

SHADES

THE DEMISE OF BLAKE BECK



ANDERS RAUFF-NIELSEN

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a novel by

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In this work of fiction, the characters, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or they are used entirely fictitiously.

CHAPTER 1

- ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST -

I

It was late evening and the corridors outside Blake Beck's Manhattan office were empty. Apparently, everyone else at the CAC had lives to go to after work. However, Blake – the Director of Operations – was still there. Sitting in his chair, his back to the panorama windows and a spectacular view of New York from the 61st floor, Blake looked down at his mahogany desk. It was tidy, with only a small stack of papers, a Philippe Starck lamp and a single picture frame to disrupt the level landscape of the desktop. It mirrored the rest of the office, which was appointed with a mix of old hardwood and leather furniture, spruced up with carefully chosen elements of modern design. Blake leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath, his eyes fastened on the tiny envelope in his hand. It had come with the morning mail and he had repeatedly put off opening it, but now he was going to do it. He was all alone and it was time. Definitely.

“More than twenty-five years with the agency and now this,” he thought to himself as he opened the envelope and took out the small rectangular paper package. The paper felt waxy to the touch. He unfolded the paper, revealing a single

razor blade. He put it down on his desk before removing a small card from the envelope. In Gothic calligraphy, a skilled penman had written only a single word. "Congratulations," it read. Blake looked at the card for a while before carefully inserting it back into the envelope, along with the razor blade, which he repacked in the waxy paper. "I guess there will be no retirement for me after all," he thought, knowing full well that that ship had sailed long ago. His wall clock told him that it was almost eleven in the evening and his "word-of-the-day" calendar sported the September 15th slip. He ripped it off and threw it in the garbage can. For some reason, he had gotten out of the habit of changing the date in the morning when he got in, and instead he ended up doing it just before he went home. The word of the day was "ces-sa-tion," meaning a temporary or final ceasing. He thought it typical, some sort of fateful irony. Of course the word of the day on this particular day would be a synonym for "end."

II

At great speed, four black Frisians pulled a beautiful black carriage down the cobbled country road. A nearly full moon rose above the horizon, preventing the darkness from conquering the mild autumn evening. The sparse lights from a small village could be spied in the distance beyond the fields. The driver sat on a bench at the front of the carriage, holding the reins with both hands to control the galloping horses, with little need for the long whip that lay next to him. He was shielded from the rushing winds by a broad-brimmed hat and a long, dark woolen coat that made him blend into one with the carriage. In the stately red velvet interior sat Dæth returning home to his mansion. He was a handsome man and, as always, he was well groomed and impeccably dressed. He wore a knee-length black frock over a masterfully tailored suit of trousers, dinner jacket, waistcoat and a cummerbund – all tailored and embroidered to match the fashion of mid-nineteenth century Victorian England, the fashion of his time. A silver chain hung from his breast pocket, hinting at the presence of what could be nothing but the epitome of chronometers. Anything less would simply be out of place in his pockets. From outside, Dæth heard the sound of the whip cracking. “Fall,” he thought to himself, looking out the window at the passing landscape. “Even in life, I had an affinity for it. The trees changing their colors like a fire surging in flames of red and yellow, as if trying to fend off the coming winter’s chill.” He let the image linger a short while in his mind. “But inevitably, just as the fire dies out and leaves

behind a pile of ash, the trees lose their battle. The leaves fall and it is time for darkness to envelop the land, at least for a time. Just like death inevitably comes to us all in the end, after a life of spring, summer and fall.” He felt it and embraced it. To him there was no sadness in death – not anymore. To him, death was simply a transition into something else. Into his arms, as it were. He was Death now and had been for more than a hundred years. And for many years, he and he alone had governed Shades. But it had not always been that way. When he had died himself, there had been many different Deaths in Shades, each serving their own deity and taking care of their own peoples. One of these Deaths had taken notice of him and, on seeing his potential, had taken him in as an apprentice. But Dæth's potential had been far greater than any had dared dream, and soon Dæth had found himself his master's better. In the end, he had taken over his master's work and then moved to put all the other Deaths out of business. Over time, they fell one by one, as their deities found Dæth to be the better deal. And now there was only him. He was Death, governing the fate of all souls as they crossed into Shades from the world of the living. His angels of death welcomed all new arrivals to Shades, and his organization made sure that everyone was as comfortable as they deserved in the years, sometimes decades, it would take for their paperwork to go through with the departed soul's appropriate deity or deities. Then, once judgment had been passed on a soul, Dæth's organization would transfer the soul to its appropriate afterlife or inform the unfortunate soul that he or she would be forced to spend an eternity in Shades. “For some

spring will come again. For others an eternity of winter awaits," Dæth thought as the rural landscape outside gave way to the well-groomed park that surrounded his mansion.

