scrum didn't notice it, of course. "I wish. It's weirder'n that. I keep seein' this—doorway. It's in an old abandoned building. I dunno where it is—never been there before. It's one of those old-fashioned wood doors like in some fantasy trid or something. Got vines growin' all over it. It's partway open, and I can see inside. It's like ... another world. And I keep feelin' like I want to go inside. Like there's somethin' I really want in there. But soon as I head for it, I wake up."

"Wait ..." I said slowly, as a chill ran up my spine. "On the other side of the door—did the people look like they were in a castle or something? Dressed in old-fashioned fancy clothes?"

"Yeah," Scrum said. His brow furrowed under his blond brush-cut. "How'd you know that?"

"Hold on," Marley said, holding up a hand. Unlike his usual sly half-smile that made him look like he knew something we didn't, his lined face was serious and a little pale. "You two both had this dream? Of this doorway?"

"Looks that way," I said. "Why?"

"Because I had the same one."

"Okay, this drek keeps gettin' weirder," Scrum said. He slammed his glass down with more force than necessary, almost shattering it. "You know what? I want out. I'm gettin' sick of these fraggin' strange-ass runs. I wanna do somethin' normal for a while. Shoot somebody in the face. Break into someplace and grab somethin' we can sell." He finished his beer and waved for another.

"Come on," Marley said, but I could tell the dreams had both spooked and intrigued him. It went with the territory with the dwarf—if it was weird, he liked it, and if you couldn't explain it, he'd take hold of it like a hell hound with a chew toy until he'd wrestled it to the ground. "Yeah, I'll admit the last few runs have been a little unconventional, but you have to admit, the lady pays well. What do I care if the jobs don't make sense? She's not payin' us for sense."

I stared at the scarred plaswood table. Marley was right. Our latest Mr. Johnson (or rather, Ms. Johnson) was a mysterious woman who told us to call her Lady J. We'd never met her in person—the meets were always in the Matrix—but she always had the instructions hand-

delivered to us, along with a single tarot card we were supposed to leave at the scene of each job. Always the same one—the Magician. That part was important, she said. There had been four of the runs so far, over the last month, each one stranger than the last, and the pay for them had been enough that we hadn't had to take any other jobs in the meantime.

"That stuff makes my brain hurt," Scrum said. "All those fraggin' puzzles we have to figure out. It's prob'ly why I'm havin' dreams about some kinda fraggin' King Arthur drek."

"If they were easy, she wouldn't pay us like she is," Marley pointed out. Of course he'd say that—he was eating up the fact that none of the runs had been the kind of straightforward stuff Scrum liked. Me, I didn't care either way. The tricky stuff was a nice change—I had Lady J pegged as some kind of bored corp-princess type spending Daddy or Mommy's money playing jokes on her rich friends, and expected any day now she'd tire of it and cut us loose. I could ride it out till then—the paydays were great for my plans to replace my aging arsenal with newer models.

"He's right," I told the ork. "Besides, you can't get out yet. We've already accepted this job. We at least have to finish it."

"Fine," Scrum said. "But after this one, I'm out. I mean it, guys. You might like this weird crap, but I don't."

"Fair enough," Marley said. "C'mon. Let's go pick up the package from Lady J. And don't worry about the dreams—I don't think they have anything to do with the jobs. I think we're getting some feedback from all the drek happening around Yellowstone. Magic can play tricks on your mind."

"Even more reason to get the hell away from here," Scrum said.

The package was in a storage locker in downtown Butte, exactly where Lady J had told us it would be. It looked like the others: elegantly wrapped, with the instructions written in calligraphy on honest-to-drek parchment. Who used parchment anymore, unless they were getting married or something? It just added to my theory about the bored corp princess, except the writing looked like something you'd see in one of those old books in museums. We took the package back to the van and I

busied myself running through all the automated checks on my guns while Marley opened it.

"This is strange," the dwarf said.

I stowed my Predator and looked up quickly. "What is?"

"Different card this time."

He held it up. Instead of the familiar figure of the Magician, this one featured a shadowy humanoid form and no label on the bottom. "Wonder why she'd change it up."

"Maybe she ran out of Magician cards," Scrum suggested.

"Or maybe she's moving into a new phase of her little game," I said, returning my attention to my guns. "Who cares? As long as her cred's good, I'm in. What's the job this time?"

"She wants us to break into a small, private collection and steal a jeweled bird figurine, then leave the card in its place. Then we go to an abandoned industrial park outside town. There's a hidden basement in one of the buildings—she's sent us all the details. We're supposed to break in and leave the figure in one of the file cabinets."

Scrum brightened. "Hey, at least we might get a little action this time."

Scrum didn't get his wish, which suited me just fine. But getting the damned bird still made me nervous.

The collection was housed in the penthouse of a high-rise apartment building. Lady J had sent us the security codes and told us the place wouldn't have live guards, so getting up there was easy enough. Hell, it looked like nobody even lived in the place—it was more like one of those staged showplaces you see when somebody's trying to sell a property. The only real impression I got was that the place was owned by a woman, since a lot of the elegant touches were too elaborate and feminine for most men, even rich ones. Except elves, maybe.

Scrum verified that no cameras were spying on us while Marley and I examined the room housing the collection. "She said to only take the bird," the dwarf said with regret, eyeing the dozen other glass cases containing everything from delicate sculptures to an open book he lingered a long time over before moving on.

"You sure we can't grab at least somethin' else?" Scrum asked, coming back in. "Bet some o' this stuff would sell for a fortune."