

*Shades
Of
Death*

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This is an original shorty story and has
never appeared elsewhere.

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They say when you come into this world you get a guardian angel who does their best to see you stay here awhile-and a personal devil who does their level best to take you out from the word go. Both of them were putting in overtime for one lucky individual on a warm spring night outside of Slugger Harris' Combination Club.

The entrance was in an alley that looked like a Warner Brothers street movie set, complete with an always wet street (courtesy of the leaking hydrant down the block), steam from the cleaners next door, and a neon sign that proclaimed the club's name. It was located in the Chinatown section of the city on the border of Little Italy so it got what the sports columnists called a 'colorful' clientele.

The co-owner, Slugger Harris, was a little badger of a man and his silent partner, had just helped some of that 'colorful' clientele-to leave abruptly; and were standing in that same alley-making sure they didn't come back.

"They won't be thinking of anyone but you any time they look in the mirror for weeks, Slugger," the partner said in a rich base voice, "you pasted them but good!"

The 'partner' was a giant of a man, dressed to the nines in a slate gray suit of summer-weight cloth that did little to hide his sculpted muscular physique. In fact, he resembled nothing so much as a sculpture of granite-with skin a pallid gray and prematurely silvered hair brushed back from a high intelligent forehead. All that animated him was a warm smile that went all the way to his eyes.

Harris brushed imaginary dirt from his hands and looked up at the Grey Man, "Geez boss, I barely tapped them. 'Sides, they know no gangster stuff in the club."

Just then the Granite Man spotted an envelope on the ground and stooped to pick it up. It was addressed to him as 'Doctor Spook'-the slang transliteration name the world knew him as, Dr. Shadows. Which was itself a corruption of his given name, Anton Chadeaux, PhD.

"Lazy mailman it seems," The Granite Man said. He looked up to see the

'businessman' Retsudo Oyama (with his usual three stone-faced security guards in ill fitting suits), and his sister Akemi out on the town.

"Good evening, Akemi," Dr. Shadows said pleasantly. It wasn't hard to be pleasant to her; she was a hundred pounds of pure dynamite in a sheath dress that would barely make a handkerchief for most.

"Good evening, Anton," she said with a sly smile. Her brother looked on this exchange with less than joy in his beady little eyes. He didn't like his sister dating a 'saloon owner' as he called Dr. Shadows. Truth be told the eyes of the gray giant were round and that was the rub.

Slugger, ever the genial host, smiled at Akemi and stared directly into Retsudo's attitude.

"A little late for you to be out without a police escort, Ratso, isn't it?" One of the stone faces took a step forward, but Retsudo stopped him with a grunt.

"I thought Dr. Spook here was law-abiding," Retsudo said with a sneer, "but here I see he walks his pet without a lease." Slugger returned his smile with fixed purpose.

Dr. Shadows ignored the fight about to happen-continuing to make eye contact with the little Asian angel.

Suddenly.

Ephips-fphips of a silenced rifle rocked! the Granite Man back into the doorway with the force of a sledgehammer!

Recovering quickly, Dr. Shadows jumped back to his feet as the sound of a car screeching away filled the suddenly silent night.

The Granite Man was still half inside the doorway and half out, as Slugger put a hand on his shoulder. "See'em, boss?" he said with hurried breath. His gun appearing in his hand.

"No, just felt 'm."

The little pugilist gazed down at the hole in Dr. Shadows' arm to see that it wasn't

life threatening; then ran to the street at the alley mouth to get a look at the fleeing car.

"You're shot!" Akemi screeched, squeezing from behind her wall of bodyguards, pulling free of her brother's grasp.

"No, it's just a snakebite-with a kick!" She looked at the Gray Giant with a cross expression.

"Really, Akemi, " he added. "It's not serious."

"I think our dead shot is gone." Slugger said coming back from the street. He had holstered his pistol and made motions that the group should go inside.

"Do I detect a note of sarcasm?" Dr. Shadows said as Akemi tried to look at his arm. He fingers probing around the wound.

"Ow!" Dr. Shadows said to himself.

"It was a real easy shot to miss," Slugger observed. "Unless they were nervous or only trying to wing you; a target your size should have been a piece of cake." The little pugilist had an inscrutable look that told Dr. Shadows everything he needed to know: Slugger didn't like his friends, partners, patrons or himself shot at.

