

Defenders Of Shadow And Light

Ghost Thief

Jason Levine

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Prologue

The Museum Job

Murray Gastev tossed a bag out of the window of the Natural History Museum and into the alleyway below. He glanced out of the window. The bag had landed safely on the mattress he had positioned next to the dumpster earlier. Murray climbed through the window and dropped to the street below. Alarms blared through the night. Murray knew that this sound meant that the sounds of sirens would follow. He hated that sound.

“Four guards in the gems area,” Murray chastised himself. “Four! Not three.”

He could hear sirens now. The police were here. Murray picked up the bag and risked peaking inside. The gems still looked just as good as they had in their display cases. Before Murray removed them, of course.

“Good. Gordon said the payment would be much less if they were damaged.”

There was shouting coming from the museum now. The pounding of footsteps let Murray know that he had no time left to talk to himself. It was time to get away from there as quickly as possible. Murray ran from alleyway to alleyway. There was a whole network of these narrow passages that people tended to avoid. For Murray, though, they were highways to cover great distances without being spotted.

Murray paused for a second after making his fourth turn. Though the noise of the alarm and sirens had faded, Murray still heard footsteps. The police had figured out that he was heading through the alleys and were pursuing. He peeked around the corner.

“Big mistake,” he thought to himself. Two officers had just rounded the corner and were trying to figure out which way he had gone. They spotted him and ran towards him, shouting for him to stop.

“No thanks,” Murray yelled back. “I’d rather not be arrested if it’s all the same to you.”

Murray ran down alleyway after alleyway. One of the officers tripped over a wooden crate and tumbled to the ground. His partner glanced back for a moment before continuing the pursuit. Murray whispered a few choice curses at his rotten luck. This last officer was good. He dodged obstacles like an expert and was relentless.

“It figures that I’d get the one guy on the force that’s a former triathlon athlete,” Murray thought to himself.

Murray kept in shape, but he could feel his lungs starting to ache. He couldn’t keep this up much longer. The officer hadn’t drawn his gun yet, but Murray knew that this was likely only due to the winding path that this section of alleyway took. The part coming up straightened out which greatly increased his chance of being shot at.

Murray felt pain in his back as something slammed into him. He crashed to the ground and his bag of ill gotten goods slid down the alley ahead. His arm was pulled behind his back and Murray forced himself not to cry out despite the pain. He heard the sound of handcuffs being pulled out.

“You’re under arrest,” the officer began.

Murray twisted his body and kicked. The officer tried to remain on top of him, but Murray managed to wiggle out from under him. Murray got to his feet quickly and faced the officer.

“Sorry about this,” Murray said as he kicked the officer in the stomach. The officer doubled over in pain and the handcuffs clattered to the ground. Murray scooped them up and quickly slapped them on one of the officer’s wrists. He pushed the officer backwards against a wall and slapped the other end of the handcuffs around a bent pipe along the wall.

Murray pulled the gun from the officer’s holster.

“Drop that now,” the officer ordered.

“Don’t worry,” Murray replied, stepped out of range as the officer swiped at Murray with his free hand. “I’m not planning on firing this thing. I just want to make sure you don’t use it on me as I leave.”

Murray popped out the magazine out and tossed it aside out of the officer’s reach. Then he turned the gun upside down and pulled back on the slide. The bullet in the chamber dropped into his hand. Murray tossed the bullet in the same direction as the magazine. He bent down and carefully placed the gun on the ground.

“Now then,” Murray said. “This has been fun, but I’ve really got to go. I’d say ‘see ya around’, but I really hope I don’t.”

Murray grabbed his bag and ran down the alleyway as the officer struggled against the handcuffs and yelled after him. As the sounds of the officer faded, Murray grumbled to himself.

“That was way too close. After I get paid, I’m telling Gordon that I’m out. A normal job will be much less stressful than this.”

