

THE DARKLINE PROTOCOL

A WOLF DASHER SHORT STORY



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The Darkline Protocol

A Short Story by:
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Wolf Dasher looked left and right to make sure no one was watching. He stood with his back to the wall of the Urlish consulate in Mensch, East Bretelstein, encased in the darkness of the shadow the building threw across the former capital's perpetual night. So long as he stayed put, his Shadow powers would keep him invisible. But he was not about to stay where he was. His mission demanded he enter the consulate, and that meant he would chance being seen, especially with what he was about to do.

Certain no one was looking in his direction, Wolf removed the scarab from his black tunic, tapped it twice, and tossed it into the air. As soon as it left his hand, it transformed into a giant beetle. A moment later, it snatched him by the shoulders and lifted him into the sky.

The magical insect rose straight up three floors. With a mental command, Wolf directed it to deposit him on the parapet outside a tall window. He dropped lightly onto the stone landing and clapped his hands twice. The beetle metamorphosed back into a scarab and fell out of the sky. Wolf caught it easily and re-pinned it to his tunic.

He moved swiftly to the window and produced a set of lock picks. Within moments, he had successfully jimmed the latch. A second later, he had opened it and slipped inside.

He found himself in a dark office. He waited nearly a full minute, trying to let his eyes adjust and listening for patrols. It seemed a little silly to him to be breaking into his own country's consulate, but, for nearly three months, someone had been leaking information to Urland's mortal enemy, Phrygia. Wolf's job was to find out who it was and put a stop to it. His mission protocol called for no one in the consulate to know what he was doing or even that he was in-country. After all, they didn't know who was compromised.

. . . All is clear. . . .

Wolf shook his head. He hated working in Mensch. The Rift – the poorly understood tear in the fabric of reality that granted him and others like him dark magical powers – was located just outside the city. Its sinister energy was responsible for Mensch never seeing daylight, and it was constantly speaking to Shadows – the people who wielded its black magic. Back home in Urland, the voice was barely a whisper. Only an occasional word could be understood. Here in Mensch, though, that sickly, cloying voice was much louder and more insistent. The Rift murmured its dark ideas with much greater clarity.

Working in Mensch always made Wolf feel a little crazy, but he knew that awful voice also offered critical advice. As much as he despised hearing it, he had learned to trust it.

Wolf went to the door, sucked in a breath, and then opened it and slipped out. He was nearly blinded. The hallway was well lit with torchlight. He found the nearest shadow, dived into it, and triggered his power to vanish.

After his eyes adjusted to the new light, he took a moment to study his surroundings. He was in a short corridor that turned to the left about twenty feet away. To his left was another door, which, if he had his bearings correctly, was a stairway. The office he wanted, that of Her Majesty's Ambassador to East Bretelstein, was around the bend on the right.

Presently, Wolf heard footsteps coming down the hall. Despite his invisibility, he tensed and drew a dagger. A soldier in the navy blue uniform of the Royal Army came around the

corner. He looked directly at Wolf for a moment, but Wolf's Shadow powers concealed him. The guard continued down the hall to the door that led to the stairs, opened it, and descended.

. . . No more guards on this floor. . . .

Wolf didn't hesitate. He bolted from his hiding place and zipped around the corner. This hallway was much the same as the one he left, except it was longer. Three doors down on the right-hand side was the one he sought. He dashed over and put his ear to it. He heard nothing through the wood. He tried the handle and found it unlocked. He turned it, slipped inside, and shut the door behind him.

He was again cast in darkness and had to wait for his eyes to adjust. Moonlight bled through a large window identical to the one he'd come through. After a moment, he was able to ascertain he was in a small anteroom with a desk, a chair, and a bench. Behind the desk was another door. Wolf presumed he was in the ambassador's waiting room, and that his secretary used the desk during normal office hours.

He went to the door he presumed led to the ambassador's office and found it locked. He picked it and moved silently into the next room. This one was much larger. There was an enormous desk, several bookshelves stacked with tomes, another large window, and what looked like a map of the world, although it was too dark for Wolf to be sure. Another door hung open and led into what looked to be a study, but it too was shrouded in darkness.

Wolf went to the desk. What he was looking for would be inside.

He pulled a small stone from a pouch on his belt, held it to his mouth, and exhaled. It lit up like a fire ember, but its light was much brighter. He set it on the desk, then used his lock picks on the drawer.

He had it open in short order and started rifling through the files. After a few moments' searching, he came across the one he'd been instructed to investigate. It was labeled "Darkline Protocol."

