

Timid Pirate Publishing Presents a Cobalt City Adventure A Neighborhoods feature by Nathan Crowder

Old Roots from a Sinister Vine
By Nathan Crowder

Doctor Shadow learned through three-thousand years well-lived that there were many comparison points for advantages and disadvantages of immortality. Regrets, mistakes made and chances not taken piled up like barnacles around every good memory, undermining every little victory. The ghosts of poor decisions follow everyone, waiting for their chance to strike, and Doctor Shadow was no different. It meant that he tried especially hard to improve himself daily.

One of the lessons his accursed lifespan had taught Doctor Shadow was that vulgar displays of power were easy. The subtlety of focus it took to blend in with ordinary mortals was a task of herculean proportions, especially at first. When Anubis banished him forever from the halls of the dead, the many-named Egyptian priest took up extensive occult studies. With all the time in the world to divine the secrets of the universe, he let years pass without human contact of any kind. However, when he ventured out into the world after these scholarly periods, he found that he lacked perspective.

When the average mortal had the comparative lifespan of an insect, the self-aggrandizing lie that he might be a god was easy to believe. Over the intervening centuries he relapsed from time to time, forgetting that he too had been human once. After all, in addition to being effectively immortal, he no longer had to eat, drink, or breathe, and had mastered the ability to turn invisible or insubstantial, to fly, to read minds, see through walls, and to wield considerable telekinetic force with a minimum of effort. He found that only by walking in the shoes of those he chose to protect did he reliably stave off the constant risk of megalomaniac delusion.

So it was with a deliberate sense of purpose that Doctor Shadow slid back into the human identity he had created for himself. Certain elements had been in place for some time, including the “family” home he had built in 1810 in Regency Heights under the name Caleb Umbra. Though he used the house only during those periods of his life he spent in Cobalt City, it had proven to be an excellent investment, creating a legacy, however false, that he could slip into and out of with little practice. He spent days laboring over the details: the wardrobe, the car, the story of what had happened to his “father,” who he had played twenty-five years ago.

Returning to Cobalt City after a generation away, he took the name Seth, and presented himself to the landed gentry of Regency Heights. The Umbra family was still remembered well, and he was taken into the fold like a long-lost favored son. This afforded him a seat at a regular and cutthroat canasta game played in the wood-paneled sitting room of the country club with some of Cobalt City’s more exclusive families.

What it did not afford him was a useful card, discarded by the old associate of his from when he last lived in Cobalt under his “father’s” name. With a hand full of low cards in sets of two and three, Seth was a long way from making his meld threshold to lay down cards. He watched Piers Steerpoint survey his cards, liver-spotted scalp and paranoid eyes sharp above the fan of paper. Cigar smoke from a nearby table tickled his nose, and the low murmur of a half dozen other conversations tried to distract Seth from the game, but a few millennia practicing the occult arts had done wonders for his focus.

Piers discarded a wild card on the already fat pile, locking it and forcing Seth to take two

cards from the top of the deck.

“I have some of your father’s books, you know,” Piers Steerpoint said as though it were a guilty secret. He smiled, pleased to have denied the so-thought younger man the discard pile yet again. “Not in the main library, of course. I don’t believe I ever found *Witchcraft Traditions of New England* in hardcover, and I can’t be putting paperbacks in with the other books.”

“Dark Meridian Press never bothered with the hardcover market,” Seth Umbra said, his voice hiding his delight of a wild card and yet another six in his draw, bring him one step closer to actually scoring some points this hand. He discarded his sole remaining face card, a king of diamonds he had held onto in hopes of turning it into something. “They targeted a market more interested in cheap, flashy pseudo-science. Drugstore reading, really.”

Cassius Gandry scoffed; whether due to the useless king he had just been given or Seth’s statement wasn’t immediately clear. Although of Piers’ generation, he carried himself like a younger man. His eyes were steely. He tried and failed to drill some sense of shame into Seth with them. Of the three septuagenarian men at the table, he was the most reluctant about Seth joining their game. He had insisted on holding one of the leather captain’s chairs for their regular fourth, Morgan Blake, who was going through a financial crisis recently and was reportedly inconsolable. Seth was only awarded the chair on the condition that he surrender it should Morgan appear. “In my day, children had more respect for their father,” Cassius grunted and discarded a six.