Chapter One

Legal Employment

Murray groaned. An e-mail had just come into his inbox from his boss. The only time that happened was when the guy wanted to give him more work or yell at him for work he had already done. Filled with trepidation, Murray opened the e-mail. It was the latter. His boss wanted him in his office and he wanted him in there now.

“Hi, sir. Is something up?” Murray asked as he poked his head into the office of Albert Sorington the Third, Senior Manager in Charge of Information Analytics. Albert insisted on his subordinates using the entire title when addressing him and demanded his title be spelled with the appropriate capital letters.

As Albert’s title implied, he was both the head of the department and quite full of himself. He was five feet tall and two hundred pounds, but acted as though he were six foot seven and built like a Roman god. On the rare occasion that he exchanged pleasantries with his employees, he never failed to “accidentally” mention the beautiful women he was dating or the movers and shakers he was hanging out with. When Albert was out of earshot, though, Murray’s co-workers grumbled that Albert only had his position because his uncle was a stockholder with a significant stake in the company.

“Hello, there, Mr. Gastev. Please come in and have a seat,” Albert said pleasantly. Murray began to walk into Albert’s office. It would be fine, Murray reassured himself. Albert prided himself on being nice when others could hear him. It was only if the door was closed that things would get dicey.

“Oh, if you don’t mind,” Albert added. “Please close the door.”

Murray shut the door. The click reverberated through the office as if he were shutting himself in a metal cage.

Murray sat down opposite Albert. Albert’s desk was a large, elegant looking wooden construction that was definitely not the standard manager’s desk. His chair was posh and extremely comfortable. Murray knew this from experience when Albert ordered him to clean a virus from Albert’s top of the line computer. Albert had opened yet another suspicious sounding email and didn’t want to get IT involved because “it’s none of their business.”

Murray squirmed in his seat. While Albert’s chair was built for comfort, the chairs he had in his office for “guests” were designed for maximum discomfort. The seat was lumpy and uneven. The back was at an odd angle and could not be adjusted. The chair’s height could be changed but even the highest setting left one feeling like Albert was looking down on them. Worst of all, Murray could have sworn that there was a metal spring in the seat designed to move into the most uncomfortable spot at any given moment.

“What’d you want to see me about, boss?” Murray asked as the spring dug into his rear.

“I wanted your opinion on this,” Albert answered, sliding a folder across the desk.

Murray picked up the folder and opened it. Inside was the report he had written about the Donaldson account. Murray’s confidence surged.

“This is the Donaldson account,” Murray answered. “I handed this in last week and my contact at Donaldson said they were thinking of signing a multi-million dollar contract with us.”

“Oh, they did, did they?” Albert mocked. “Well, I was golfing with their CEO the other day and he’s really upset that the numbers weren’t higher.”

“The numbers were actually pretty high,” Murray countered. “They were ten percent higher than similar clients.”

“The CEO figured that the numbers should be at least fifty percent higher than other clients.”

“Sir, there’s no way to do that.”

“Oh, really? Are you an expert on these matters. Tell me, MISTER Gastev, how long have you worked for this company?”

“It will be five months on Monday.”

“And do you know how long I’ve worked here?”

Murray sighed. “Ten years.”

“Exactly. I think I know a LITTLE more than you do about these things.”

“Sir, the laws clearly state...”

“Don’t quote me the laws. Now you’re going to redo this report until you’ve gotten them to at least sixty percent.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Murray said. “I’ll get back to you next week on this.”

“Tomorrow morning,” Albert corrected.

“Excuse me?” Murray asked.

“You will get this report back to me by first thing tomorrow morning. If it’s not on my desk when I get in tomorrow, you’ll find yourself on the streets.”

“Sir, there’s no way I can get this done by five tonight.”

“Who said you could leave at five? You’d better stay here for as long as it takes to get these numbers right. I don’t care if you’re here all night. Either you get this report done by tomorrow morning or you’re done. Now get out of my office and don’t come back without those numbers where I say they should be!”

