

TOMMY  
BLACK  
— AND THE —  
STAFF OF LIGHT

JAKE KERR

Copyright © 2014 by Jake Kerr

All rights reserved.

Cover design and illustration by M. S. Corley

ISBN 978-0-692-31666-5

[1. Fiction: Fantasy-General. 2. Juvenile Fiction:  
Action & Adventure-General, 3. Juvenile Fiction:  
Historical-United States-20th Century]

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Published by Currents & Tangents Press

Dallas, Texas

For Lea, Zoë, Willow, & Mia



# Chapter One

## SHADOWS IN MANHATTAN



**L**et's be honest, my Grandfather drove me crazy. He was a kind man and all, who truly cared and looked out for me, but I was pretty much a prisoner in his townhouse. Sure, I could walk outside, but what was there to do? It took all my willpower not to sneak away on a regular basis. The only relief was the day when Grandfather and I would see the latest motion picture at the Ziegfeld Theater and then walk to the Persian Garden restaurant for dinner.

I lived for those days, and it was during one of them

## Tommy Black and the Staff of Light

when I forever left the prison of my Grandfather's apartment behind. It was a Saturday, and it started out ordinary enough. We had just watched Errol Flynn in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, and were on our way to the Persian Garden. I grabbed a broken broom handle off the curb pretended I was Robin Hood, practicing sword thrusts and swings against mailboxes and trees along Sixth Avenue. Sometimes I'd have to pause as the passing horses and automobiles stirred the dust and made me cough, but I didn't mind. It was better than the dry stale air of my grandfather's townhouse.

We were walking along, and Grandfather didn't seem to mind my fun until we turned into the alley leading to the restaurant and I smacked one of the metal drums stacked at the entrance. Dark brown fluid splashed over the edge. My nose was assaulted with the noxious smell of rotting straw and horse manure.

Grandfather stopped, turned, pointed his cane at me, and growled, "Watch it now, Tommy! You're wearing your nice clothes." I looked at my khaki pants and white cotton shirt and then at the brown liquid on the cobblestones. While the length of the alley was mostly empty, the entrance was stacked with

## Jake Kerr

large metal containers filled with dirt and horse waste scraped from the streets and only emptied once a week. “Mind your step,” he added and started walking again. I stepped over a pool of liquid manure, glad none had splashed on my leather shoes.

He took particular joy in our trips down the quiet alley. He once told me that before my parents passed away they had forbid him from taking the shortcut to the restaurant, as if that would stop him. He talked of taking the dangerous lonely road, and I humored his belief that an alley could be dangerous by stabbing at imaginary thieves as I rushed to catch up.

Grandfather was a tall man, with the same grey eyes we all seem to have in my family, and he had wild white hair that he kept slicked back in the style of his youth. His hair would resist his efforts however and often stick out in odd directions, causing him to constantly slide his fingers across the top of his head in an attempt to tame the unruly mess. He didn’t smile much, or laugh, and there was an intensity about him that was often scary. But he was a kind man, and for as much as he drove me crazy I did love him dearly.

The alley was long, running the length of the Theater and

## Tommy Black and the Staff of Light

the department store that backed on to it from Seventh Avenue, and was always empty, the drums of manure and dark brown clotted liquid pooling beneath them acting as an effective deterrent to everyone but my grandfather. As always, he set a pace that was a brisk walk for his long legs and a gangly jog for me, my fourteen year old legs always a half step behind and trying to catch up. The sharp “tap, tap, tap” of his cane whenever he walked had become another part of his character, like his firm handshakes and the constant fixing of his hair. The taps were so loud and distinct that everyone in the neighborhood knew when Grandfather was approaching long before they saw him.

I matched Grandfather’s stride a few steps behind him and returned my attention to stabbing and parrying imaginary foes. We were more than halfway down the alley when the rhythmic swinging and tapping of his cane ceased. My grandfather stopped so suddenly that I almost ran into him. As I regained my balance, he tossed his cane to his right hand, and with his left arm, pushed against my shoulder and maneuvered me behind him as he slowly turned to his left.