III

Blake picked up the picture frame that stood on his desk. “Marie. Sweet, darling Marie,” he thought as he studied the photo like he had so many times before. It had been taken in front of Notre Dame on Île de la Cité in the heart of Paris. Marie was sitting on a stone ledge that framed a long bed of small green bushes on the square. She was posing. She looked absolutely stunning – her black hair flowing in the autumn wind and rays of afternoon sunlight illuminating the smile that had won Blake's heart. Her smile had a slyness to it, revealed by the way her lips curved a little higher on one side than on the other. She was utterly intriguing. Wearing a black skirt suit, she sat with her legs crossed, her long coat folded over her knees and her umbrella resting upright against her leg. The clouds on the eastern horizon were dark and promised a change of weather typical of autumn. It had been ten years since Blake had been stationed in Paris and had taken this photo. She had been working at the CAC Paris branch as one of the lead operatives and had been chosen as Blake's liaison on a cross-departmental assignment. A long assignment. He had been stationed in Paris for seven months, but it hadn't taken that long for Marie to capture his heart. It hadn't even taken seven days.

Blake had been set up in a penthouse apartment in the Latin Quarter, just south of Île de la Cité, with a view of the Pantheon on one side and Notre Dame on the other. The apartment had soon become their little oasis where they could

escape the world and, for a short period, forget the fact that they had both chosen to go through life alone. If only for a little while, they could have each other and once again know what it was like to be close to another person. “Goddammit! I loved her,” Blake thought as he looked at the picture, feeling his body urge his eyes to begin watering – an urge that he soon subdued. They had walked around Paris pretending to be a normal couple by day. They had seen the sights, dined in small cozy cafés and returned to Blake's apartment to make love in the afternoon before getting a few hours sleep in each other's arms while the pigeons cooed on the ledge outside the open window. They did it all so that their nights would make sense.

The clouds had closed in on the city and the wind picked up. Marie shook her coat before putting it on in one clean, swinging motion. She opened her umbrella and took Blake's arm. As they walked off the square in front of Notre Dame and over the Petit Pont towards the Latin Quarter, the rain began to fall. Marie put her arm around Blake and pulled herself even closer to him, shielding both of them from the rain with her umbrella. They walked through the streets of the Latin Quarter saying nothing, savoring the sounds, sights and smells of Paris in the autumn rain. Outside the building that housed Blake's apartment, they stopped.

“I just have to stop by the offices before we go out tonight,” she said. “Is it OK with you that we just meet at the club?”

“Sure,” Blake said. “I'll see you there.” She gave him a kiss goodbye. It was a long and wet kiss, partly from the dampness

of the air. Then she turned and walked away towards the metro, looking back only once to give him a wave.

They had been hunting Vincenzo in Paris for months and he had continued to elude them. They had followed his tracks through the abandoned metro tunnels. They had followed their leads through museums, churches and bars, and they had walked the city streets endlessly. On several occasions their hunt had even led them to back-alley abattoirs where Vincenzo had disposed of those who stood in his way. This was something uncommon for his kin, as they usually left their victims in a quiet place, out of the way, where no one would find them for at least a few hours but preferably longer. This allowed one of their kinsmen to take over the body rather than having it go to waste by decaying, being buried or cremated, or – in the case of Vincenzo's victims – being dismembered and destroyed. The dead, soulless body was a valuable vessel for them, as this was what allowed them to travel into the world of the living once again. Of course, many retained their own body from life, but those who had been so unfortunate as to lose their own body were forced to take a new one. And it was much easier and a lot safer to take a soulless body than a living one. But for some reason, Vincenzo had taken to destroying his prey, perhaps to obscure the fact that he killed so many. Once Blake and Marie almost caught up with Vincenzo in an abattoir that he had recklessly used twice in a row. The girl's body was still in one piece and several degrees above room temperature when they arrived. She was young, maybe sixteen or seventeen, but it was hard for Blake to tell because her half

Asian heritage somewhat concealed her true age from him. On her back, she bore a large tattoo of a white tiger guarding a lotus blossom. In life she had been very beautiful and gracious – it was obvious. But as she lay there naked, all grey and cold on the table amidst the saws and butcher’s knives, she was a horrible sight. Blake felt a memory struggling to surface and finally he realized that he had seen the girl before.