Albert stared at Murray as if daring him to argue. Murray wanted to slap Albert across his face with the Davidson report and storm out. He needed the job, though. His rent was coming due in two weeks. Without his paycheck, he’d be stretching his cash reserves to the breaking point.

“Yes, sir,” Murray said dejectedly as he walked out of the door.

Murray flipped through page after page of regulations. Everyone else had long since gone home. The lights were all off except the ones above Murray. His cubicle was sparsely decorated because Albert insisted that decorations distracted his workers. This didn’t apply to Albert, of course, who always had some new poster or painting on his wall and some new expensive looking desk toy. Murray sat back in his chair which squeaked under the strain. He had requested a replacement and was, of course, denied.

Murray pointed to a line in a book and copied it down. He did a few calculations on a sheet of paper and groaned. He had been able to finagle another couple of percentage points by skimming very close to the legal limit. That had taken him about seven hours of work—punctuated by a one hour dinner that he was sure Albert would have argued was tantamount to stealing from the company had he known about it. There was no way he could get many more without breaking some laws—something he wanted to avoid that at all costs.

Murray’s cell phone rang. He looked at the number and rolled his eyes.

“Speaking of breaking some laws.”

Murray picked up the phone.

“Hi, Gordon.”

“Hey, M. Listen. I’ve got this sweet gig lined up. Might be a little tricky but a big pay day. You interested?”

Murray glanced around nervously to double-check that he was alone.

“Look, Gordon. I appreciate everything you’ve sent my way in the past, but I’ve already told you that I’m trying to go straight. That last gig was a little too close for comfort.”

“Too close? You had plenty of time before the police arrived.”

“I got out of the museum as they stormed in and then that officer tackled me in the alley.”

“Yes, but you got away, didn’t you? And those gems netted us both a healthy payday.”

“Right, but I’ve got a job now. I’m not looking to jeopardize it.”

“Come on. You can’t fool me. I know you miss the excitement and challenge. This one’s a hoot. So, some bioengineering firm has...”

“No, Gordon. I don’t want any details. I’m not interested.”

“Can you honestly say your job is better than the gigs I find for you?”

“Yes, it is.”

“You’re lying. I can always tell when you’re lying.”

“Fine. It’s not as exciting, but at least I don’t have to worry about being arrested every day.”

“Yeah, unless your jerk boss makes you the fall guy.”

“Look, the guy’s bad, but he’s not that bad.”

“I’m just saying. It’s been my experience that jerk bosses don’t get where they are by helping their subordinates. They do it by stepping on as many people as they can as hard as they can. Think it over and give me a call back. I need an answer by tomorrow night.”

The phone clicked and Murray set it down. He rubbed his eyes and looked through the rules and

regulations again for another couple of minutes before slamming the book shut.

“Gordon doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” Murray said to himself, standing up.

He paced around the office. When he stopped, he was looking at Albert’s door. The door was unlocked. Albert had left it slightly ajar so that Murray could drop the report off when he was done. Murray reached for the door to push it open, but stopped.

“No. I’m not going to risk this job based on Gordon’s paranoia,” Murray said.

He walked back to his desk, opened the book, and began leafing through more regulations.

When midnight hit, Murray decided to call it a night. He had only managed to take the report from ten percent higher to fifteen percent. Even then, he was in the gray areas of at least a dozen laws. If the regulatory agencies took a dim view of his creative interpretations, the company could be looking at a million dollar fine. He might even wind up in jail. Murray wasn’t comfortable risking that any more than he already had.

Murray closed his books, logged off of his workstation, and picked up the report. He walked over to Albert’s office and opened the door. He half expected to be yelled at as he entered, but, of course, Albert was gone.

“We get to work late, but he goes home early every day,” Murray griped. “And how does he convince the higher ups to give him all this stuff?”

Murray placed the report on Albert’s desk. As it landed, it touched Albert’s mouse. His screen flickered to life. Albert had neglected to log off. Murray sighed.

