

Journal 48 - in Shadow

Since it had worked so well before, I decided to masquerade as an FBI agent again. I reasoned that I would probably need to be a little more aware of how to do so when going up against an unknown quantity, so I took myself to the public library to read up on how to best present myself as a federal agent.

Books in both the reference section and the children's section gave me a few ideas; how they acted against known or suspected criminals, how much or how little they were empowered to do in certain circumstances and so forth. Hitting upon the ruse that I could claim to be investigating smuggling I examined the books on that subject, and seeing that smuggling alcoholic drinks between states of the union was illegal I examined some maps of the state I was in, California. It seemed best to say that the smuggling I was looking into had occurred at the nearest border to San Francisco, in a tiny little border town by the name of Magdeburg.

I was hoping to elicit a reaction by mentioning the name.

Since the intrusion into the Magdeburg I was concerned about had happened about a month ago, providing the time frames of the two Shadows were closely aligned, I would use that timing in my story.

The next morning I returned to the warehouse armed with a Pattern-created search warrant; I used the name of a judge who lived in the city but was currently, thankfully, on holiday. As I arrived a large transport vehicle arrived and entered the building through the main doorway; the big 'engine' at the front pulled the massive container at the back, not unlike a kind of 'road train'. The side of the container was emblazoned with the word BUDWEISER, apparently some kind of beer.

About two dozen labourers got to work unloading the container, under the watchful eye of a few men wearing suits. The suits were of the thin striped variety, not unlike the type I had seen in Magdeburg but with narrower stripes. They also fitted the local style, with the flared trouser bottoms. But the suits seemed somehow too average; they appeared to be too well blended in, if that makes any sense. Just call it instinct; I was almost completely sure that these were the people I was looking for.

I went over to the nearest suit-wearer and showed him my identification and asked to see whoever was in charge. The fellow seemed confused, asking what the problem was and saying that their papers were in order. I assured him that I was there on a different matter, so he shrugged and went over to a nearby phone. He pressed a few buttons and spoke into it; was his superior elsewhere?

The activity in one of the second storey offices running along the left side of the warehouse suggested otherwise.

After a short conversation the chap returned, saying his manager would be down to see me in a moment. He then went back to overseeing the unpacking of the transporter.

The gentleman who left the offices to talk to me was an older man, looking perhaps in his fifties, with greying hair and a welcoming kind of expression. I could see him sizing me up as he approached, however. His suit looked very expensive. I introduced myself to him, showing him my identification badge as I did so. He looked closely at it for a moment before introducing himself as Martin Renick and looking at me expectantly. I asked if we could speak privately and he said we could; he led the way up the stairs that ran up the left wall of the warehouse and along the walkway until we entered one of them. He led me past the woman behind a desk and into another, larger office that was up against the front wall of the building. A large window looked over the roofs of the buildings down the road; no window faced the street itself.

He bid me to sit, indicating a chair in front of his desk, and sat down himself as I began to tell him how I was investigating a smuggling operation. Several witnesses had said that men from his company were involved and that I wished to interview his employees regarding their whereabouts at the time in question. He seemed perturbed that I would have to speak to each person on the payroll; it would cost him a lot in overtime, he told me. Did I have descriptions to narrow down my search?

I apologised that I did not; I only had the company name and that “several men” were involved. He suggested that perhaps his company work logs would help, since they detailed who was where and when they were there. I agreed with this idea and he spoke to his secretary using some kind of telephone device on his desk, telling her to arrange a ‘printout’ of the work logs for the last two months. He then told me it could take half an hour to get the details printed; longer if the computer ‘played up’.

In the mean time, he asked, would I like some coffee? I said that I would; he asked if I preferred instant or percolated. Not really knowing the difference between the two, I asked for percolated. He spoke to the secretary again and arrange for coffee to be brought in to us.

As we waited I asked if it were possible that the foremen were involved; they could be arranging it all themselves. Renick agreed that this was possible, as it was they that handed out the assignments to the loaders and drivers. Perhaps if I were to tell him the exact time and place where the crime had been committed he could narrow my search down to a few men.

He pulled a large atlas of the United States from a desk drawer and we located the relevant page. Having checked a similar but more precise map book earlier I easily located the supposed location of the smuggling racket. I put my finger on that point and said it was a little town by the name of Magdeburg; I kept an eye on him as I said it and was rewarded with a very slight tightening around the eyes and a narrowing of the mouth.

I had found my culprits, I was sure of that.

He gave it a moments thought and named two men, Johnson and Williams, before scribbling down some times, dates and place names on a notepad. He was sure, he said, that these men were supervising deliveries in that area around that time.

Before I had the opportunity to ponder his remarkable memory his secretary entered bearing a tray on which stood two cups, a small bowl and two jugs, one large and one small. She poured the coffee from the larger jug and gestured towards the sugar (bowl) and milk (small jug); as she was about to leave Renick handed her a note, asking her to “check that reference number”.

