

## Excerpt from Shadow Blade (Fantasy Novel)

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“What are you doing?” Geld struggled against Shadow Blade’s grip. “I’m not going to run away!”

“That’s not it!” Shadow Blade hissed. “Now shut up and listen! We only have a minute until that spell wears out and we need a better plan if we want to win this thing.”

“But we were winning!” even Milla was protesting.

“No, we were playing right into his hand. Milla, stay back a bit and fire off some small stuff at his feet. Don’t overdo it, we just need him off balance. Geld, do what you were doing but drop back when I attack and wait for an opening.” Shadow Blade glanced back at the rapidly thinning mist where a glowing figure was just becoming visible. “Go, now!” he was off before his companions could get a word out.

Neither of the two was happy or comfortable changing from their preferred battle style. In their minds no tricks were needed. But, more than anything else, they trusted Shadow Blade. Without him they never would have made it this far so they owed it to him to try this new plan, even if it failed.

Shadow Blade engaged Dratine for a few seconds as he waited for Geld to arrive. Though their first exchange lasted for barely a minute it was enough to confirm what he’d suspected. At the beginning of the battle Dratine was only playing with him. At a one on one level his skill easily surpassed any of theirs. Even if it were two on one Shadow Blade would still be worried, but, with three, they just might have a chance.

Following his opponent’s example, Shadow Blade conjured a second sword, this one made entirely of magic, in his left hand, blocking both of Dratine’s staves. The Mage of Heaven only smiled as he began a series of fast twirls, striking repeatedly at odd moments. It didn’t take long for Shadow Blade to realize that having two weapons was only making it worse. Several times he took a stinging blow from one or both of the staves simply because his swords got in each other’s way. At last he let the magic sword fade and replaced it with a simple shield instead.

By the time Geld jumped in, Shadow Blade was already tiring. Dratine’s strikes weren’t that hard but when you took enough of them... At that moment Milla did her part, firing a bevy of low level spells close to the ground. While they were dangerous enough to merit some of the enemy mage’s attention they were too weak and too low to effectively block or reflect. Now that Dratine was distracted, Shadow Blade quickly dropped out of the fight and vanished behind the tower. He was going to need a little time to prepare this spell.

Geld fought hard but he was beginning to see that Shadow Blade may have been right. While he was beginning to tire, Dratine didn’t even seem to be breathing hard. Their swords and staves clashed repeatedly, creating an endless shower of magical sparks which fizzled and popped as they came into contact with Milla’s barrage of magic. Of course, Geld had to watch out for those spells as well but he had the advantage since they were targeted at Dratine, not him. Besides, those spells were probably all that was saving him from a nasty pounding by Dratine’s impossibly fast staff work.

“Take this!!!” Shadow Blade appeared without warning, hovering high above Geld’s head. The air shimmered around his hands as burning hot magic coalesced around them.

Geld leapt back more out of instinct than anything else as a giant beam of searing red light sped towards Dratine. Simultaneously, the ground beneath his feet began to shake as a forest of towering stone spikes ripped through the grass. Nonplussed, Dratine kept his balance seemingly

without effort and jumped back just before Shadow Blade's ray melted a large crater into the earth. Steam rose from the ground as rapidly cooling pools of liquid hardened back into the rocks they once were but Dratine just stood there, his unsinged clothes hanging loosely over his shoulders. Almost immediately a small army of Shadow Blades converged on him from all directions, each carrying the same pulsing sword. Dratine watched as the deadly circle of black enclosed him with a detached calm on his face. At the last second he swept around, staves extended, cutting through the illusions as if they were nothing more than air. One, however, didn't vanish but took the hit dead on and went flying back into the ground. Raising a lone hand, he cast a last spell and the air around Dratine exploded in a ball of fire.

Through the smoke and flames Geld could see Dratine standing aloof in the midst of the inferno, laughing as the field burned around him. It was then that Geld realized what Shadow Blade had meant, **this was his opening**. Charging heedlessly into the fire, he launched himself through the blaze aiming at Dratine's back. With the target set, he committed his entire body to the strike and lunged...

Dratine smiled as he turned and rammed the end of his staff into Geld's stomach. Eyes widened in shock, the young swordsman coughed and keeled over as he struggled to move, struggled to breathe... With triumph in his eyes, Dratine let one staff vanish and raised the other one high, preparing to bring it down upon the helpless warrior's throat.

*Damn... Geld could do nothing but watch as the shining brown staff descended. It's over... God, if you're there, please protect Milla...*

"Checkmate." Shadow Blade materialized behind Dratine and casually brought his blade up and across the other man's neck, slicing open his throat.

Dratine's staff blinked then vanished entirely as he fell to his knees. "So..." blood poured down his neck and chest, darkening his clothes even further as he stared off across the grass to where the Shadow Blade he had struck earlier broke apart in a flash of magic. "It was, an illusion, too..." A final smile crossed Dratine's lips as he pitched forward, the last of his life dripping out onto the grass. "Well...played..."