“Of course, he’d forget. Some days I’m surprised the guy knows the difference between a mouse and a keyboard.”

Murray almost turned to walk out, but spotted something on the taskbar on Albert’s screen. Dept Finances. Murray knew he shouldn’t, but he found himself moving the mouse to the taskbar icon and clicking it. A financial report filled the screen detailing how funds were allocated across the department.

“New employee workstations. Employee office equipment. Break room renovations?” Murray questioned. “John is the one with the newest computer and that’s two years old. I was told my chair will be replaced when it breaks in two and the break room ceiling is STILL leaking.”

Murray flipped through page after page. In it, Albert attested to how he was distributing the money to benefit his employees even though not a single cent was used for those purposes. Murray angrily went to print the document on Albert’s new, private, full color, photo quality printer—Albert couldn’t be bothered to use the eight year old printer everyone else used which jammed constantly. As Murray opened the menu, he noticed another document in Albert’s “most recently used” list which read “Murray Gastev.” Murray opened the document and read it, his face growing red with anger. The document detailed how Murray was stealing company resources, not meeting expectations, and constantly left early from work. The report concluded by mentioning how Murray was unable to meet the required totals on the Davidson account and would have cost them a multi-million dollar contract had Albert not swooped in, worked an all-nighter, and saved the day. The report recommended that Murray receive seven months probation and forfeit his yearly raise if his work ethic didn’t improve.

“That toad,” Murray grumbled. “He’s going to take credit for my work and make ME look like a slacker?”

Murray walked back to his desk, picked up his smartphone, and dialed.

“Hello?” came a groggy voice on the other end.

“Hey, Gordon. It’s Murray. I’m in. I just have something I need to take care of first.”

“No problem, pal. I’ll get some info from my contacts. Give me a call back in a couple of days.”

The next day, Murray showed up at work and endured a one hour berating from Albert about missing the target numbers on the Davidson account. Albert threatened to fire Murray fifteen times—Murray counted—but finally decided to be “generous” and give Murray “one final chance.”

“You’re lucky I’m in such a good mood,” Albert grumbled as he wound down his tirade. “My date with Supermodel Anna Rochinski went perfectly.”

“If by ‘date’, you mean you watched videos of her while sitting on your couch alone,” Murray thought to himself.

“I’m glad to hear that, sir,” Murray said aloud.

“That and I found this perfectly good thumb drive by my parking spot. It’s brand new, has a lot of space, and even is loaded with a ton of great music,” Albert indicated the new thumb drive plugged into his computer.

“You’re such a sucker for shiny tech,” Murray thought.

“You’re very lucky,” Murray said.

“Still, my patience has its limits. Screw up again and I won’t be so lenient. Next time, you’ll find yourself being escorted out by security. Now, get out of my office and catch up on the work you fell behind on when you were dawdling around on the Davidson account!”

Murray got up and thanked Albert profusely for allowing him to keep his job. He made his way back to his cubicle, logged back in, and pretended to run some reports. When he was sure nobody was looking, he glanced at his smartphone. A text message read: “Puppet Master Installation successful.” Murray put his phone away and smiled.

The next day, he quit his job. He said he was very sorry, but he had just been offered another position across town. It was the same pay, but the commute was shorter. The HR director was very sorry to see him leave and praised his wonderful work. Murray was sure that this was scripted pleasantries. Murray confirmed that his new position wasn’t in a competing company—the non-compete clause in his contract forbade it for a year after leaving—and gave an exit interview. At a few points, he was tempted to reveal how horrible his boss was, but he knew that Albert would worm his way out of anything Murray said. Instead, Murray gave his boss a positive—but not glowing—review.

A day after that, Murray saw a news report detailing his former boss’ arrest. Albert’s computer was used to access the company financial systems and transfer ten thousand dollars to an offshore bank account registered in his name. He maintained his innocence, but company e-mail records showed that he had sent e-mails from that computer around the time that the hacking occurred. Albert vowed that he was innocent and insisted that he would be acquitted. His uncle even posted bail, but not before Albert spent half of a day in jail.