"Take that coat off," Akemi ordered. "I want to look at that arm." He started to remove the coat and realized he was still holding the envelope he'd picked up in the alley. When he opened it neatly the note was penned in Korean and said:

"Your life is in danger. Beware the Shade of Death." It was signed simply (and oh so originally) "A friend."

He held the note out to Slugger. "I should read my mail more often," he said. Slugger just looked more inscrutable.

The group went into The Combination Club, passing the coat check, the bar, the bandstand, the dance floor full of gently swaying patrons and numerous tables with booths that fell away into shadowy corners so that the true dimensions of the club were hard to pin down to the manager's office.

Over-looking the dance floor was a large window into that office where the group walked one by one like a demented parade for Akemi to dress Dr. Shadows' bullet wound. Next to the door to the office was a plaque with a number counter built in that said, "Number of renovations to club this year: six".

Dr. Shadows pulled the shades, closed the door, and pulled out the jumbo first aid kit they'd kept in the office closet, next to twin owner's lockers.

Meanwhile, Slugger escorted Retsudo to his usual booth-along with his three stooges.

Akemi followed The Granite Man into the empty office-while he went into the bathroom to wash the wound, she retrieved a fresh shirt for him from his locker. When he emerged she immediately set about dressing the wound.

The bullet wound was little more than a deep graze on the inside of the Granite Man's left bicep which the Asian was able to close with a butterfly bandage. She wrapped the whole bicep as well, stepping back to look at the quiet giant. She found herself staring at the most perfectly muscled upper torso she had ever seen; no muscle over developed, yet each at the peak of useful development. It was a complete contrast to the strange pallid-gray tone of the flesh, which on anyone else would have looked sickly and on the verge of death! Perhaps equally as startling were the myriad array of old scars crisscrossing his back and chest. And the old bullet and knife scars on his arms and back.

She pointed to one scar on the gray giant's side. Dr. Shadows trapped her pointing finger with his left hand. She smiled. "It's a wonder there's an inch of un-punctured skin on your body." She playfully bit at his hand. "How does the new one feel?" She asked.

"Okay, no major muscle damage, I think."

"I've patched up my brother enough," she said knowingly. "It's a clean wound; it missed the bone."

"You're very good to me." He leaned over and pulled her to him as he sat on the edge of the desk.

"Better than you deserve," she said.

"A terrible thing to say to a wounded man, possibly mortally so." He tried to look faint and helpless. She laughed.

"My legs have worse razor burn."

They were nose-to-nose now, whispering until there was no air to spare for whis-pers.

"Hey, Boss, the natives are getting restless," Slugger said from the doorway. Dr. Shadows and Akemi giggled like a couple of teenagers as the Granite Man gingerly put on a clean shirt Akemi'd taken from his locker.

"How so, Slugger?"

"The Police as usual, found nothing. They took the original note with them too."

The Bantamweight bar owner went to his desk and removed a box of shells, reloading his snub-nose revolver. Akemi smiled at him with total cool, nonplussed by his entrance. He smiled back like a goofy school-kid.

"But what is this Shade of Death?" Dr. Shadows mused. "Or who? And why a hit on me? I'm not on any active cases."

"Maybe it was a mistake," Akemi offered hopefully.

"Yeah, we do all look alike." Slugger said.

"It's the round eyes." Akemi said sagely, smiling at the fighter, enjoying his joke.

Slugger puffed himself up, enjoying her smile and added, "By the way, it was a high powered rifle, and I located a steel jacketed slug down near the corner. You were lucky, Boss."

"So far, but the next one might be hollow nosed, or mercury filled or-" the Granite Man said.

"Optimist!" Slugger said.

Dr. Shadows turned to Akemi. "I'm gonna hand you over to your brother, hon. I have some questions to ask some shady characters."

"I'll ask around as well." Akemi said with a sidelong glance that was halfway between innocent and evil, "I know quite a few myself."

"You can start with your brother," Slugger said in a jovial matter-of-fact tone. He opened the door and stood aside for Akemi to exit first. Akemi scrunched her nose up and looked back through the door at her brother.