He sipped his coffee and then commented that Magdeburg seemed a very small town; kind of a one horse town, perhaps. Or maybe more a one Datsun town. I smiled politely (missing most of the reference; a make of motor car perhaps?) and said something noncommittal.

Something tingled in the back of my head, though; if Datsun was a make of car, that would make it a rare one, as almost all the cars I had seen had displayed badges bearing names like “Ford” or “Chrysler”. Had he been trying to catch me out?

I told that about a dozen men had been involved on each side of the exchange; in all about a dozen cases of wine, vodka and beer had changed hands. This produced a tiny drop of sweat to appear on one brow. I hoped that I had him on the run, as it were.

I fingered my collar and asked if it were hot in the office or whether it was just me. He shrugged in a fine example of indifference and gestures towards the air conditioning unit behind me, saying I could adjust it if I wished. I did so, turning it down to the lowest setting possible.

I returned to my seat to see that his position had changed somewhat; his right arm hung over the side of his chair in a rather uncomfortable position that kept his hand out of sight. If he had some kind of weapon there was little I could do without making him too aggressive to continue helping me, if he truly was helping me, of course.

While we awaited the printouts from their computer we began a long conversation. He seemed intent on getting some kind of information out of me; it seemed that he was trying to both trip me up and get to me to reveal something of my past, perhaps in an effort to find out who I really was. He certainly seemed to becoming more and more sceptical regarding my story and appeared to be attempting to penetrate my disguise, such as it was.

He asked after my family and our origins, claiming he was unable to place my accent. He then moved on to talking about ‘organised crime’, presumably meaning criminal gangs of some sort, and was interested in their involvement in the smuggling. I was not forthcoming on my family background, saying I preferred to stick to business, and said, with regard to the organised crime questions, that I was unable to discuss matters of the case outside what I had disclosed already.

He then suggested that perhaps “more chaotic groups” were involved in the smuggling operation, clearly trying to draw me out again. I insisted that I could not discuss the details of the case in any more detail. Throughout our conversation he made more and

more comments involving 'Law' and 'Chaos' references. He was almost certainly sure of my true origin by that point, and was merely seeking some kind of confirmation of the truth; he was watching me very, very closely for any small reaction. I did my best to conceal any betraying reaction with expressions of confusion and irritation. He described himself as a middleman, arranging to deliver what people wanted from their supplier. Was he really trying to describe to me what he did for his employer, whoever that was? He also mentioned lawyers, saying how they were good at arranging deals that benefited everyone but mostly themselves.

His secretary came in long enough to hand Renick a note; Renick glanced at it and thanked her before turning back to me. The last polite questioning regarded my family again; where did we come from? In an 'annoyed' way I told him we came from the east coast, knowing we were a continent away. He then asked if I had "risen through the ranks" to reach my current position; since I knew some of the background of the FBI I told him that I had attended college like everyone else.

He paused for a time before asking who I really worked for. I enquired as to his meaning, and he told me that my identification code was unknown to the FBI. He smiled and waved his hand towards the outer office, saying he had had his secretary check out my ID; he had memorised the code and told me to check it with the Bureau. I protested my ignorance, saying that either the FBI had made a mistake or that he was lying for some unknown purpose.

He then raised his right hand to reveal the pistol he held in it. It was a revolver, mostly made of some plastic, suggesting it did not originate in that sphere. He held it on its side, flat against the table and pointed at me.

I put on my authoritarian voice and told him that threatening me would not help him. He made an obscure reference about chaos I did not get before asking if my family was German; he appeared almost entirely certain as to who I was by that point. I just shrugged and said our ancestors might have been at some point. He cocked his head to one side and said that he was sure the connection was more recent; perhaps they were from Bek? I feigned ignorance, but inside I was definitely concerned. I would soon have to discard my 'disguise' and try a more direct approach.

To buy some time I asked if I could have more coffee. He poured me another cup and pushed it across the desk towards me before sitting back once more. As I reached for the cup he remarked that I should know his suit was very heat resistant, in case I was planning anything. I do not think I had been planning such an aggressive action; I was hoping more to stall for time as I drank so I could come up with some idea of how to proceed.

While I was of Amber, with all the advantages that entailed, I was totally unaware of what powers my opponent possessed. On top of that I had a pistol aimed right at me that would no doubt prove fatal if I tried anything.

As if on cue he said that if I tried to lunge at him he could easily claim self-defence.

I told him again that threatening me in such a manner would not help his case in any way. He replied by asking who I was and who I worked for. This surprised me a little as I thought he knew who I was. Perhaps he thought I was just a person from Shadow, hired by someone in Amber? Or maybe he just wanted to know which member of the family had sent me? I stayed in the role, continuing to appear confused yet angry at this threatening and illegal behaviour.

Heavy footsteps could then be heard in the outer office. Renick told the new arrivals to enter and I found the room became smaller as two big bruisers entered the office. Their narrow-striped suits were very well tailored and they were probably armed.