“I’ve seen this tattoo before,” Blake said. “I saw her in a Montmartre nightclub, so at least now we know how he likes to feed. This wasn’t business – this was pleasure!”

“Mmmhh,” Marie murmured in agreement as she took her cellphone from her jacket pocket.

“Are you calling the gatherers?”

“Yes.”

”Good. Then let’s get out of here.”

This had been the night before the photograph was taken.

It was already dark when they met up outside the nightclub Le Chat Blanc. Blake had been waiting in a small café across the street for about an hour, enjoying several cups of espresso and the fact that he had time to read the paper. Marie saw him through the large café window and tapped the window with one of her rings. Blake looked up from the newspaper and out the window at Marie. She had her hair in a long, single braid and was wearing a short black leather jacket, black leggings and a pair of Dr. Martens boots. Blake walked out of the café to Marie, leaving the waiter with a “merci beaucoup” and a generous tip. They walked together across the street and into

Le Chat Blanc. Once inside, Marie made her way to the bar while Blake walked over to one of the dancers who stood chatting with a patron. Blake tapped the girl softly on her shoulder, provoking an annoyed and slightly hostile glare from the man she had been talking to.

“Excuse me, miss,” Blake said.

“Yes,” she replied, her pronunciation revealing that English was not her strongest suit.

“I’m looking for one of the girls who works here. She’s got a big tattoo of a tiger and a flower on her back. Is she here tonight?”

“Fabienne?”

“Yeah, Fabienne. That’s right,” Blake replied.

“No. She is not here. Maybe she is sick – she should have been dancing at seven o’clock.”

“Do you know where she lives?”

“No. I’m sorry. But her friend is sitting right over there, maybe he knows about her. They left together yesterday.” She pointed across the room to a man sitting in one of the VIP booths that offered a perfect view of the flesh on stage. He was a stately looking man with a presence that couldn’t be denied. His long, dark hair was combed back, and he had a slightly greying and perfectly groomed mustache and goatee, which made Blake think of Vincent Price in his portrayal of Cardinal Richelieu in *The Three Musketeers*. Even the man’s clothes had a slight air of olden days to them. The cut and style of his tailor-made outfit looked like a quaint mix of contemporary fashion and Italian Renaissance. Blake couldn’t

believe that he hadn't noticed the man the second he walked in, but he hadn't. They were somehow able to do that – the vampires, that is. They could stand out like a sore thumb, but still remain unnoticed until attention was called to them.

“Thanks, miss,” Blake said. “I think I'll just go have a drink with my date, otherwise she might get upset. I'll catch up with him later.” Blake gave her a smile.

“You're welcome,” she said. “I guess you won't want a dance since you brought a date?” Blake noticed that her companion flinched ever so slightly at her question.

“No, thank you. Not tonight.”

Blake walked over to Marie, who had easily gotten the attention of the barman and was already sipping a cosmopolitan.

“I'm quite sure he's here.”

“Where?” she asked, keeping her cool and focusing her gaze on the bar.

“He's sitting in the VIP booth closest to the stage,” Blake said. “Once you take a look, you'll wonder how on earth you missed him.”

“I think I'll just go and powder my nose,” Marie said as she hopped off the barstool. She gave him a kiss. Then she walked off to the ladies' room in order to get a good look at the man in the booth along the way. They were right. It was Vincenzo.

They left the nightclub and walked just around the corner to where Marie's yellow Citroën 2CV was parked. Marie

picked up a slim aluminum suitcase that held the pieces of a high-powered rifle, designed for easy transport and quick assembly. Blake picked up his katana, which had been his favorite close combat weapon since the late eighties. He hid it in the folds of his grey trench coat and tipped his fedora hat slightly to one side. They were ready. This was the night they had been waiting for.