Retsudo and his henchmen were focused on the open door and he motioned her to him. She suddenly smiled, waved and kissed Dr. Shadows deliberately on the mouth.

Over Akemi's shoulder The Granite Man caught sight of Retsudo fuming and found himself enjoying the man's discomfort almost as much as the kiss.

"Call me soon, you Grey Gable, you."

Slugger watched Akemi go. "You let that one go and you are as punch drunk as I am, Boss."

"Yeah," the Granite Man said, "Nobody's put up with me like she has for a long time."

Dr. Shadows pulled his newly ventilated jacket off the chair back rather than let blood seepage ruin another, and with a few wincing donned it. "Speaking of time, it's time I nose out some dirt on this Shade."

"If you're going to slink around looking for answers, Boss," Slugger said, "will you break your usual rule and take a gun?"

"A gun's too easy," The Granite Man, answered, "you know it should be the last solution. Besides," he said with a mischievous wink. "Where would the sport be?"

"There's a reason a lot of people think you're nuts, Boss."

"I just won't carry one if I don't have to." Dr. Shadows insisted, "It makes some things too easy and other things-like defusing situations, too hard. There'll be more than enough guns in the world soon enough." He donned a stylish gray fedora and

**leather trench coat. "Cheer up, Slugger" he added.
"If I need one, I'll take it away from someone trying to use it on me."
Slugger did not look amused.**

Hitting the streets, Dr. Shadows got some snitches working in both the oriental and occidental communities and then decided to go to the best source he knew of: Trigger O'Leary.

His room in an S.R.O. off the Bowery and was dark and dingy, with peeling wall-paper and cockeyed wainscoting. On the dilapidated bed, which dominated the room's 'decor', was Trigger, an immaculately dressed man in a three-piece suit. You could cut steak with the crease on his pants. From a radio Dr. Shadows could hear harpsichord music playing. Trigger was reading a copy of Military Mercenary magazine, laughing softly to himself.

There was a noise at the door from out in the hall and as if by magic Trigger was holding an automatic pistol in his hand. He moved silently, standing off to the side of the door, easing it open a crack. Suddenly, a blur of metal nailed the sleeve of Trigger's gun hand to the door and before he could jerk his hand free-Dr. Shadows popped up from the fire escape where he had been crouched.

"Move and I go for the bull's-eye, Trigger!"

"Leave a guy some self respect, Shadowman."

The Granite Man took pity on him, ambling over, pulling the pistol from Trigger's hand, extracting the slim throwing dagger he nicknamed 'Ike' from his sleeve and

backed across the room.

"I respect you enough not to come in the front door," he said.

"What do you want?" Trigger asked.

"Whatever happened to polite conversation?" The gray giant lamented.

"Repartee? Banter?"

Trigger lit a cigarette with a platinum lighter. "I regret my time is-short," he said. "I'm awaiting a business call."

"The modern rush and rationale," Dr. Shadows said. "Well, to be blunt I came in a job related matter."

Trigger blew smoke rings and watched them float toward Dr. Shadows. "You're hiring?" He asked in an incredulous voice.

"No, inquiring." Dr. Shadows said. He sat on the edge of a dresser that had more coats of paint than a lower east side hooker. "Who tried for the brass ring on me tonight?"

Trigger began to study his smoke rings as if they had been done by Gustave Klimt. "It wasn't me," he finally said.

"You wouldn't lie to me just to keep me from relocating your liver, would you?"

Trigger smiled gently, as if he feared to crack his face. "No lie," he said. "I don't owe people I owe. Ethics, you know." He actually looked embarrassed. "You got me out of that Skullmask murder thing."

"You weren't guilty," Dr. Shadows said matter as a of fact.

"A trivial detail," he pointed out. "Other law enforcement professionals would have fried me on general principles."

There was an awkward pause. Finally Dr. Shadows asked, "What do you know on the matter at hand?"

Trigger made a very conscious decision, stubbed out his smoke and sat up-focusing intently on the Granite Man. "I know no names-so I can violate no confidences," he

explained, "but a couple of weeks ago, a floating contract came out on you. No specific terms, no names behind it. No local would take it, they're all scared of you."

"That's heart warming to hear," Dr. Shadows said with a smile.