Ostensibly, this file contained information on deployment strategies for Her Majesty's Shadow Service in Mensch and East Bretelstein. Following the war with Bretelstein, Urand and Phrygia had occupied the country and its capital. But only Urand returned rule to the former citizens after Bretelstein was sufficiently disarmed. Phrygia had claimed the eastern half of the country as a buffer state, and they built a wall to separate the half of Mensch they controlled from the West. The city was now the hub of Shadow activity in a cold war between Urand and Phrygia. Her Majesty's Government's deployment plans in this arena were critical documents the Phrygians would love to have.

There was just one catch: the Darkline Protocol was completely false. It was deliberately misleading information designed to disinform the Phrygian People's Defense Bureau. When Her Majesty's Government discovered there was a leak in the consulate, it drafted the Darkline Protocol, sent it to the ambassador, and then enlisted the Shadow Service to determine who was responsible for the leak. The Darkline Protocol was bait – Wolf would use it to determine who was selling secrets to their enemies, and the Phrygians couldn't profit from the information.

Wolf had been specially chosen for this mission due to his abilities. He held the file in his hands and closed his eyes. Triggering another of his Shadow powers, he sent his mind back in time, searching for the last person to touch the file.

He had to sift through several routine uses of it. The ambassador pulled it out three times in the last two days, but only to read it and make notes. There did not appear to be anything suspicious about it.

But then Wolf saw something else. A female figure crept into the office after dark, rifled through the drawer much as Wolf had, and pulled it out. She looked left and right to make sure she wasn't seen. Then she sat down and started making copious notes on what she read.

Wolf's perspective was behind her. He couldn't make out her features except for long, black hair. He rotated the vision in his head, so he could look at her from the front. His heart sank when the girl's face was illuminated in the lamplight. It was Virginia Downing – the ambassador's daughter.

Wolf's mind rushed back to the present. Why would the ambassador's daughter be a spy? What possible motive could a girl her age have for selling secrets to the Phrygians? According to the file Wolf had read on Ambassador Downing, his daughter was only sixteen.

Depressed, he put the Darkline Protocol back in the drawer and closed it. Suddenly, this mission was extremely distasteful to him.

"So, you have come for me at last," a voice said.

Wolf whipped his head around and found Virginia Downing standing in the doorway of the darkened sitting room. She was lovely. A long face with a button nose and small eyes and mouth was framed by a curtain of black hair. Her eyes were green and seemed to be filled with an overbearing sadness. Had she been smiling, she would have lit up the room. Instead, her mood appeared as dark as the emerald dress she wore.

"I've been waiting for you," she said. "You're more handsome than I expected. I always imagined Shadows to be horrible, ugly people."

Wolf blushed despite himself. He ran a hand through his own black hair and watched her carefully with his grey eyes.

"Shadows *are* horrible, ugly people," he said. "Appearances can be deceiving. Just as with the daughters of ambassadors."

"Ah, yes," she said taking two steps into the room. "You refer to my treason."

Wolf was taken aback by the girl's stark confession. Treason was a capital crime. How could she be so casual about it? How could someone this young be in this much trouble?

"Why?" he said.

"Why what? Why did I do it?"

"Yes."

"I had no choice," she answered. "They targeted my boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?" Wolf said. "There was nothing in the file about you having a boyfriend."

She smiled ever so slightly. Sadly, it did nothing to improve her appearance.

“I know,” she said. “Father does not know about him. He is a soldier. Father would be very angry. He doesn’t want me to date yet, and certainly not a soldier.”

“But the Phrygians found out,” Wolf said.

“Yes.” She seemed to think about things for a moment. Wolf was about to speak again when she continued. “They threatened to destroy him. They said they would ruin his career. I couldn’t let them do that.”

Wolf stared at her. He knew the Phrygians often made threats against loved ones to turn people, but he didn’t think this one was credible. What could they have done?

“Ms. Downing,” he said, “that seems incredible. How could they have hurt him?”

“They threatened to produce papers that would implicate him as a double agent. He’d have been arrested and executed.”

“And now it’s you who faces that fate,” Wolf said.

“Yes,” she said. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“Because I love him,” she said as though it should be obvious. “I would die before I saw any harm come to him.

“And because they said a Shadow would come for me. They are interested in our secrets, but they are also interested in capturing a live Urlish Shadow they may interrogate.”

Cold dread fell across Wolf’s mind. His heart started racing. Virginia was no simple double agent. Just like the Darkline Protocol, she was the bait to a trap. She walked casually past Wolf to the door and locked it.

“You set me up,” he said.

“I am afraid so. I am sorry.” Her eyes traveled past him to the sitting room she’d come from. “This is Splitter. She’s here for you.”

Wolf turned to see a tall woman in a black tunic and leggings had appeared in the doorway to the sitting room. She had mousy brown hair tied up in a simple ponytail. Her brown eyes gazed fiercely at him.

“Good evening, Shadow Eight,” she said, calling him by his service codename. “I’ve read your file. My superiors in the PDB weel be very pleased Her Majesty’s Gowment has sent so talented a Shadow for us to collect in thees little snare.”

