
CHAPTER 1

Whilst he sat, looking down at the unaware three story home of mortar and wood, Illus shivered lightly as a light breeze blew through the air and chilled him to the bone. The year of fourteen twenty was coming quickly to an end. He caught his hot breath floating like eerie smoke in the cold moonlight and scratched the back of his head. His fingers pierced through his short, light brown hair and massaged his scalp.

From the tree branch he The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) was crouched upon, The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) Illus had a wide field of vision of the houses ahead of him. They sat peacefully and unaware of a prowler in the midst. The houses The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) in the Residential District of the city ahead were lined up in rows of six, and Illus counted five rows.

He scanned carefully for nearby patrolling guards, and any other potential threats that would aim to bring about the failing of his mission. The security consisted of two guards stationed at the city's east gate, one patrolling the street in front of the district, and another patrolling the street behind the district to the south. Illus was south of the district, looking north where clouds crept eerily in the distance.

The full moon brightly floated above on a frosty December night. It was quite marvelous to behold. The conceited moon, although it wished to take up the spotlight, was not alone in the sky; there were twinkling stars up there as well. Darkness would prove less of a pall than Illus had hoped for, but alas he could do nothing to change that. He imagined the moon The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) was castigating the stars' refusal to disappear. He wouldn't put it past the The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) moon to do as such.

Before he could infiltrate the targeted home and retrieve what he needed, which was only one item, Illus needed to get over the city wall. The wall harkened silently, and with a

narrow focus, to him as he calculated his next move. He would accomplish this task by jumping over from the tree he currently occupied to the large stone wall of the city. He grasped the tree trunk and raised himself up. With just enough room to stand between the branch he stood on and the branch above, Illus slowly and carefully moved along the branch toward the city wall.

The branch didn't quite reach the wall, producing a ten foot gap between the two, but he had not expected it to, so this wasn't a shock to him. Illus would have to leap from the branch to the wall and make sure he actually caught it. The potential forty foot drop did not appeal to him and made his stomach uneasy. He crept to the last sturdy inch of the branch, stepped back to the tree trunk, and took a deep breath. He then started running, and The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) once he reached that last sturdy inch, he leaped, all the while regretting his decision as his feet left the tree branch.

As he soared through the thin, wintry air, he felt his heart pound with violent force, whose resonating could rival the drum of a bell. The wall neared faster than he expected, and soon his hands gripped the top of it, causing a loud clapping sound. The catch stung his hands briefly, even through the black leather gloves he wore. He managed to hold his feet against the brick wall, after they had slid down it, The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) and started his climb up. The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) With all the force Illus could muster, he pulled himself up onto the cold, The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) stone wall. He kneeled down and tried to catch his breath, which he found to be an arduous task. All right, no more sweets for you, he thought to himself. He let out a quiet chuckle and dusted his The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) hands off. The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1)

After a brief moment, Illus regained his breath and unsheathed a small dagger from his belt. He then used it to scratch a symbol onto the top of the city wall. He had done this previously into the tree truck. He etched a diagonal line slanting towards the right. Next, he connected a horizontal line at the top of the diagonal line. He extended the horizontal line to about three or four inches, and then etched another diagonal line that was connected to the end of it. This diagonal line was slanted forwards. Now moving to the middle of the horizontal line, Illus drew a four inch vertical line down.

He The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) then drew another The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) horizontal line that ran parallel with the horizontal line above, with The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) the vertical line separating the two. He extended the second horizontal line the same length as the first and connected another diagonal line at the end of it. This diagonal line was slightly shorter than the other two. The symbol was very much similar to the letter "I" in the English alphabet. The symbol represented that letter and his name. He had etched his symbol many times, so it only took him a minute or so to place it somewhere.

The reason he put it on the tree and wall was so if another certain type of individual wished to use the tree as Illus had, then he would see he wasn't the first to do so and could not take credit for a new ingenious method of entering a city. It was a secret competition among them, one that Illus was determined to win.

He quickly looked down and pondered on whether to drop from the wall, potentially harming himself, or to find a safer way down, one that wasn't insalubrious to his health. After walking along the wall to a nearby roof that stretched out towards the wall, Illus hopped across and climbed down before dropping to the ground once he was close enough to it.

He landed without the slightest sound and dashed to a nearby bush. He shrunk down and hid from the passing guard, who would surely arrest him for skulking around past curfew. The guard didn't have a clue Illus was there. He waited for the guard to be a bit farther away then darted towards the alleyway between his targeted house and the house to its left. He moved to the back of the home and picked the lock on the door. It had not taken him long to pick open the door and enter the house, about five seconds, in fact. About as long as I lasted my first time, he thought while quietly withdrawing his lock picks from the lock.

The lock was too easy for such a master of lock picking as Illus. After digressing long enough about being a master object procurer, as he affectionately called his occupation, Illus returned to the task at hand: finding and retrieving a special artifact that came from some nearby ruins. Illus' trade was technically treasure hunting, but occasionally the treasures he was assigned The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) to acquire were housed in areas or buildings that weren't exactly open to the public. Often, though, he is mistaken for a no good thief.

The back door lead to the first floor of the three story house. The first floor served mostly as a storage floor and was moderately clean, with only a few cobwebs here and there. The flooring was made of wood panels that were of a dark brown color, and the walls were white, well not exactly white, more of cream color. Barrels and crates were many in number and spread throughout the first floor. Illus, surprisingly, didn't wish to look through them. He figured there were too many barrels and crates to go through, and he didn't have all night.