"Who did take it?" Trigger shrugged.

"A faceless, past-less individual who uses the appellation. The-"

"Let me guess-'The Shade of Death'." Dr. Shadows interjected.

"Precisely. A new name in the business." He considered for a moment. "Perhaps two years old. No one knows from whence or where. Save that it's a solo operator and very efficient. Just a feeling says its a slant eyed-"

"Trigger-"

"Oriental. No particular reason to think so, but a feeling. My guess is a talented amateur decided to turn pro."

"So this 'Shade' will finish what he started?"

Trigger nodded. "He has to for credibility."

"Momma Chadeaux's little boy thanks you, Trigger." Dr. Shadows said, moving to the door.

"Keep your ears open on this thing. I'll stay in touch."

He pocketed the clip, then set Trigger's gun down on the doorframe.

"If I get anything I can pass on," he said. "I will."

"Anytime you want to go slumming," Dr Shadows smiled, "the drinks at the Combination Club are on me."

Dr. Shadows closed the door and stood in the corridor for a moment. He heard the phone ring and Trigger answering it.

"Yes," Dr. Shadows heard him say, "it's me. Yes. Correct. How much is the fee?" The radio began to play, this time something by Chopin. "The client's name? And when do you want this accident to take place?"

On the way down the stairs The Granite Man signaled a police contact and a uni

formed cop went up to knock on the door. "Sorry," Dr. Shadows thought to himself, "it's for your own good, Trigger."

Next day The Granite Man did a vampire act, sleeping 'til noon or so-then hit the streets again looking for 'Shade spoor'? But, no luck.

He had dinner with Akemi and then, planning to meet her later for an evening at the fights, walked across Mott street to stop at the club-before going up to Gramercy Park to change clothes.

The Street was strangely deserted for a Friday (light rain notwithstanding). Then he heard a very distinct sound: the bolt of a submachine gun being cocked!

Dr. Shadows dove over a parked car and shoulder rolled as bullets tore the side of the car to pieces. He stifled a cry of pain, his wounded arm hitting the sidewalk, but rolled anyway and sighted under the car, 'Ike' in hand.

The shooter had been in the setback of a building. When Dr. Shadows did a dive making them come out to get a better angle to target him behind the car.

Looking under the car The Granite Man could see booted feet on the other side approaching with gun still blazing. He threw 'Ike' and hit the shooter in the ankle. There was a muffled cry and the gunman interrupted his firing to clutch at the knife.

It was the break that Dr. Shadows needed to vault over the car, slamming into the hooded killer with both feet. The assailant hit the ground with a loud exhale of air and a mumbled curse but he was up in a blink and stopped the follow-up punch from the Grey Wolf. The tiny masked man sent two powerful kicks into Dr. Shadows left side,

one of which connected with his wounded left arm and staggered him to one knee. The gunman took off at top speed (proving the ankle wound was negligible), scooped up his Tommy-gun, vanishing into the darkness.

The Granite Man was on his feet in a minute, rubbing his arm-in the suddenly quiet night.

The sound of retreating footsteps-was like thunder.

"Maybe you'll be lucky," a voice said from behind Dr. Shadows, "and the Shade's a hunch back."

He whirled around with throwing knife in hand ready to attack.

Slugger just smiled without humor as he watched his boss wince with pain. "Hurts like hell, doesn't it?"

"Don't do that, Slugger," he said, "save the sneaky stuff for the bad guys."

"Sneaky stuff?" Slugger said. "I was walking my dinosaur; -you're not one hundred percent are you?"

The Granite Man reluctantly nodded.

"You gonna be smart and lay low at the club?" Slugger asked.

Dr. Shadows shook his head no.

Slugger made a disgusted sound. "I didn't think so. At least that much about you is no mystery; if it's dangerous you'll be there."

"You wound me, sir." The Grey Giant said, giving him the smile that had launched a thousand punches. "I'm an open book."

Slugger laughed. "And I still trust you-I must be crazier than you. I gotta get going. Look both ways before you cross the street and I'll see you in a couple of hours."

Then Slugger was gone as silently as he'd come.

'Either Slugger still has the light step that made him a champ or,' Dr. Shadows said quietly to himself, 'I really am going deaf with old age.'