Strangely, as they entered Renick kept one eye on them and one on me, literally; one stayed fixed on me while the other watched them enter. Martin Renick was clearly not a normal fellow; he was either possessed of some exceptional muscular control or he was some kind of shapeshifter. The second option certainly explained his chaos references.

I looked at Renick in a puzzled way and asked him if doing his eye trick caused him any pain. He said it did not. I continued to look bewildered and commented that while I knew someone who could cross their eyes I had never seen anyone do that trick before.

Renick's expression turned deadly serious as he raised his pistol into an upright position and said that it was time to go. I looked sorrowfully at him and said that I had been enjoying our conversation. He sat up straight and as he said "is it cold in here or is it just me?" and smiled slightly in a triumphant manner.

Then there came three short cracks a little like a glass breaking; it seemed to come from behind Renick, perhaps out in the street. Renick seemed surprised; then his expression became a little distant as he slumped forwards over his desk. In the brief moment before I acted I saw blood begin to flower in the middle of his back; he had definitely been shot.

The two large chaps were standing to my right, close to the door, so I threw myself behind the heavy desk as they drew guns from under their coats. A round burned its way along the back of my calf as I rolled behind the desk; almost too close. As I crouched there considering my options one of them took the occasional shoot at the desk to keep me in cover; was the other creeping around the desk to try to catch me unawares?

I carefully looked around the side of the desk to see if the other bruiser was doing what I had guessed he might be and I was right; I was rewarded with the sight of a rather surprised fellow as I shot him twice with my pistol in his head and throat. Over a slowly increasing fizzing sound I heard rapid footsteps and a slamming door. Over the smell of the powder I could not fail to notice an acrid smell that was getting stronger.

When I tried to locate the source of both sound and scent, fearing a bomb of some kind, I was instead faced with the peculiar sight of the bruiser and Renick dissolving into some kind of lumpy white gelatinous muck that steamed. In fact, as I watched, the two 'bodies' were slowly evaporating away to nothing.

I looked at Renick's chair and saw several holes in the chair and the wall behind it. Someone had almost certainly short him through the wall from across the street, or perhaps from even further away. As I pondered the implications of having some kind of unseen protector (presumably) I wiped the big revolver clean and did the same for the smaller revolver the bruiser had been holding. Pocketing the two smaller weapons I picked up the larger one and left the office.

The secretary was frozen in her seat by shock and terror. I suggested she get out while there was still time. She was nodding vaguely as I left. As I limped along the walkway and down the stairs I noticed that all the men in suits had apparently fled, while the labourers looked around confused. They did not stop me as I limped past them and out the door.

There was no sign of the suits as I came out onto the street, so I dashed across the road to the café opposite. If there was any trace of the gunman the first place to look was there; the roof was the first port of call. My FBI identification got me access to the roof, though the man behind the counter was very confused by my need to get up there.

The rifleman had been up there; I found three used cartridge cases and a piece of paper held in place by a small piece of masonry. The paper had a sketch on it, a scene depicting a street somewhere with a procession of Africans walking down the middle of it. They appeared to be members of a band; they were all playing brass instruments, though a couple were carrying large drums. The appearance of the street and other pedestrians suggested it was roughly the same sort of time period as the place I was in now, yet the buildings had a kind of French-ness to them. Perhaps it was a place in one of the southern American states; I had seen pictures of such places before.

I pocketed all the items as I heard police sirens in the distance. On the way back downstairs I displaced myself a little through Shadow to avoid the police; the counter man was the same fellow, but he did not know that I had been on his roof. My FBI identity convinced him all was well, however. I took a taxi to the broker's office I had first been to as Agent Michaels; once there I shifted back to the original Shadow and took another taxi back to my hotel.

Once I had put a simple bandage on my leg wound (minimal as it was) I pulled out my Trump of Fiona. I told her I had found the people who had been responsible for the vodka delivery to Magdeburg, and gave her a simple account of the incident. She offered to come through and see my wounds, but I told her I would deal with them myself.

She said she was aware of people like Renick, who turned to evaporating goo when slain, but did not say how she knew of them. She expressed an interest in closely examining one or getting a good sample, so I told her the guns I had acquired may still have traces of their body matter on them. She asked if she could have them and I passed them through the link to her, having no further need for them myself.

She then thought for a moment before expressing the concern that it was possible we could be stepping on someone's toes, metaphorically speaking, by interfering in the plans of

an ally rather than a foe. She went on to say how Bleys was investigating the Renick people. She thanked me for filling her in and the contact was closed.

I packed my gear away and prepared to leave. Another taxi took me to a hospital via another minor Shadow displacement; there I had my scratch seen to before returning to the hotel for my luggage. Then I went back to the stables where I had left my horse and reclaimed him from the pretty stable lass and her unattractive companions. Once I was out of sight I turned to my Trumps once more and transported myself to the courtyard in Amber. I left my horse in the good care of Amber's stables and made my way up to my rooms.

Once there I took a well deserved shower and dressed in shirt, trousers, boots and jacket acquired in Magdeburg. All in all I felt much refreshed.