Creeping silently through to the stairs to the next floor, Illus felt a sharp chill run up his spine. After a brief moment of relaxing himself, Illus continued to the wooden stairs. At first sight the stairs appeared as though they couldn't hold anyone's weight, even that of a child. The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) However, Illus had to risk climbing them, for he had no other choice. Upon placing just one foot on the first step, the stairs creaked and whined softly. The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) Illus froze in his tracks at the sound. He was The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) worried that he alarmed the residents, and if so, how long would The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) it take them to venture to the first floor to investigate? Despite the notion of alarming the residents, Illus took another step and then another.

He climbed slowly and eventually reached the The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) door that lead to the second floor. He carefully turned the The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) knob and pushed the door. It was unlocked and gave entry into the kitchen. Ahead, a fire roared in the fireplace. Firewood took up most of the space around the fireplace. The fire was welcoming and gratefully accepted.

The house was comfortably warm and peaceful, and besides the crackling of the

flames of the fire, it was eerily silent, like that of a cemetery. The living room was glowing with candlelight, and in front of the fireplace were three empty chairs. Next to the chair on the right of Illus was a small table, upon it a book. The book was titled A Guide to Hunting. Unlike the others in the secret organization, Illus did not detest reading. He rather enjoyed it and hoped to one day write a book of his own. He soon had an idea for one, but he was digressing, so he quickly regained focus on the task at hand.

Illus left the living room and headed to the stairs that went up to the third floor. The sharp chill returned and The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) once again ran along his spine like a crawling spider in a haunted house. He started imagining this house to be haunted. The only thing missing were the ghosts. Hell, he thought, they were probably sneaking up on him right now. The brown stairs he climbed creaked softly with each step he took. Illus began to wonder the age of this home. Other than the creaking stairs and his shallow breathing, the house was not filled with sound. It was almost dead silent for the most part. Illus did not hear tremors of voices through the brick The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) walls, even the fire below did not utter sound audible to him. His hand gradually moved closer to his sheathed dagger without his permission. He had not noticed it until his hand came into contact with the hilt of the blade. It was cold and rough.

He reached the top of the stairs to the third floor and clutched the handle. To his surprise, the handle was colder than ice. The dagger was no longer sheathed. He carefully and slowly turned the handle and pushed open the door. The opened door revealed a pitch-black room. The air was cold and thin, much like the air outside.

This air, however, was colder and sent a sharp, almost painful chill up and down Illus' spine and into the bones of his The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) body. His skin tingled, and goose bumps appeared along his arms. He could not see the skin of his arms, for the leather sleeves of his armor hid it, but he could feel the tingles and bumps. The only light in the newly found room was spilling in from the candles that were set along the wall next to the staircase. However, not much of the light broke in.

Illus' heart began to pound violently with each forward progression into the room. It wasn't the dark he feared; it was what was hiding in the dark that worried him. He wondered if the residents discovered his presence and were the ones The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) responsible for the darkness, but after thinking of the stupidity in that, he tried to conceive of The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) another logical explanation.

Illus took a few more cautious steps through the cold darkness. He hoped to not hit any furniture, lest he be The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) discovered and have a sore foot or knee. The darkness made this task extremely arduous. After a few moments had passed since his arrival into the new room, Illus heard an eerie whisper. It echoed through his mind.

The silence had been broken, but not in the best of ways. There was a minute long interval between the first whisper and the second. The second whisper came as Illus neared a

door. He slid his along the door, feeling for the handle. The action brought results. For better or for worse he did not know. With a light push, the door cracked open. No light erupted through, but another whisper sounded. It was much eerier than the previous. It even stopped Illus in his tracks. "Enter," another whisper commanded.

Illus did not accept the whispers were supernatural. No, they had to be coming from a person. He reached for the door with his foot, and pushed it further open. A thick ooze of cold darkness was revealed upon the door's opening.

Illus took a step into the room and then another until he was fully clear of the door, which suddenly and violently slammed shut behind him. It produced a loud thud and soon the locking mechanism moved to the "locked" position. Illus' heart continued to pound through the leather cuirass he The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) wore. It practically jumped in and out of his chest. As he took another step forward, moonlight suddenly spilled in through the only window in the The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) room.

Illus looked to where it shined and saw the artifact he was meant The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) to steal. He grew suspicious of a trap, which made him hesitant of picking up the contracted artifact. Up close, the artifact was covered in dust, and other assortments of filth. Luckily, Illus was wearing gloves. The moonlight showed dust particles floating in the The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) beam of light. The moonlight also revealed the table upon which the artifact sat. The table was as black as the darkness that flooded the room.

The artifact itself, however, was a bronze color, and had strange writing on it, which The Shadow Runners (The Master of Darkness Book 1) he did not understand or recognize. It also appeared to have a lid. Apparently, the artifact was a container of some kind. Illus wondered what was contained inside. He sheathed his dagger and stepped toward the table.

He clutched the artifact with both hands and picked it up. It had some weight to it, which indicated it may be filled with something, or the artifact itself was just heavy. He estimated it weighed close to five pounds or so. It stood in length to roughly the same length as a man's middle finger to his elbow. The artifact had two handles for carrying that Illus took advantage of. He used a leather strap to tie the artifact to his cuirass.

He then turned around and tried unlocking the door. The lock, however, would not budge, no matter how hard he tried to push it over. It was as if someone welded the damn thing in the locked position.

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