Later at the Garden, preliminary matches were starting as Dr. Shadows arrived to meet Akemi, heading to the seats he'd reserved the week before. She was accompanied by her brother and two stone-faced Yakuza bodyguards. Like Akemi and her Brother, the Yakuza were Koreans who had adopted Japanese names in a vain hope to fit into the conqueror's society, yet were marginalized into (mostly) criminal activity like extortion, brothels, and smuggling. Retsudo headed a successful 'export import' company.

Akemi settled sinuously into a seat beside Dr. Shadows just two seats away from her brother. His two bodyguards looked anything but inscrutable, their expressions very sour. Her brother looked particularly pissed.

Dr. Shadows and Akemi exchanged small talk and hand holding during the next two matches and then she excused herself to go to the ladies room. Her brother seized the opportunity to lean over and talk directly to the Grey Wolf.

"Listen up, Dr. Spook," Retsudo said, "you're no good for my sister." The gangster was almost at the shoulder of the gray giant and too close for comfort.

"Listen, Retsudo, I think she's the best judge of that."

"Hear me," he said, "she was almost hurt last night because of you. That is-unacceptable. If you have any true feelings for her or any honor-you will stay away from her!" Then he smiled like a melon that had been slashed. "Enjoy the show."

With that statement, the Yakuza chief and his men rose to leave, just as Akemi

returned. Dr. Shadows watched him go, then turned back to the match and tried to ignore Akemi's look-of-death directed at her retreating brother.

The boxing match was violent, but not nearly as bad as that look on such a pretty face. The two sat in silence for a time until finally, Dr. Shadows broke the tension.

"You know you can't chose your family, but you sure know how to chose your clothes; that dress does great things for you," he said.

"Only the best," she finally cracked a smile, "but then you know how to get them off me." Despite his gray pallor the giant blushed.

"So."

"So?"

"Dinner after the match, Angel?"

"We had dinner."

"A midnight snack? Sushi ala Oyama?" She laughed and he leaned forward to kiss her. Suddenly, the chair arm broke under his weight and he slipped on top of her and proved again that he had a guardian angel, because just as he fell forward a bullet slammed into the chair where he had been, tearing a huge hole when the dum-dum bullet exited the chair back. Akemi and Dr. Shadows tumbled to the floor in a huddle and waited for a second shot that did not come.

"To coin a phrase," Dr. Shadows said in quiet whisper to the trembling Akemi, "I am annoyed, real annoyed."

Later, when the arena was empty, and the cops had finished crawling antlike all over the place, and Akemi had been secreted to Dr. Shadows' townhouse-Slugger and

Dr. Shadows stood alone in the hall.

The Granite Man called Trigger but he still had nothing new to say which left the gray giant still angry as he hung up the phone.

"Flame it!" He cursed.

"Flame it?" Slugger said with an odd look. "I take that as a sign your hunt for info was negative?"

"Three misses. I'm either a lucky S.O.B. or somebody wants me to sweat." Dr. Shadows observed.

Slugger gave a little evil laugh. "Third time's usually the charm, Boss."

"You're a barrel of inspiration." He put his jacket on and picked up his slouch hat ready to leave.

"Were are you going?" Slugger asked.

"I have a date with that lady I put in the cab before."

"Keep your head down and stay away from your usual haunts?" Slugger said, "I'm gonna look around the place again, maybe find something you or the police missed." Then he nailed Dr. Shadows with his glare. "Will you at least carry a gun?"

The Granite Man looked at him sharply, and then changed his expression to a magic smile.

Slugger sighed.

"I know, 'it wouldn't be fun.'," he said. Then added softly, "Maniac."

Dr. Shadows had a romantic late supper with Akemi at his townhouse off of

Gramercy Park. Afterward, they curled up quietly on the couch in front of a glowing fire.

"Anton," she said after while. "What happened in China? What happened over there that-that changed you from the old Anton I knew in university; the gad-about, the-uh-play boy, as you say?"

He was a little taken aback by her question so he answered with a question. "Why do you want to know?"

"You're not the first man who's broken my heart by not falling hopelessly in love with me; but you're the most interesting."