Wolf tried not to panic. He’d heard stories about the PDB’s Torturer General. Only the very strongest victims were able to resist being compromised for information. The rest were broken. Based on what he’d read and heard about the PDB’s torture methods, he didn’t want to find out how he measured up.

. . . *All is not as it seems.* . . .

Quickly, he assessed his situation. Splitter did not appear to have any backup. It was just her and Virginia. Wolf didn’t think the ambassador’s daughter was much of a threat. That made the odds even. He decided to take the initiative.

Virginia was circling back to Splitter's side. He acted before she could get close enough to put herself in danger. In a single, fluid motion, he reached for the dagger holstered at the small of his back, drew it, and flung it at Splitter. It was dead on target, heading straight for her throat.

But the Phrygian agent had surprises of her own. Her body shimmered with black Shadow magic, and then she divided perfectly into two identical people. The knife went between them and embedded in the wall. Both Splitters smiled.

"You've no doubt ascertained why my PDB codename is 'Splitter,'" the one on the right said. The left Splitter added, "You deeadn't think we wouldn't send a Shadow of our own capable of dealing weeth you, did you?"

. . . Told you. . . .

Shut up, Wolf thought.

"Virginia," he said, trying to buy some time and maybe an ally, "they'll never let you go. They'll always want something more. Selling me out won't get you off the hook."

The girl looked at Splitter and at Wolf. There seemed to be conflict in her eyes, but she set her jaw.

"That's not true," she said. "They promised me."

Wolf took a cautious step towards the ambassador's daughter. She was a traitor, and she'd set him up. But he felt some strange compulsion to try to save her. She was in over her head.

"Virginia," he said. "She's lying. You're too valuable to them. Help me, and I'll protect you and your boyfriend."

. . . You are a fool. . . .

"Enough of this," Splitter-on-the-right said as though echoing The Rift. "You weel come quietly, Shadow Eight, or eet weel go badly for you."

"Drop your weapons," Splitter-on-the-left said. "Your file indicates you always carry four daggers. You've only thrown the one."

Wolf sighed. He didn't have much of a choice. He wasn't close enough to make a move yet.

He pulled the daggers from the holsters on each hip and dropped them on the floor. Then he reached into his left sleeve and pulled out the small knife he kept strapped to his wrist. He dropped that one too and then held up his hands.

As he hoped, the Splitter on the left came forward. As soon as she got inside his critical-distance line, he launched a spear-hand into her throat, crushing her trachea. She dropped to her knees and clutched her throat.

Wolf grabbed Virginia's wrist with his other hand and attempted to pull her towards the window. The surviving Splitter reacted instantly, again dividing, with her new offspring dashing between them and the window.

"No!" Virginia screamed and pulled her wrist away. "You'll get us both killed."

. . . Leave the girl. . . .

Wolf cursed to himself at Virginia's stupidity. The Rift might be right. He might have to abandon her after all.

"You can't escape, Shadow Eight," the Splitter in front of the window said.

"Neither can you," Wolf retorted. "This building is crawling with guards. They'll have heard the noise of our fight. They'll be coming soon. All I have to do is wait long enough. No matter how many times you can split, you won't be able to fight all the guards and get out with me."

He smiled at them. Virginia looked more upset. This was clearly not what she was expecting. Under the circumstances, he felt only a little sorry for her.

"Eet seems," the Splitter by the window said, "I am going to have to raise the stakes."

The original Splitter divided again. The new copy dashed to the wall, pulled Wolf's dagger out of it, and then came up behind Virginia. She grabbed the girl, clapping her free hand over Virginia's mouth and put the dagger to her throat.

"Surrender now," the new Splitter said, "or I'll keel her."

Wolf froze. He hadn't counted on that. What to do? He'd be within his rights to sacrifice her after she'd set him up, but he knew she was being blackmailed. Someone her age had no idea what to do. He needed to help her, not condemn her. Besides, even if he called Splitter's bluff and the girl died, that wouldn't get him any closer to escaping.

Virginia tried to scream, but her mouth was covered. Her eyes were wide with fear. He had to rescue her, but how?

. . . Abandon the girl if you want to escape. . . .

I said, "Shut up!" Wolf thought in reply.

Just then, someone banged on the door. Everyone's head turned to the source of the noise.

"Open up in there!" a soldier ordered from the other side.

Virginia may have only been a sixteen-year-old aristocrat, but she knew an opening when she saw one. With everyone distracted by the guard, she bit hard into her captor's hand. Splitter yelped and, to Wolf's surprise, dropped the knife. Virginia stomped on Splitter's foot, freeing herself.

Wolf moved instantly. He leaped the desk, landed next to Virginia, pulled her away from Splitter, and then drove a vicious sidekick into the Phrygian's knee, shattering it. She wailed and collapsed to the floor.