They waited in the small café where Blake had enjoyed his paper and espresso earlier in the evening. At a quarter to two in the morning, Vincenzo left the nightclub across the street. He wore a long scarlet coat that draped him like a blanket of blood flowing in the autumn winds. Blake and Marie tailed him at a distance, following him through the night streets of Montmartre, biding their time until they would finally be alone with him. Vincenzo turned up the stairs of Rue Foyatier towards the Sacré-Coeur Basilica high atop the hill overlooking Montmartre and the rest of Paris. Halfway up the stairs, Marie took Blake's hand. She pulled him in and gave him a peck on the cheek. Then, with a wave, she beckoned him to head up the stairs. He took off his hat and placed it on her head with a grin, and then continued up the stairway. He unbuttoned his coat as he walked, letting the hilt of the katana out into the moonlight. Marie knelt down and opened the aluminum rifle case. She took out the stock of the rifle, and less than a minute later she had the weapon assembled. She closed the rifle case, and with Blake's hat resting on top, set it next to the fence that separated the stairway from the dual tram tracks that ran up the hill. Then she jumped the fence

with the rifle slung on her back, and she ran into the park that stretched down the hill from Sacré-Coeur beyond the tracks. By the time Marie made it across the tracks, Blake had reached the top of Rue Foyatier with a clear view of Vincenzo who was leisurely strolling along the white stone column railing of the viewpoint square just a little way down from the church itself. Vincenzo was looking out over the park at the evening lights of Paris, which were rivaled only by the light of the nearly full moon. No one else was there, save for sleeping pigeons.

Vincenzo stopped and turned around, and Blake stepped out of the shadows, flinging his trench coat to one side, readying to draw his sword. They stood there in the dead of night among hints of shadow drawn by the cold moonlight and the lights of distant street lamps.

“Vincenzo . . . It's time to go!” Blake said with the confidence of a male lion challenging another to a fight for domination with a roar and baring of teeth.

“Signore Beck,” Vincenzo replied with a smile on his lips, “such a nice night for this.” He shifted the side of his scarlet coat slightly to reveal an old longsword. Vincenzo had been given the sword by his father when he was a young man coming of age in Siena, but in the end the sword had failed its charge during the Battle of Marciano in 1554 when Vincenzo was killed – sword in hand – at the tip of a Spanish soldier's blade. Both men drew their swords in silence. With nothing but the sounds of their feet to disturb the pigeons, they started towards each other. Vincenzo moved to strike, raising his

sword high above his head. He struck hard, aiming for the sword to cut through Blake's ribcage and straight into his heart. Dodging the blow, Blake jumped, and with one foot on the stone column railing, he somersaulted past Vincenzo, landing right behind him. Before Vincenzo could steady his sword and turn around to face his opponent, Blake moved to strike. Blake knew that he was fighting a being whose long death offered a degree of skill, knowledge and experience which was poorly matched by that offered by Blake's short lifespan. He knew that he would not get many chances, if any, and that there was no glory or honor to be found in fighting fair. He would defeat Vincenzo by any means possible, and any chivalrous ideals would only bring about his own downfall in a battle like this. In one swift, flowing motion, Blake raised his katana before turning around and guiding the blade downwards. He drew the blade from left to right, seeking to cut Vincenzo in two from behind. In response, Vincenzo dropped to his knees and raised his sword over his head and down his back, letting the blade run along the length of his own spine. Then he shifted his balance and turned his torso to parry Blake's attack, the sound of the two swords meeting piercing the chilly November night. In the hope of finishing the fight right then and there, Vincenzo made his move. Still on one knee, but with his other leg stretched out, he turned and swept Blake's feet out from under him, sending Blake crashing down on his back. He landed with a muffled "Umpfh!" as Vincenzo sprang to his feet with a feline grace. In a series of movements flowing seamlessly into one, Vincenzo brought his sword back around. Then Vincenzo let his

defenses give way for the strike, his sword looming in the night air above his head, about to be thrust down into Blake's chest.

“Arrivederci,” Vincenzo whispered, as much to the shadows as to Blake. He leaned into the strike, letting his full weight drive the sword downwards. Lying on his back, Blake saw death's reflection in an instant as the blade gleamed in the silvery moonlight.