“Stay directly behind me,” he whispered. “Don’t run. Don’t

hide. Just stay behind me.” I had no idea what was happening but I did as my grandfather said, his voice calm but commanding. He glanced at me, and I saw a look in his eyes that I had never seen before. He turned away and looked at the wall across the alley. I peeked around, but saw nothing but a dark elongated shadow from a small balcony on the second floor. It was a sunny day, so it was easy to see everything along the wall. There was nothing out of the ordinary. I gripped the broomstick in my hand, prepared for anything.

Grandfather stared at the shadow, unmoving. He crouched down slightly, holding his cane in both hands like a staff. His knuckles were white.

“Grandfather, what is it?”

“Shhh. Stay behind me.”

I thought I saw a flicker in the shadow, and my grandfather suddenly stood upright.

“Vingrosh, I know you are there. You may as well come down. I don’t know why you are skulking about, but your efforts were obviously for naught.” The normal-looking shadow started to move. It was not the slow, natural movement of shadow reacting to light. It moved as if it had a life of its own.

## Tommy Black and the Staff of Light

The darkness was so alien and unnatural that my hands started to shake. I grabbed Grandfather's arm and steadied myself.

"Please let go, Tommy. I may need to move with some suddenness, and—as I said—it is safer for you behind me, not holding onto me." He nudged me with the end of his cane. I felt an immense power as the cane touched me. If you've ever been near a lightning strike or inside an electricity station you'll know what I mean. It wasn't being touched by power; it was being touched by the presence of power.

I peered again at the wall in the direction my grandfather was staring. The shadow spread like a black stain. "What is it, Grandfather?"

"Shhh, Tommy.

"Vingrosh, I am late for a dinner appointment with my friends from Persepolis. Or perhaps we should join them together?" My grandfather slammed the brass tip of his cane to the ground, where it let out a loud crack.

Immediately the shadow on the wall started to drip, like fresh paint. It oozed down, crossed the alley toward us, and then coalesced in front of my grandfather, who was still tense but glanced back at me and winked. The shadow on the ground

was roughly circular and looked like a hole in the alley. A deep baritone voice came from the hole. It had a barely perceptible echo, almost like it was spoken from the end of a long pipe, its voice echoing off the sides until it got to us. I couldn't understand what it was saying, but the accent was oddly English sounding.

“None taken,” my grandfather responded. “Although I expected more from you, Vingrosh.”

The Shadow spoke some more, sounding almost apologetic as its words echoed from the ground.

My grandfather laughed. “You presume to ask me for my staff? Do you forget all I have done for you?” He tapped his cane to the ground again, and the Shadow appeared to get smaller, but only for a moment.

The shadow responded with a short phrase, and my Grandfather let out a short laugh. “Be reasonable? What is reasonable about giving up the staff?”

The shadow then growled and spoke again. My grandfather no longer sounded amused as he stated in a clear, firm voice, “Baseless threats do not become you, Vingrosh.”

The creature growled again and with purposeful slowness

## Tommy Black and the Staff of Light

rose from the alley into a vague human-like form. An arm reached out and pointed over my grandfather's shoulder behind us. I looked around and saw another shadow seeping down the wall.

My grandfather saw it, too, and in a blur, twirled the cane in his left hand and then plunged it down against the concrete. It let out a crack like thunder. The shadow creature in front of us fell back a few feet, while my grandfather yelled, "Run, Tommy!"

I held my ground.

Errol Flynn would not flee and neither would I. My Grandfather was old. It was time for me to take care of him. I moved forward a step and swung the broomstick at the Shadow. There was no resistance. The end of the stick swung through the black air, followed by my hand. As my fingers touched the Shadow they immediately went numb. My momentum carried the rest of my hand into the Shadow. I cried out and yanked my hand back. The broomstick fell from my fingers into the depths of the blackness. Thankfully, my hand emerged, but it was cold and without feeling.

"Tommy, no!" Grandfather grabbed my other arm and

## Jake Kerr

hauled me away. The force of his grip was painful. He dragged me behind him as he sprinted toward the theater alley entrance.

I looked over my shoulder but could only see blurs of black.

As suddenly as he had stopped earlier, Grandfather stopped again. This time I did collide with him, but before I could fall to the ground, he grabbed me and held me close.

“Tommy, that was a very foolish thing you did. Now you must listen to me. Whatever you do, do not move. I need you to stay as close to me as possible.” I couldn’t tell why we had stopped. We were just outside one of the emergency exits from the theater, standing close to the door. I looked back, and squeezed my hand into a fist even though I couldn’t feel it. The entire alley was an oozing mass of black, moving toward us.