Wolf dropped to one knee, scooped up the dagger and threw it at the Splitter in front of the window. She was so stunned by the sudden turn of events she simply stared as it struck her in the eye, killing her.

"Come on!" Wolf barked as he jumped up. He practically pulled Virginia off her feet as he bolted for the window.

He was betting it would be open. Virginia had locked the door to keep him in the office. Thus, the most logical path for Splitter to get him out would be through the window. He put his shoulder down as he neared it and crashed into it with terrific force.

He'd been right. It was unlocked. The glass doors blasted open, and he and Virginia flew through them onto a parapet similar to the one he'd landed on before entering the consulate.

Splitter was rushing them from behind. Wolf was only going to get one chance at this.

. . . You'll never make it. . . .

"Hang on!" he yelled. Then he tore off the special scarab, tapped it twice, and tossed it into the air. He had just enough time to pull Virginia to him before the giant beetle snatched him off the parapet by the shoulders. The girl screamed as they were whisked into the sky.

Splitter wasn't about to let her prize get away that easily. She sprinted to the edge of the parapet and dove at them. Wolf willed the beetle to fly them away from her, but he wasn't fast enough. She caught him around the leg and held on tightly.

The beetle, already carrying more people than it was designed to, plunged out of the sky with the added weight. Virginia screamed again before the magical insect recovered itself and started climbing again. It was definitely struggling. They needed to do something about the new arrival.

Splitter realized the nature of the problem too. She grinned. Then she divided again. The new Splitter fell for half a second before grabbing hold of Wolf's other leg.

Again the beetle plummeted and recovered. It was really straining now, though. If Splitter divided one or two more times, her weight would be enough to pull them to the ground, or, worse, pull the beetle's legs off its body, causing them all to fall.

Wolf wriggled his legs trying to get them free, but the Phrygians' grips were too tight. He couldn't shake them.

. . . If you don't drop the girl, you won't be able to fight. . . .

Virginia drove her foot down into one of the Splitters. Her heel hit the woman in the jaw and took a large chunk of flesh off her face. Involuntarily, her hands went to the wound, and she fell away.

With one leg free, Wolf started swinging wildly at the remaining Phrygian. But, no matter how he kicked her, she held on tightly. He looked up and saw them approaching a building. An idea hit him.

"Hold on tight to me," he ordered.

As soon as Virginia complied, he clapped his hands twice. The beetle transformed back into a scarab, and the three of them fell out of the sky. Virginia screamed again. Wolf was getting a little tired of that.

They landed on the roof of the building in a clump. Wolf rolled into a fighting position. Splitter was up in a second. He feinted to her right and then came back left, connecting with a solid blow to her face. Staggered, she stumbled back towards the edge of the building. Wolf kicked her hard in the chest, and over she went.

He watched her all the way down to make sure she was done for. She landed with a sickening thud. Wolf nodded grimly.

"How do you like that?" he said to the sadistic voice in his head. The Rift didn't answer.

He went back to Virginia, scooping up the scarab from where it landed as he did so. The girl was shaking.

“It’s alright,” he soothed. “She’s gone.”

Virginia threw herself into his arms and held him tightly. He was a little surprised, but he supposed the poor girl had never experienced anything like this. He stroked her hair and told her it would be okay. At last, she pulled away from him.

“Why did you save me,” she asked.

“Because,” he said, “you didn’t really want to do this. And your life shouldn’t be over just because the Phrygians found out you had a secret.

“Now let’s get you home and get the rest of this mess sorted out.”

She nodded and wiped tears from her eyes. Wolf tapped the scarab twice and threw it up into the air. The two of them were whisked away into the preternatural night.

**The end of “The Darkline Protocol”
Wolf Dasher will return in *State of Grace*.**

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***John R. Phythyon, Jr.** is the author of *State of Grace*, a fantasy-thriller mash-up novel starring *Wolf Dasher*. He wishes he'd been bitten by a radioactive spider, so he could have lots of exciting adventures, but, in the absence of such a miracle, he contents himself with writing about such people. He is an author, playwright, and award-winning game designer. His commentary has been heard on *Kansas Public Radio*. His play, *Isabelle*, has been commercially produced; and he earned *Origins Awards* for his work on *Celtic Age: Role-playing the Myths, Magic, and**

Monsters of the Celts from *Avalanche Press*, *Gamemastering Secrets* from *Grey Ghost Press*, and *Sailor Moon Collectible Card Game* from *Dart Flipcards*. *State of Grace* is his first novel.

*He currently resides in Lawrence, Kansas with his girlfriend, her children and dog, and his cat. He is working on the next book in the *Wolf Dasher* series and fervently cheering for the Cincinnati Bengals.*