Marie had gotten into position. High up one of the park trees, she sat straddling a thick branch. Her aim had been on Vincenzo since the fighting started, but she found no reason to reveal herself or to draw attention to the fight by firing her rifle, which, although silenced, was not silent. That was until she saw the moonlight gleam in the polished blade with Vincenzo about to strike. As she pulled the trigger, she felt the force of the recoil, and she saw through the scope how the blade shattered and split as the bullet hit Vincenzo's sword just above the cross-guard.

“You fucking coward!” Vincenzo bellowed, displaying the strange sense of betrayal he felt. He stumbled forwards, trying to regain his balance and recover from the attack. “You dare not even face me alone!?” A small stream of smoke rose from the muzzle of the rifle as Blake quickly took advantage of Vincenzo's disarming. The distant ring of a bullet casing hitting the ground scarcely registered with Blake. Still lying on the ground, he kicked Vincenzo straight in the gut, sending him stumbling back. This left Blake just enough time to get to his knees and ready his sword. Vincenzo pulled a dagger from

the folds of his coat and launched himself at Blake, knowing that he would have to end it before the rifle could be reloaded and re-aimed. As Blake saw Vincenzo coming at him, he heard the distant sound of a rifle bolt sliding and he knew that the fight had come to its end. With his dagger raised to strike, Vincenzo was just about to jump Blake when another bullet split the air. Flesh and bone were sent flying everywhere as the bullet ripped through Vincenzo's knee. What should have been a powerful pounce suddenly became an uncontrolled topple, and as Vincenzo fell to the ground, Blake struck. He drew his katana upwards, the blade cutting into Vincenzo underneath his left arm and running all the way through to his right shoulder. As his soul retreated from his dismembered body, Vincenzo looked up at Blake.

“You'll never get me Beck . . .”

“Vincenzo, let me enlighten you,” Blake replied. “We just did. Now have fun with the Hunters.”

Vincenzo's body fell limp as Blake wiped his blade in the sleeve of Vincenzo's scarlet coat. Then Blake rose to his feet and sheathed his katana.

It took a couple of minutes before Marie reached Blake.

“So, I saved your life,” she started. “Now you owe me one, but I will settle for a cup of coffee and a kiss,” she continued with a smile.

“Well, that's all you're gonna get, sweetie. 'Cause I still had to do all the hard work – what the hell was that all about?”

“What?” asked Marie with a shrug.

“I mean . . . his sword?” Blake paused. “Why not just shoot him in the head and be done with it?”

“Honey, what fun would that be? And also, I wouldn't get to see you fight, all . . .” she searched for the word for a second or two. “What do you say? Macho?”

Blake didn't reply. He just smiled at her and gave her the kiss she was due.

They got into Marie's yellow Citroën and drove through the Paris night towards the Latin Quarter. In the silence that followed, they each battled the invading feeling that this night not only saw the end of Vincenzo, but also the end of them. Marie parked the car outside Blake's apartment, but they didn't go up. Instead they went just around the corner to their favorite late night café. Neither of them wanted to go to bed and end the night because chances were that Blake would already have to travel back to New York the next day. It was the day they had both been dreading.

They sat in the café, each sipping their coffee and praying that they would never reach the bottom of their cups. However, despite their prayers, the café eventually closed and they had to go back to Blake's apartment. They didn't really sleep. They didn't even make love. They just lay there until morning broke, neither of them saying what they were both thinking. When the sun had made it above the rooftops, Blake got up and walked to the windows and drew away the curtains. Marie was still in bed, sitting halfway up, resting her back on a huge pillow. She had the sheets pulled up to her chin. She

looked changed. She looked neither sly, nor dangerous – and she didn't smile, which she almost always did. Rather, she looked like a young girl stricken down by the profound sadness of death, guarded only by a shield of cotton.

“So, I guess this is it?” Blake asked, staring out the window with his back to the bed. He knew that he couldn't say the words and look into her eyes at the same time. He simply didn't have the strength. “I'll be leaving now and who knows when I'll be back.”

“Blake, you could put in for a transfer,” Marie parried his words in a vain attempt to save what they had together.