The horrific thought of being engulfed by unfeeling nothingness took away any thought of fighting the Shadows off. “Grandfather, shouldn’t we try to run? Or maybe break in through that door to get away?”

My grandfather looked at me. He didn’t seem scared, but he had a grim look on his face. “No, Tommy. These are Shadows. The only thing that can stop them is light.”

## Tommy Black and the Staff of Light

I looked around. The entire alley was bathed in light. The sun wasn't directly over head, but it was still well before night-fall. "But we're surrounded by light!"

"Artificial light, Tommy. Artificial light." He pointed with his cane, and above the exit door was a floodlight, which glowed dully. It was meant to illuminate the door and surroundings at night, but had little effect during the day. I looked down and couldn't see the outline of the floodlight on the ground even though I knew it was shining down on us.

"You may not see it, Tommy, but the light from that bulb above is protecting us from the shadows." He paused, as if considering his options. He ran his hand over his head, putting his disheveled hair back in place. In a quieter tone, seemingly more to himself than to me, he added, "Now, how to escape? Shadows are powerful." He nodded grimly. "Powerful."

"What are Shadows? Should we call for help?" We weren't far from the theater end of the alley, and I was certain we could get someone's attention.

"They are magical creatures, Tommy. And, no, we cannot call for help. We would just put others at risk."

Magical creatures! Of course they were. I had always been

told that they had disappeared from Earth decades before I was born, and yet here they were. I looked up at my Grandfather. He stared intently down the alley. How could my grandfather, who walked with a cane and rarely left our apartment, know anything about magical creatures?

My curiosity left me as I followed my grandfather's gaze down the alley. From a distance, what looked like a wall of black was actually an approaching collection of individual moving shapes. Several came directly up to us, but wouldn't get any closer than a couple of feet. Two of them grew into the vaguely human shape I had seen earlier, while the rest surrounded us in a sea of black.

One of the Shadows spoke, but my grandfather didn't reply. "What did he say, grandfather?"

"He said I'm clever." He paused. Clearly the Shadow said something else that Grandfather didn't want to relay to me. I looked around. A Shadow oozed toward us from further down the alley. I watched as it stretched and twisted itself into a human form. It pulled its arm back, and then whipped it forward. A rock clattered off the wall above the door.

They were trying to break the lightbulb.

## Tommy Black and the Staff of Light

They could do it, too. It was a bare bulb, unprotected from vandals by a cover or metal cage. Another rock flew over our head.

Grandfather stood up tall and grasped his cane in both hands. He pulled his arms in opposite directions. Over his right shoulder I could see the top of his cane, which now ended in a bright sword, while in his left hand was the bottom of his wooden cane. The engravings glowed.

As soon as the sword was free, I noticed that my grandfather was twisting it oddly in his hand. There were murmurs coming from the Shadows, and as I looked out I saw several of the standing ones dart one way or another.

Another rock flew, but as it clattered off the mark I realized what my grandfather was doing. He was using the bright steel of his blade as a mirror, reflecting the light from the floodlight out toward the Shadows that were throwing rocks. The light didn't appear strong enough to do more than cause pain, but it was working.

More Shadows joined in throwing rocks, but my grandfather's hand waved like a symphony conductor wielding a baton, sending invisible light across the alley in all directions.

Even more Shadows arose. I felt like I was on some alien landscape, surrounded by black stalagmites.

To my horror, a rock struck my grandfather in the shoulder, twisting his body back. The blow clearly hurt, but did not knock him off his feet. Grandfather smiled. “I wondered how long it would take them to think of that.”

He made a gesture with the fingers holding the wooden part of the cane in his left hand. Immediately, a warmth surrounded us. Another rock flew toward grandfather, but it thudded, as if it hit a mattress or heavy draperies. It slid harmlessly to the ground.

“What was that?”

I whispered the words to myself, but Grandfather answered. “It is my sad excuse for a shield spell. Never was much good at magic. About the only thing I can stop are slowly thrown rocks. Never thought it would actually come in handy.”

Seeing that their rocks couldn’t harm us, the Shadows redoubled their efforts at smashing the light bulb. They made very little progress with my grandfather reflecting rays of artificial light at them.

“Can you stop them from hitting the light?” I asked.

