



# Shadowcutting

Jason Franks & Steven Mangold

I KNOW I'M NOT DEAD BECAUSE THERE ARE NO ANGELS, NO trumpets, no lights.  
"Theo."

My ears are still ringing, but my eyes start to clear. I can smell gunsmoke, caustic soda, and cooking chicken.

A silhouette leans over me. "Theo. Theo."

I'm lying sprawled in an almost-dry creek bed. Got some broken ribs, something sharp sticking out of me. I look down to see a twelve inch blade on a broken-off haft sticking out of my guts.

"Theodore." The silhouette resolves into a tattooed, bearded visage that I know and hate: Julian Keneally.

"Fuck off."

"That's not a very gracious way to greet an old friend, Theo," he replies. "Especially one who saved you from a cockatrice."

"Wasn't an ordinary cockatrice."

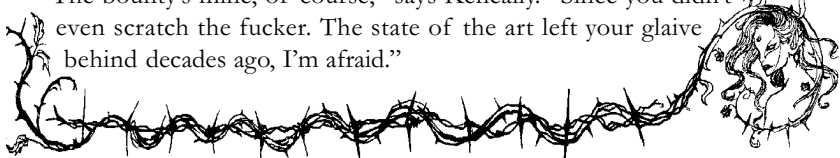
Keneally smiles. "Somebody thought it would be funny to crossbreed one of its parents with a demon," he says. Yeah, some smart-arse fucking sorcerer like Keneally.

"Fuck you." A few specks of my blood settle on his face, but his smile remains.

"You should thank me; I ruined the organ harvest saving your miserable skin."

The meat of the demontrice is still cooking; it makes farting, squeaking noises. Keneally's favorite spell is one he calls 'Microwave Madness.'

"The bounty's mine, of course," says Keneally. "Since you didn't even scratch the fucker. The state of the art left your glaive behind decades ago, I'm afraid."



I try to speak, but blood fills my mouth. Hard to argue the point with the weapon in question broken off in my stomach.

Keneally waves a hand and his filthy sorcery raises me into the air. “You look like shit, Theo. I’ll give you a lift to Doctor Langer.” He turns away. “No, don’t thank me; we’ll stop off on the way so you can sign the bounty check over to me.”



I pass out while Doc Langer works on me. It’s not just pain; it’s the feeling of my guts moving around inside me, the tingling of my flesh rapidly resealing. Or perhaps it’s the Doc’s singing: bassy and trebly at once; a melody I can’t quite predict, lyrics I can’t quite understand.

This is faerie magic, I’m pretty sure. Makes me uncomfortable, but I know the Doc’s a purebred human. Doesn’t have the sheen on him that the frips do.

“There you go, Theo. All done.”

“Ugff.” Sitting up hurts a lot more than it should. I look down; there are rows of stitches snaking all over my stomach, my arms. “What the fuck?”

Langer is peeling the bloody latex off his fingers. He smiles. “Something wrong?”

“I got fucking *stitches!*” Yelling hurts my stitches. “Goddamnit!” Swearing hurts, too.

“You’re not covered for muscular or epidermal repairs. Your internals should be working, though.”

Fuck. I can’t work if I’m injured. “I can write you a check for the full workup,” I say, confidently. Then, just as confidently: “But it won’t clear.”

Langer chuckles a little.

“I mean, it won’t.... I don’t....”

“Give it up, son. There’s truth floss in the stitching.”

“I got insurance!”

“Your Monster Hunter’s Guild doesn’t cover jack shit, Theo.” He sighs. “I’m not even going to bother invoicing them for the kidneys or the liver. They won’t pay it out.”

I glower at him. “We don’t all have fancy-pants Sorcerer’s Guild insurance.”

“That’s because you need to be a sorcerer to qualify,” says Langer, “and *that* requires you be at least *partially* literate.”

Before I can reply he puts his hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Theo, you’re just going to have to take it easy for a while.”

When I open my wallet to give the receptionist my twenty dollar co-pay I find a business card I’ve never seen before: DB WEAPONS.

Fucking Keneally. Is he getting a referral fee?



DB WEAPONS is located in an office block on the eastern fringe of downtown. Finding the building is easy; getting up to the fourteenth story is another matter. I ride the elevator up, but it doesn’t stop on 14. I ride the second elevator