Murray smiled as he watched the news report. He picked up his cell phone, dialed, and waited as it rung.

“Gordon? It’s Murray. I’m ready now. What’s the job?”

Chapter Two

The Sampson Technologies Job

Five guards.

From atop his perch in the large oak tree, Murray surveyed the scene. He could see five guards by the entrance to Sampson Technologies lab. Of course, there were probably another ten inside. Then there was the rest of the security system. This was going to be fun.

Murray pressed a button on the dark, oversized goggles covering his eyes. The built-in binoculars zoomed out until he was just looking at the normal view in front of him. The goggles, a black cap for his head, and a black mask covering his mouth were just part of what Murray called his “work suit.” The black fabric of his shirt and pants helped him to blend into the darkness. The pride of his outfit, though, were the many hidden pockets he had worked into it. They hid a vast array of tools that he used in his nighttime pursuits.

Murray pulled a small device from a pocket on his upper right arm. It was short and black with a contoured handle that made it easy to grip. Murray aimed one end at the oak tree’s branch, and pressed a button near his thumb. A blade expanded from the end. He jabbed it into the tree, pressed the button again, and pulled. The blade remained rooted in the tree. A thin filament connected the sharp tip to its former casing. Holding fast to the handle, Murray dropped off the branch. The filament slowed his descent. Once his feet touched the ground, Murray turned the blade around and pressed a second button. Another blade erupted from the opposite side of the device. Murray stabbed this into the oak’s trunk, lodging his device in place.

The lab might have been located in the middle of the city, but that didn’t mean it was a small facility. Murray had already scaled the gated fence around the compound’s perimeter. The wall was twenty feet high. The tops of the walls were dotted with spotlights triggered by motion sensors—one of which Murray had disabled to scale the wall. There were security cameras which he had stayed in the blind-spots of. In front of him lay a large yard replete with booby traps. All of this was meant to dissuade “visitors” the likes of Murray, but he was nothing if not persistent.

The first three guards were easy to avoid. The fourth and fifth required a distraction. Luckily, Murray was prepared. He removed a small sphere from a pocket and squeezed it for three seconds. Then, he tossed it past the guards towards the other side of the courtyard. It landed in some bushes and exploded ten seconds later. It wasn’t a large charge—definitely not enough to do major damage—but it was loud and shook the bush it had landed in. The guards drew their guns, aimed them at the bush, and cautiously approached it. Murray silently slipped behind them, removed a small lock pick from a pocket, and had the lock open in a matter of seconds. He placed the pick away as he entered the facility.

Once inside, Murray found a quick hiding spot and scanned the room. He was in a large office. An oversized mahogany desk dominated the room. Along the walls were photos of various people—perhaps family and friends—as well as whiteboards covered with complex equations.

Murray had memorized the layout of the compound along with all of the known security devices, but there were always surprises. After getting his bearings, he figured that his prize was three floors below him. The most direct way to get to his intended target was to go into an elevator down the hallway in front of him. Unfortunately, that was also the most direct way to get captured. There were bound to be security cameras with guards watching the video feed.

Murray noticed a grate leading to a ventilation shaft above him and shook his head. Were this a bad movie, he would pull out the cover and crawl through the duct work. In reality, though, he’d barely be able to fit and would make a ton of noise. The guards would be alerted to his presence quicker than jumping up and down in front of the security cameras.

Murray had been a thief for quite some time and had hit some very high profile targets. Most times, he worked for someone who contacted Gordon to get an item “liberated via extra-legal measures.” Other times, though, he spotted technology that could assist him and seized it to put it to good use.