Seth looked at the inaccessible card and read the discard as an act of spite, whether it were true or not.

“Mr. Umbra is hardly a child,” Benny Wright said. He studied his cards, a look of disapproval on his round face. With an exaggerated sigh he picked up the discard and laid out a quick 90 points worth of cards with efficient snaps of card stock while the rest of the table groaned. A little twinkle appeared in the corner of his eye as he began sorting the stack of cards into his hand. “He must be, thirties or something?”

“Thirty-two, Mister Wright,” Seth offered, smiling inwardly that his real age was close to 100 times that yet he was still treated like a pup by these men. He had liked Benedict “Benny” Wright when he had lived in Cobalt a generation ago. Something about his manner and his way of sharing dirty jokes with a clandestine wink and nod reminded him of the comedian and actor Buddy Hackett. Returning to the city and finding him still alive had been a strong motivation for Seth to connect with those who knew him when he posed as the senior Umbra.

“Please. You’re Dick’s boy. Call me Benny.” He tossed a black three out for discard and continued sorting his hand. “Anyway, Cassius, didn’t one of your own grandchildren try to kill you recently?”

Cassius had no reply. He glowered as he poured another glass of 12 year-old scotch into a crystal tumbler. With less at risk in the diminished discard, play resumed quietly for a bit while everyone waited for the memory of Cassius’ murderous grandchildren to fade.

The attempt on his fellow canasta player’s life was news to Seth. He had been very careful to shut off his telepathic abilities to avoid cheating, even accidentally. But a murder attempt piqued his curiosity. It might even warrant his involvement as a super-hero. With delicate focus, he touched the minds of the other card players, careful to glean only the details about Cassius. He was thus focused when the sudden news of Morgan Blake’s apparent suicide swept through the room in a grim buzz of gossip, the way bad news seems to do.

From his vantage point, peering lightly through the surface thoughts of those around the table, this news appeared as a lightning storm. And in that storm, Doctor Shadow saw more than grief over a lost friend; he saw the memories of a ritual sacrifice flash briefly across three sets of faded memories before it sank back into the depths of closely guarded secrets. The victims had been two children, younger than ten if he were to guess. Refracted through three distinct sets of memories, the other details were useless and vague.

“I think that’s enough cards for one day, gentlemen,” Piers said weakly. His face was pale, hands shaking. The news of Morgan’s death appeared to have hit him harder than the others. He pushed himself from the table and made to leave. Almost as a second thought, he turned back to

Seth. "Mr. Umbra, if you would please indulge an old man with a moment of your time? I have something I wish to speak to you about."

The memory of the sacrifice was a secret closely guarded by these three men, and possibly Morgan as well. It was a practiced secret, one kept from the light of day for a long time. As such, it would be difficult to retrieve the details casually. Difficult, yes. But not impossible if he played his cards right. Seth Umbra stood and nodded politely. "Of course Mr. Steerpont."

Piers Steerpont grunted his approval, and beckoned Seth to follow. They walked through the richly carpeted, dark, walnut-paneled halls to a wide porch that looked out over rose gardens and tennis courts beyond. Seth fished his expensive sunglasses from the breast pocket of his jacket but it still wasn't quite enough.

The sun was a fierce furnace determined to blind Doctor Shadow from its position right over the distant elms. He bit back a silent curse to Ra, the other God to have cast disfavor on him, making him extraordinarily light sensitive. While Doctor Shadow could use a hooded cape and spells to protect himself from the sun, Seth had no such luxury. He leaned against the wall, using the shadow of Piers for cover as casually as possible. "What was it you wished to speak to me about, Mr. Steerpont?"

"Your father was an occultist," Piers said without preamble. "Not a practitioner, perhaps, but at least a scholar. Did you perchance follow into his area of inquiry or did your idle time and mother's influence lead you to something more...prosaic?"