## Tommy Black and the Staff of Light

In a grim voice, grandfather replied, “We’re lucky I am stopping them from hitting us.” I asked him what he meant, but he ignored me.

After what seemed like an hour, my legs were burning. The feeling was returning to the hand that had touched the Shadow while it was leaving my legs. I don’t know how long a human can stand in one spot, but I felt that I was near my limit. All the while, my grandfather held his ground, waving his sword around in a series of graceful and never ending arcs. I couldn’t imagine how his arms, let alone his legs, felt.

He must have been tiring, however, as a rock hit the floodlight with a horrifying clink. It flickered but did not break. This seemed to spur the Shadows on, and more of them braved the reflected light from my grandfather’s sword to hurl rocks.

Several of the Shadows were within arm’s reach, waiting for our protective light to shatter into darkness. I couldn’t stop myself from staring at them, their black so complete that I felt myself on the edge of a bottomless dark pit. They made no sound, but I felt warm air, like a breath against my cheek. The urge to run was nearly overwhelming.

The Shadows became too much for my grandfather to con-

trol with his sword. Another rock hit the light, but again it didn't break. I looked up at him; his face was frozen in intense concentration.

I heard the sound of glass shattering and prepared myself for whatever death a Shadow would deliver, but I didn't feel glass shards falling on us, and when I looked up I saw that the light was still glowing. It wasn't the sound of glass shattering I heard, but a shriek. All around us the Shadows flowed with great speed up the walls and down the alley. Toward the restaurant end, a large smiling man approached. It was Mister Oz, the maître d from the Persian Garden restaurant. His name was actually Baraz, but I had called him Mister Oz for as long as I could remember. He was carrying a box flashlight, and as he pointed it at a Shadow he would laugh and say, "Boo!"

My grandfather sheathed the sword back in his cane and walked up to Mister Oz, who seemed to find the whole situation quite amusing. I followed, with my hand gripping my grandfather's shirtsleeve. Every shadow we passed looked ominous.

"My goodness, what is the world coming to? There isn't a worse race I can think of for assassinating someone in the city

## Tommy Black and the Staff of Light

that never sleeps than Shadows.” Mister Oz laughed again. “They should have just waited for you to take a camping trip!”

He turned to me. “What do you think, Tommy?” He flipped on the flashlight and shone it in my face. “Boo!”

Grandfather wasn’t amused. He stopped in front of Mister Oz and replied, “Well, apparently they didn’t want to wait.” Sighing, he added, “I’m getting old and careless, Baraz. Why would I leave the house without a flashlight?”

Mister Oz slapped grandfather on the back and held up the box connected to the electric lamp. “You would walk around the city carrying this?” He smiled. “Besides, why would you leave the house with a flashlight? We’ve had twenty years of peace, and much of that is due to your kindness to the Shadows.”

My grandfather grunted. “Peace, kindness... the fact that we are using these words tells me how old and careless we have gotten, Baraz.”

Mister Oz nodded solemnly, but immediately smiled again. “You are too hard on yourself. Who would expect the Shadows to do such a thing? They have been quiet for all this time.”

“No, Baraz. I was foolish to expect—to hope—for peace

and quiet.” He looked at me and his frown lessened a bit. I could feel the tension leaving his body under the iron grip I had on his sleeve. “This is no one’s fault but my own.”

He reached down and put his hand on my shoulder. “It’s about time Tommy learned about his legacy. Come, let’s talk about this over dinner. It is dangerous business when the Shadows not only break their treaty but attack the one who had saved them.”

Mister Oz fell in step with Grandfather. “Indeed, my friend. The Shadows are lucky Vingrosh was not there. He would have torn them to shreds for attacking their savior.”

“Vingrosh was there.” The news must have stunned him, as Mister Oz stopped suddenly, grabbed my grandfather’s shoulder, and spun him around to face him.

“Are you sure, Pehlivan? I find this almost impossible to believe.”

“I am sure. He said that my time was done in this world and that he wanted the staff.” My grandfather shrugged and started walking toward the restaurant. “He was surprised I didn’t just give it to him, and I can’t blame him. My time *is* done, Baraz.”

## Tommy Black and the Staff of Light

Mister Oz was quiet, but I noticed him shaking his head. As he entered the door in front of us, he turned the sign in the window over so that it showed “closed.”