Murray entered the hallway and approached an elevator. Sure enough, there was a security camera trained on the elevator doors. If anyone entered or exited the doors, the guards would know. Murray

pulled a small device from a hip pocket. Acting quickly, he reached up and disconnected the security camera. He had only seconds before the guards noticed the feed dropping out. He connected the video camera to his device and then connected his device back to the wires that had once plugged into the video camera.

Pressing a button on his device began to record video. It was a pretty boring scene—just an elevator with nobody coming or going—but that was the point. After a few seconds of this, Murray hit a second button. If it worked right, his “boring footage” would play on a loop, fooling the guards into thinking that nobody was there. If it didn’t work—well, he would need to make a hasty exit.

Murray walked in front of the security camera and approached the elevator. He couldn’t just call for it or the guards would be tipped off to the fake footage. His source was quite cooperative in giving Murray access to the facility’s schematics as well as detailed descriptions of the security systems. A few days prior, he had struck up a conversation with a lab technician from the facility. He bought the man a few rounds and slipped something special in his drink. The technician got very chatty and helpfully provided many details to help Murray prepare. The next day, the technician woke up with a pounding headache and no memory as to what had happened. He would have figured that he drank just a little too much not realizing how badly he had compromised his employer’s security.

Murray couldn’t take the elevator down, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t use the elevator shaft. Quickly prying open the elevator console, Murray began rewiring it to open. Were this a less secure facility, Murray knew that the doors could have been opened without this destruction. Many elevators came with special keys used to open the doors in case of emergency. He would have much preferred that as Murray always liked to keep evidence of his presence to a minimum. Ideally, he went in, came out, and left as little evidence as possible that he had ever been there. Well, except for the items that he took with him.

“Sometimes, some destruction is needed, though,” Murray thought as he got the elevator doors open and replaced the panel cover as best he could.

Carefully grabbing hold of the elevator cable, Murray slowly lowered himself down the shaft. It was slow going and he almost lost his grip once or twice. As he descended, he silently swore at the person who designed the building with elevators but no stairs. Surely, this was at the very least a fire hazard. Sadly, Murray didn’t think the fire marshal would take kindly to his report.

“So I was breaking into this place and noticed that there were no stairs to the lower levels,” Murray thought to himself—suppressing a laugh. “That wouldn’t quite go over well.”

Soon enough, Murray arrived at his destination. This was, perhaps, the most dangerous part of his plan. Murray managed to make it to a narrow ledge by the elevator door. Normally, this door wouldn’t open without the elevator car in place. The car would engage a set of interlocks which set the door to open. Murray could manually trigger these. However, if he wasn’t careful, he would lose his balance and fall down the shaft.

Murray moved slowly and deliberately. Every movement calculated and planned. After a tense few minutes, Murray managed to get the door to open a little bit. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to allow him to slide past and into the hallway beyond. He glanced around. There were halls to his left and right as well as right ahead of him.

He was closing in on his target, but heard the sounds of people approaching. Down the hall, to his right, two guards came around a bend. One was tall and lanky and the other was heavysset. It was only the dumbest of luck that allowed Murray to remain unseen. The guards were too busy talking about a recent sporting event to notice Murray ducking into a nearby room. Murray waited until they passed and then went down the hallway directly in front of the elevator. He was almost there.

Suddenly, Murray stopped. If he went any further down the hall towards his goal, he would trip pressurized floor plates or an invisible laser grid. Instead, Murray examined the walls until he found a hidden panel near the floor. Prying it open was another bit of necessary destruction. Murray examined the wiring he had just exposed. After taking out a set of tools, Murray got to work. Before long, he had both security systems ahead of him disabled.

This wouldn’t last, though. Thanks to his source, Murray knew all too well that the people who owned this facility were too smart for this simple bypass. He had one minute, at most, before the system reset and re-activated. One minute would have been plenty of time had the two guards not decided to finish their argument in the hallway that he was currently in.