Seth smiled, happy to be given a question for which he had a prepared answer. It allowed him to probe more easily into the memory of his conversation partner with his mind. "I suppose I took after my father in a manner of speaking. I have made a study of exposing fraudulent psychics, mystics, spiritualists, what have you. The scholarly study of the occult did my father no favors. I fear he might have fallen under the sway of more than one charlatan in his time. Why do you ask?"

The answer appeared on the aged Steerpont's consciousness in sharp focus, as did his disappointment. *Manu Diaboli*, his mind had wanted to scream. But instead Piers nodded. "He wouldn't happen to have left any unpublished manuscripts, would he? As a collector, I would most interested in acquiring even unfinished drafts."

"I'm afraid not. I'm sorry," Seth said, waiting for what he felt to be an appropriate length of time before turning the discussion to his own investigation. The sound of songbirds and smell of nearby roses punctuated the silence. "I take it that you and Morgan Blake were close friends?"

Steerpont pursed his thin, bloodless lips. "Since we were younger men," he said. Doctor Shadow watched as significant memories tumbled across the other man's mind, a gallery of scenes painted on wind-blown leaves. "We were going to become powerful together, all of us." One memory flared more brightly, a beacon. Doctor Shadow snatched it before it could escape, studied the details. Morgan and the other three canasta players were there, quaint yet sinister in black robes. The two children were bound, flour sacks over their heads to hide their features. An arcane circle, obscured by candles and the positions of the men dominated the memory.

He was not good with guessing the ages of men based on such little information, but he placed the vision as mid-1950's to somewhere in the mid 60's. Not much to go on, but it was a start.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," Seth coughed politely. "Please let me know if there is anything I can do. I'm just down the road from you. 28 Pheasant Lane."

Piers muttered a good-bye as Seth Umbra ducked back into the hallways of the clubhouse, away from the smells of fresh cut grass and back to those of wood polish. A plan of action was forming behind his sunglasses, worn despite the absence of sun. He sent the valet around for his car as he pondered where to start. Morgan's home was closer, but was likely to be crawling with police now.

He pulled smoothly away from the sprawling country club, through perfectly manicured lawns bordered by rows of trees so thick a person couldn't see the ostentatious homes of the neighbors. It wasn't until he left the club's lengthy driveway and turned onto Cavanaugh Road that he could even tell that other people lived out here; then, only by the appearance of carefully maintained high hedges, walls, and wrought iron gates. Though much of this area had originally been

settled as some sort of orchard or farmland, the elevation and relative isolation from Cobalt City quickly encouraged those with money to snatch up the land and turn it into estates and getaways from the hustle and bustle of the city. By the end of the 19th century, the only crop grown in Regency Heights was money.

Doctor Shadow made a snap decision and turned towards the closest thing the heights had to a heart, the Town Square, near where Benny lived. His new candy-apple red Pegasus Motors sports coupe handled like a dream around the lazy corners and dips and rises of the picturesque bluff. From time to time he could glimpse bits and pieces of homes through the trees, each valued at over a million for the land alone. Terra-cotta tile roofed manses to cedar shake Victorians; there was no unifying style other than expensive. At the intersection where the left road curved out towards the lighthouse, ferry dock, and the weathered battleship of a building that housed the Ferelli Mental Institute, he caught a glimpse of Cape Cod down below, and just a bit of the far-east curve of the Cannonade Park. He slowed down enough to take it all in before cranking the wheel hard right.

A few minutes later, the walls and hedges gave way to day spas, expensive boutiques, small park spaces, and a handful of exclusive bistro coffee shops. The Regency Supper Club sat at the far end of the Town Square, the anchor that held all the little shops in place. He maneuvered the sports car around the fountain in the center, blinded for a second by sunlight reflecting off water spouted from the mouth of one of the two twined dragons in the center.