"I haven't fallen yet," he side-stepped, "But you are real close to finding a home all the way inside me, Angel." He looked back at the fire for a bit then said, "I think I was a disappointment to my parents; my father especially. Oh, he was proud when I got my degree so I could follow in his footsteps with the petrochemical business, but not with my behavior after hours at college. I don't think he even my flirtation with stage magic. Too many stage door Janes, I guess."

"That would be me," she smiled at him.

"Once." He acknowledged. "you were always a special light in that alley by the stage door, Angel. Only I didn't quite realize it then. I didn't realize a lot of things before that trip to Korea, but that's where it changed," he continued, "Where I changed. My folks and I were on a plane over the northern mountains on the edge of China on the way to inland oil fields my dad was developing."

"But how did you-", she hesitated to say it, "-how did the Anton Chadeaux I knew become-"

"Dr. Shadows?" he smiled down at her, marveling at the smooth perfection of her skin. No one had asked him in so many words so it took him a minute to form them, but then they came out like he'd rehearsed them. "The plane was shot down by warlords working with the Japanese: they killed my parents who had survived the crash. I was

left for dead, a hopeless paralytic." His voice tightened. "It was days later when I was found by Salsa monks from a hidden monastery, taken there to heal. For years I was bathed in herbal formulas, hand fed a special diet and they worked on my muscles with needles and massage. And each day, each long day as I lay there unable to move I read their sacred texts and learned the breathing techniques which were the core of their arts."

She looked at him with an odd sort of awe and fear. "But you seem, so-vital so-"

"I know," he continued. "But the chemicals that made my skin gray and my hair silver strengthened my sinews as the breathing techniques did my heart and lungs. And more, I learned to harness the power of my focused mind. When I could move again they said I learned their physical techniques faster than any student ever had. But the Japanese eventually learned of the 'gray white man' and the monastery was raided. The abbot hid me out despite my desire to confront the warlord. And the monastery was destroyed. I swore then, with the dying abbot in my arms, to use what I had learned to make him and my parents proud of me-to fight for those who had no champion."

"In the process, set yourself up as a target of the underworld."

He laughed hard but without any humor. "A moving target at least."

She hugged him a little tighter.

"I'm scared for you; with this Shade out there, and no one to fight for you."

"Slugger and my friends in the Shadows Foundation watch my back, and try to keep me this side of the wacky line."

"I don't know, Anton," she said, "I kind of like you a little more 'wacky' than the average round eye despite what my brother says." He leaned over and kissed her little bow of a mouth and embraced her. Suddenly he broke the embrace and sat bolt up right.

"He called me 'Dr. Spook'." he exclaimed.

"What?" she said, very annoyed. She tried to get things going again and snuggle

up to him, but the Granite Man was somewhere else already and was standing.

"You know me as Anton or Dr. Shadows , Angel. Some people call me Shadowman, or Ghost Healer. Or more unprintable things. But the note said Spook!"

"That Shade thing?" He had started putting on his outer tunic. "Yes. The note called me 'Dr. Spook'." He stooped to kiss her, and finished dressing.

"Where are you going?" She asked.

"To see a man about a warning."

"Take care, crazy man," she pouted at him. "I have grown fond of you, you know." She didn't look at him and he didn't blame her. When he left, she was still staring into the fire.

Dr. Shadows called Slugger from a pay phone on his way to investigate his brain-storm; Slugger said that there had been a rifle found clamped where the shooter had set it up in the rafters of the arena.

"It was set with a radio device to fire the trigger, Boss," Slugger said. "The police figure it was operated from within the arena; pre-aimed at your seat. They're working at tracing the radio control device."

"All that cheery info just strengthened my case," Dr. Shadows said. "I'll call you when I'm one hundred percent sure."

"I risk repeating myself," Slugger said. "But, take care."

The Granite Man went straight to the legal offices of the Oyama Import/export company. The Yakuza was at his desk on the phone placing a bet when Dr. Shadows made a commotion outside-pushing his way in.

"Listen, Ernie, you are breaking my back. I know a debt's a debt," Retsudo was saying as Dr. Shadow came through the door, "Just give me some-"

"Sir, you can't go in there!" The very blonde secretary in the outer office yelled.