“Sweetie, we both know that won't work. The agency doesn't exactly encourage this, you know.”

“But . . .” She tried, but it was no use. There were no words that would serve her. No words that could shield her from the truth, and deep inside she knew he was right.

“I know. I want to keep seeing you too, you know. I love you,” he said, his voice trembling slightly. “But we'll have to keep a low profile and see where time takes us.” He paused as he turned around. “If we make this official, they'll probably just have one of us hunting in Outer Mongolia,” he said, hoping for a hint of a smile. There was no reward. “And I guess we both knew that it would come to this.” He tried to believe it himself. He didn't though, so he shrugged his shoulder in an attempt to excuse himself. He stood there looking at Marie in silence, and she eventually took mercy upon him by finally rejoining the conversation.

“Well,” she started, “at least give me another kiss and come back to bed.”

IV

As Blake put down the picture frame, he thought about the first couple of years after Paris. They had seen each other as often as possible, but it was hard. Neither Marie nor Blake had much free time, let alone vacations – both of them climbing the career ladder, advancing within the ranks of the agency. In the end, Blake had been the one to break it off when he had finally convinced himself that the pain of saying goodbye again and again, and not knowing when or where – if ever – they would meet again was greater than the joy of being together. But he still loved her, even to this day. He took out the picture of Marie and stuffed it into the breast pocket of his jacket that was hung over his chair.

It was almost midnight now. Blake picked up the small envelope containing the card and razor blade and put it in his jacket pocket. He got up, put his jacket on and left his office, not bothering to lock the door behind him. The hallway outside was empty and the lights flickered as they switched on from the hallway motion sensor. As he reached his secretary's desk, he stopped and bent over it, picking up a yellow pad of Post-it notes and a ballpoint pen. "Dear Marcia, thank you for these last five years. You've been an ace. Have them pick me up at home in the morning. Take care," he wrote. Then he walked away, not looking back once. He took the elevator down to the parking level where his white Jaguar E-type was parked in his reserved stall.

Blake drove across the Brooklyn Bridge to his home on the waterfront of Brooklyn Heights. He parked the car at the curb and went up the stairs, holding his bundle of keys in his hand. He unlocked the front door and entered the stately hall of the old but newly renovated building. It was three floors of beautiful, perfectly styled home. Most people would have given their right arm to live in it, but Blake seldom had time to use it for anything other than sleeping. He hung his jacket on the coatrack by the door and unbuckled his belt. He took the picture of Marie and the small envelope from his jacket pocket and went upstairs to his study. Tall bookcases lined the walls from top to bottom. He picked up a bottle of whisky from the table in the corner and poured himself a glass before lowering himself into his favorite chair. He felt the leather embracing his body as he sat down. He sat there in silence, drinking his whisky, staring out into nothing.

“I guess it's time,” he thought, having finished his drink. Then he got up and picked up the envelope, the picture of Marie and the bottle of whisky, leaving the empty glass behind. He went into the white-tiled bathroom adjacent to the master bedroom. He looked around in the same manner as when deciding whether or not to use the toilet before or after showering. He decided on the toilet and lifted the lid. Then he placed the whisky bottle and the envelope on the edge of the bathtub and the picture of Marie on the sink opposite it. He opened his pants and let them drop to the ground. As he sat down, he thought about the fact that people always seemed to do this kind of thing in the bathtub. Something quite

undesirable, he concluded, having seen enough dead people to know what happens when all the muscles of one's body relax as you enter death. "No one is going to find me floating like a great big raisin, marinated in my own filth," he thought to himself as he took his belt from his pants and used it to fasten himself to the toilet to keep from toppling over. Then he took a great big swig of the bottle before grabbing the envelope. He took out the razor blade and looked at it. He shifted his gaze between the razor and the picture of Marie every other minute or two, interrupting the process only to take another drink. He repeated this for about half an hour, until the bottle was empty and he could feel the alcohol flowing through his veins, numbing his body more and more. Then he took the razor blade in his hand and slashed deep into his wrist. It didn't hurt as much as he had feared, at least not physically. Then he rested his arm on the edge of the bathtub, allowing the blood to run into the tub and down the drain. He sat there alone, the color fading from his skin and his mind gradually losing its grip on reality. He sat there and he died.

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