The supper club was housed in a Georgian-style mansion in built in 1781, two stories painted white with a front porch flanked by high Roman columns. Benny's family had owned it for generations, and had been instrumental in keeping it in fine enough condition to be included on the state's historic registry. Doctor Shadow had eaten many meals there over the past two hundred years, including a particularly memorable ox-tail soup with Helena Petrova Blavatsky in 1876. Since becoming a supper club, the Wright family had moved into the guesthouse out back. With over 3,000 square feet and five bedrooms, they didn't lack for space. Benny's car was parked behind the high iron gate. Doctor Shadow smiled at his luck.

He flipped the car around and found parking behind one of the bistros. Confident that no one was looking, he waved his fingers, turning himself invisible. Another quick gesture and he became intangible as well. Ghostlike, he returned to Benny's house, passing through walls until he found the normally jovial old man pacing the thick carpets in agitation.

"This is your fault as well! It might have been Piers' idea, but you were the one who talked Morgan into it. You and Piers. We had the stomach for it in '62, but it never sat well with Morgan. You know that as much as anyone. I wouldn't be surprised if he left a confession behind implicating all of us!"

It saddened Doctor Shadow to hear the guilt in Benny's voice, almost as much as it disappointed him to see the memory play across his old friend's consciousness of a blade striking, however reluctantly, two supine figures. 1962. Doctor Shadow had been in London at the time if Benny's recollection of the date was accurate. He had left Cobalt City during the early fifties and not returned until early February of '64, a mere three days before the Beatles took America by storm. Had he been living here during the ritual murder of two children, Doctor Shadow would have likely heard about it.

He reached out and probed at the image of the victims, goading Benny into recalling as much as possible. A name floated to the surface. Rosenzweig. The children were siblings, immigrants with the family name Rosenzweig. Benny didn't remember their first names. It was possible that he had never learned them, consciously trying to distance himself from their lives.

The identity of the victims was one part of the puzzle, perhaps the most important one. If Morgan had indeed left a suicide note confessing to the murders, the police would want to get their paperwork airtight before they came to question Benny and the others. He read the time off a mantle clock and decided to fly to his next destination rather than drive. Time was running out if the three suspects considered bolting. With the slightest thought, Doctor Shadow passed through the ceiling, flying high above the supper club and guesthouse.

He took a second to reorient, looking at the patchwork of green space and luxury. From up

here, it all looked so simple, so innocent. These were no longer innocent times. Perhaps they never had been. He sighted on the distant steeple of the First Methodist Church, on a small hillock just this side of his own home. He soared towards the familiar landmark, and once he was close enough to see the bell in the bell in the steeple, he was able to arc left, towards the sharply pitched roofs of the Steerpont manor.

As he flew, he manifested the black hooded cloak, and dark, belted tunic of his more heroic persona, realizing that though he may be invisible now, the situation could turn on a pin. It was best to be prepared. Piers was the last of the line with plenty of time on his hands. In his seventies, and with no surviving heirs, the vultures already circled his rambling estate down the road from the Umbra home, lawyers, charities looking for donations, and faith-healers for the most part. There was no telling what Doctor Shadow might find there.

As he neared the largely empty gray home, he began to feel an intense itch. The closer he got, the more intense the sensation, until it felt like a million pinpricks at a few feet from the outer walls. "Oh, Piers, you devil you. It would appear you do more than merely collect occult tomes. I wonder what it is you are trying to keep at bay with this ward?"

Acting more on a hunch than any solid evidence, Doctor Shadow allowed his body to fade back into the material world, though he remained invisible for the time being. The pinpricks stopped. So, the house was protected against immaterial trespass, indicating a prohibition against spirits, but not physical trespass. Curious, he thought, that Piers was so concerned by insubstantial threats. The threat of someone coming to break into his house and carry away his money seemed a much more credible threat. Then again, there was an unsettling darkness floating here and there among the maple and birch trees on the property. The magical defenses against his spirit form were no concern. There were other ways to gain entrance.

Doctor Shadow approached one of the wide second story windows. Gazing through, he took in what appeared to be a guest bedroom. The window latch was visible just beyond the pane, and he used the delicate touch of telekinesis to manipulate the latch. One twist and the window slid open silently.