A stone-faced oriental burst out of nowhere at the blonde's call and made a grab for Dr. Shadows who sidestepped the grab and kicked the Japanese hard in the gut then decked him with a simple cross. The Granite Man pushed him out the door and closed it behind him, leaning against it with his full weight.

Retsudo spoke calmly into the phone. "I'll call you back." And hung up.

"Hello, Rat!"

Retsudo lit a cigarette. "What's this about, Dr. Spook?"

"You'd better guess," the gray giant said in flinty voice, "'cause if I have to tell you you'll already be in pain."

Retsudo almost swallowed his cigarette. "I-I've made a lot of bad bets-even bought some bad stocks on a margin. I had to do something to call in those markers; to save face."

"How the hell is killing me going to make you rich and save your miserable face?"

Retsudo was gaining confidence by virtue of the fact that the snarling Gray Wolf of Justice hadn't killed him outright. He started to take deep draws on the cigarette. "I bet you'd stay alive for 30 days."

"You what!?"

"I know you," he said, secure in continued existence. "So I bet a Hit man ten thousand you'd survive."

"Cancel the bet!"

"I can't," he said. He hunkered down behind the desk a little, as if suddenly reminded by Dr. Shadows tone that the Granite Man could easily make the leap and ring his little neck before his guards could make it through the doorway. They were pounding on the outer door behind now.

"Honest." Retsudo whined. "I put out a blind contract and a whispered voice on the phone took it. But I warned you with my note..."

"Stop it." Dr. Shadows said quietly, "Put the word out, now Retsudo!"

"I can't," he insisted. "I'd do it if I could." He did his best to look confident and leaned back in his chair making a great show of puffing on the cigarette. "But I have great faith in you, Dr. Spook. I'm sure you'll come through this fine." He gave a little nervous laugh, "In?fact, I'm betting on it."

If looks could kill, Retsudo would have been dead right there, but there really was no point, so Dr. Shadows turned to jerk the door open and leave. Retsudo laughed to release the tension and Dr. Shadows spun back around and spiked Retusdo's cigarette to the wall behind him with his throwing knife, Ike.

Then The Grey Giant laughed and opened the door to let the stone faces pile in, jumped over them-and left.

Dr. Shadows walked around pointlessly for a while, then went back to the Combination Club and his reality anchor; Slugger.

"That's the craziest thing I've ever heard." Slugger said. They were in the office near the lockers. The window to the dance floor was un-shuttered and the late crowd was packing the place.

"Crazy or not," Dr. Shadows said,. "I've got to live with it for twenty eight more days. If I can."

Slugger shook his head, "Not knowing who this Shade is there's no way you can avoid him for a month." He was at his locker, changing his shirt that was stained with

drunken drool from some 'house cleaning' he'd had to do. "We have to find a way to bring him into the open."

"Always the fount of confidence," Dr. Shadows said as he went to his own locker. "Ever ready to go fishing with me as the worm. I need to think. I'm gonna go upstairs to the gym and shadowbox. Hey-what's this-?" he opened the locker a crack and.....

The next day, New York newspapers carried a headline that read, "Famed Adventurer Slain In Mystery Blast". Below was a story detailing Dr. Shadows' death and a special edition column by Walter Winchell that began, "Tonight the world lost a champion and I lost a friend..."

The wire services picked it up and by the afternoon editions across the country a general mourning had begun.

It was not the first time Dr. Shadows had died, and fortunately it would not be the last. The truth was that after he and Slugger had remotely detonated the explosive he had discovered in his locker the Grey Wolf of Justice had let the world believe the murder attempt had succeeded.

He then secreted himself in the storeroom directly above Retusdo's office and spent a day listening to his business dealings with special sound amplification equipment. It was all pretty boring, until about eight o'clock when a whispered voice in his office spoke.

"It's done," the voice said, "you will pay now."

Retusdo's voice was hesitant. "I can't," he said. "Come out of the shadows so I can see who you are."

Pause.

"I don't have a penny. I needed to win this one."

Longer pause. "I need some time."

The whispered voice had a hard edge to it. "You really have no honor; your ancestors should be ashamed of you. I can not let you cheat."

There was a short pause, but tension filled. Retsudo screamed, "The Shade of Death?"

A gun fired.