He crossed the threshold just to be certain that there were no further magical protections in place. Confident that he could proceed unhindered, he instead paused and retrieved his cell phone. There were several people he could call for information. Even more if he felt the need for extra hands in dealing with Piers. But there was only one name in his phone's memory that could do what he really needed. He thumbed down to it and hit the call button. The phone was answered on the second ring. "Detective de la Vega, speaking."

"Detective, this is Doctor Shadow. Is this line secure?"

"Reasonably. How can I help you?"

Doctor Shadow smiled. De la Vega was one of them, a mask who prowled the night streets as the cycle-riding vigilante Gato Loco. But his connections to the police made him particularly valuable now. "There were two children murdered in 1962, last name of Rosenzweig."

"Hold on," Manuel said. "Did you say 1962?"

"Yes. Do your records go back that far?" That was something he hadn't prepared himself for. A few decades didn't move at the same speed for him as it did for a busy police department.

"They've been scanning and indexing old cases in for a few years now, but no promises. I just need to pull up a different...wait. I have something. Hazel and Esther Rosenzweig, aged seven and ten respectively. Bodies found wrapped in an oilcloth behind somewhere called the White Spot in Quayside, June 13th, 1962."

Doctor Shadow was familiar with the place, though it had closed years ago. "It used to be a diner. I think it was replaced by a video rental store. Is the case still open?"

"Open? It's been over forty years, Doc," Manuel said, surprised by the question. "There's no statute of limitations on murder here, and they never arrested anybody. But no one has been arrested."

"I know who the killers were. I'm not certain if you've heard yet, but Morgan Blake of Regency Heights recently killed himself..."

“That’s not my division, but I heard about it. Is there a connection?”

“Yes. Benny Wright might be persuaded to talk, but I suggest getting to him soon. Cassius Gandry is involved also, and he might bully Benny into silence.”

There was furious scribbling on the other end of the phone. Doctor Shadow heard a barely voiced, “Get Gerrald at Precinct 4 on the line,” as Manuel handed the info off to someone else. “Ok, Doc. Is there anyone else I should be talking to?”

“Piers Steerpont,” Doctor Shadow said as he prepared to enter the house. “But take your time getting to him. I would like to speak with him first.” He hung up without waiting for a response from Manuel.

Finding the secret room where Piers practiced his magic was not difficult. What little Piers had mastered left traces in the ether. And most arcane sorcerers who wished to keep their practice hidden followed predictable patterns. You could rarely go wrong searching for a basement room, accessed by a single door, sometimes hidden behind a bookcase or fireplace if the practitioner had a flair for dramatics. Piers was the old fashioned and wealthy enough to accommodate his particular whims. The door was behind a revolving fireplace. Now that Doctor Shadow was inside the magical wards, it was no trouble to turn insubstantial again. He faded from the material world and passed through the soot-stained brick to float down the dark stairs.

He was unsurprised to find Piers Steerpont already there, his withered and candlelit body clad in an open black robe, hood up across his spotted pate. He was flipping through an ancient, leather-bound book propped open upon a stone altar packed with candles, handling the pages delicately as though they might crumble. Doctor Shadow moved about the room unnoticed for several moments, inspecting the titles of books preserved beneath the glass of a climate controlled case. There were several titles he recognized, even some he wrote under other names generations ago, not just as his fictional father.

A sneaking suspicion crept up the back of his spine, and he turned his attention to the book Piers was reading. As Doctor Shadow approached the altar, a black candle placed amidst the others flared suddenly, shooting sparking flames high into the musty air. Of course, Doctor Shadow realized. There had to have been more protection against spirits. Piers was nothing if not paranoid.

Piers’ hands trembled as he touched an obsidian dagger concealed beneath one side of the book. “Who approaches! I command you give your name.”

Doctor Shadow decided to remain invisible for the time being, but used telekinesis to snatch the dagger away from its hiding place and dash it against the stone walls of the secret room. “That is no way for a worm such as yourself to address to address Manu Diaboli!”