Dr. Shadows hit the emergency button to summon Slugger and was down the fire escape before the silenced pistol report had finished ringing in his ears. He dove through the closed window and rolled to one knee with Ike's twin in hand and found himself facing, The Shade of Death!

She was still holding the smoking gun-she had used to shoot her brother when she looked at The Granite Man.

"You--you're alive!"

"No thanks to you, Angel," he said.

He edged toward the door to unlock it for Slugger; enabling him to make an entrance when he arrived.

"I have to ask the clichéd question, why!"

Akemi nodded. "Money," she said. "He was a boob with the family business, always gambling any profits. Now is the time for the Japanese to ascend, be strong leaders. We can profit from that. He was a disgrace."

"And there was no way you could take over while he was alive."

"If he had botched it badly enough, I might have," she said with a smirk. "And if he had paid off I would have exposed him to the rest of the family and taken command."

"But he's dead now," I said sarcastically, "So that won't be necessary."

"I had a right!" She shot back verbally. "He did not even have the honor to stick to the terms of the bet-it was he who had one of his men take a shot at you in the alley as warning along with his note. There were to be no warnings." She was flushed with the thought of it, the same flush he had noticed on her cheeks when he had kissed her. "And he reneged on the bet! I have no need to justify myself to the family or our ancestors."

"What about to the police?"

"They will not figure into this."

"You did try to kill me, Angel. Even wiring my locker while I was in the John. What would you have done if I'd opened my locker while you were there?"

She gave a little smile that a half hour before he would have thought was beguiling. "I'm kind of glad I missed the first two times. I enjoyed both of our wrestling matches: Last night was special fun."

"That hurt more than the bullet. I'm gonna see you take the long fall for this one, Angel." He said, anger creeping into his voice. "No matter how un-annoyed your ancestors are, the cops will want you for Retusdo's death."

"I don't think so-they'll just put it off to-Chinese dissidents, or business rivals," she said.

"I do have a professional reputation to think of beside all that; I took a contract to kill you."

She raised the gun to fire.

Dr. Shadows might have seen a moment of hesitation in her eyes, but he reacted

before she had a chance to act on any doubt.

He hurtled the knife, hitting her in the gun hand. She yelped like a banshee and dropped the gun. He was across the room and holding her before the gun hit the ground, this time he gave her no chance to launch a kick!

"Don't give me reason to belt you." he said. He was close enough to smell her perfume and her body scent underneath. She glared into his eyes, and then the glare turn smoky.

"Anton," she said softly. "You won't let them lock me up, will you?"

At that moment there was a commotion in the outer office. Slugger's battle cry and a sound very much like a two by four hitting a melon.

The door flew open and Slugger entered.

This distracted Dr. Shadows for the slightest moment.

Akemi kicked his shin and pulled free, heading for the window.

"Angel, No!" He screamed. She went through, shattering the window at a full dive but with too much power, clearing the fire escape-going beyond into the river.

Slugger and Dr. Shadows ran to the window but it was too late.

They heard a scream and a splash.

The surface of the harbor was as black as the Granite Man felt and looked. Cold & glassy.

There was no sign of Akemi. Slugger checked Retsudo to confirm he was dead and then came to stand beside Dr. Shadows as his friend stared at the water.

"Forget it, boss-" he said after a while. "That water's ice cold and the current's bad here. She's gone."

"Gone."

Slugger looked at Dr. Shadows who looked as if he had dropped his ice cream cone.

"Boy, are you lost."

The Granite Man just stared at the cold surface of the water and tried to reconcile it with the warmth that had been her skin-or the heat that had been in her eyes.

The fires-of hell.

Slugger picked up the phone to call the cops. "I sure hope they find the body, Boss."

"Huh?"

"'Cause if they don't, she might be back and you'd ask her out on another date."

"Et tu, Brute?" Dr. Shadows turned from the window and walked to the door.

Slugger walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Come on, boss," Slugger said quietly. "I'll bet there's are good old fashion drunks to fight back at the club."

"Or maybe some world conquering madman to battle," Dr. Shadows said with a sad smile.

"Something simpler than a woman I'm in love with." He glanced once back to the window where his angel and personal devil-in-one had gone out of his life.

Outside-somewhere-a foghorn, sounding like a lost soul, bellowed once.....

.....and then-was silent.

The End