As gambles went, this one paid off better than Doctor Shadow could have hoped, and Piers fell to his knees reciting incantations of summoning for Manu Diaboli. Doctor Shadow knew them well. After all, he had written them not more than four centuries earlier in London. During his time in England, Doctor Shadow had discovered a circle of sorcerers intent on summoning any number of foul demons and spirits. Some were merely curious, while others were determined to bring down the monarchy. Their numbers were too large, their degrees of involvement so varied, that he chose to infiltrate their ranks rather than destroy them outright. To do so, he posed as a demon for several years using the name Manu Diaboli, meaning simply the “devil’s hand,” in Latin. This unique position enabled him to weed out the truly dangerous sorcerers while nurturing and re-directing promising spell casters with more altruistic purposes. But he had never condoned human sacrifices.

He had also never really considered that written accounts would have survived the Great Fire of London in 1666. The Latin words were common enough that he had hoped Steerpont’s ritual instructions had come from somewhere, anywhere else, and not Doctor Shadow’s own hand. The idea that potentially distorted accounts had survived and been put to dubious purposes appalled him. “Why have you called me here?”

“We sought your protection, your blessing for power and longevity,” Piers wailed. “We did everything we were told. And still you didn’t answer. So we found a more appropriate offering for you.”

The sacrifices, the Rosenzweig children; their deaths had been an improvisation, a break

from the ritual. Piers must have foolishly thought that he could mix and match bits and pieces of ritual like casserole recipes. That would explain the need for the wards on the house. He had no doubt attracted some opportunistic spiritual scavengers. “Who made this offering?” Doctor Shadow boomed, knocking several of the candles from the altar with a blast of telekinetic might.

Piers looked up from beneath the edge of his cowl. He couldn't see this so-named Manu Diaboli, but Piers could not doubt he was here. His eyes took on a reptilian shrewdness. “I made the sacrifice. The others were too weak. They didn't believe.”

It was a lie. Doctor Shadow could see it on the old man's consciousness clear as day. But he could also see the oily grip of avarice. The others weren't here to bargain with Manu, so all the glory was Steerpont's. Doctor Shadow swept the rest of the candles from the altar, exposing a deeply etched protective circle in the half-second before the candles winked out and plunged the room into utter darkness. “The truth!” the Egyptian sorcerer howled. His voice shook dust from the exposed beams in the ceiling.

Doctor Shadow was a being of darkness, and could still see as clearly as if it were day. Piers was not so fortunate, and panic began to mount in his voice, though he held his ground. This was the big test he had been waiting for since picking up the knife over 40 years ago. “It was ME! It was ALL ME!”

The room fell silent but for the sound of one old man gasping for breath as the echoes of his outburst faded to nothing. Doctor Shadow let Piers sweat it out for almost a minute. He touched the edge of the protective ward. It was well done. Very detailed, carved with general spirit types that he sought safety from, and one very specific name. Rosenzweig. Interesting. Doctor Shadow floated back and focused his not-inconsiderable telekinetic might into a wedge that struck down into the center of the altar. The force split the stone cleanly, breaking the circle.

Piers Steerpont, last scion of the Steerpont clan, let out a lost wail as his long-held dreams of power lay dashed around his bony knees. He was questioning his decisions, where he went wrong, but Doctor Shadow didn't need to look into his mind to see that. The same thought was going through his own head as well. How many other missteps had he taken in his cursedly long life? How many other deaths might he have been indirectly responsible for? There was no way of knowing. The best he could hope for was to keep moving, building a wall of good deeds to shield him from the regrets and mistakes of his past. If he felt tempted to take the easier path, he need only look back on his vision of a memory shared by three men, of innocence lost in a single misguided act of violence.

As Doctor Shadow left, he passed the ghosts of two wailing children heading the other direction. He left them to get reacquainted with Piers Steerpont. He had put off facing up to his regrets for long enough. The police would be there soon, and the Rosenzweig children had so much they had been waiting decades to say.

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