Murray had long ago learned never to trust in luck. A good thief could take advantage of good luck, but must never rely on it. After all, good luck can be quickly followed up by bad luck. This moment just proved the point as the guards spotted Murray. They began to draw their guns and one guard brought his walkie talkie out to report the intruder. Ducking down, Murray tucked his hands into pockets on the sides of his hips and drew out two short staves. Each was only six inches long but Murray had trained with them for years until he could use them more effectively than he ever could hope to use a larger weapon. He quickly hit each of the guards' hands sending the guns and walkie talkie clattering to the ground. The movement was so quick and fluid that the guards didn't have time to react before they were disarmed.

Murray then swung around, held the tip of a staff to the each guard's neck, and pressed a button on his weapons. Each staff contained a replaceable cartridge with a needle. The button press moved the cartridge forward so the needle could penetrate the person's skin. Once in position, the staff would push a syringe plunger at the bottom of the cartridge to inject the contents into the intended target. Of course, all of this happened in a split second and the liquid contents—a concentrated version of the drug Murray had used on his informant—was injected into the guards' bloodstreams before they had a chance to react. Instead of spilling all of their secrets, though, the guards just collapsed in a heap. Unfortunately, Murray knew that he now had only fifty seconds to go.

With no time for finesse, Murray ran down the hall and kicked open the door. Entering the room, he looked around. He was worried that he would be presented with a dozen or perhaps even a hundred choices. He feared that he wouldn't have time to discern his real objective from the distractions before time ran out.

Luck seemed to have switched sides again, though. His target was in a refrigerated case at the end of the room. Inside were at least fifty vials containing a black liquid. Murray opened the case, removed a vial, and allowed himself a second or two to examine the contents. He scanned the rest of the room before finding a suitable portable refrigerated case. He would have brought his own, but the person who commissioned this heist informed him that the proper equipment would already be in the room.

The vial clicked into place and the case hissed as it activated. Murray set it to keep its contents at the same temperature as the refrigerated case that he had just liberated the vial from. Noting that the refrigerated case had three empty slots, Murray loaded it up with three more vials. His employer had only requested one, but Murray was sure that he could find some use for the other three. Perhaps his employer would pay extra for additional vials. If not, maybe Gordon could find him another buyer. Murray raced out of the room and beyond the security perimeter. He made it with only five seconds to spare.

Murray realized that he couldn't go back the way he had come. He would never be able to climb up the elevator cable—climbing down had been tricky enough. He would need to call the elevator and go up. Of course, this would alert the guards to his presence, but hopefully he would be able to beat a hasty retreat before they got to his location. Just in case, though, Murray removed the used cartridges from his staves. He quickly removed some cases from his pockets that contained new cartridges. Murray put the new cartridges into the staves and placed the used ones into the cases and pockets that had just been vacated.

Murray looked down at one of the guards lying passed out on the floor and had another idea. It was crazy, but might give him a few seconds of leeway. He removed the heavier guard's jacket and hat. The jacket was too big for Murray, but that was for the best. The pockets and compartments in his "work suit" tended to make it bulkier than normal. As an added bonus, he was able to keep the refrigerated case hidden beneath the jacket. The hat hung low on Murray's head, partly hiding the fact that he was wearing goggles.

"Hopefully," Murray thought, "this will throw the guards just enough to give me more time to get out of here."

Taking one of the guards' keycards, Murray called for the elevator. He entered the car as it arrived, and kept one staff in his hand. When he arrived at his floor, he was relieved to see that no guards were there. He approached the security camera, quickly yanked his device off, and began running towards the door he had entered from. Now he was positive that they would know he was there.

Sure enough, alarms began to blare. Without slowing down at all, Murray put the security camera device away and drew his second weapon. He burst out of the door, surprising the two guards stationed there. For a split second, they thought he was another guard. That was all the time Murray needed to inject them with the drug in his staves and subdue them. Unfortunately, three more guards heard the commotion and started running to their comrades' aid, guns drawn.

There was no time to reload his staves and no way he could take three of them at once. Murray tossed the jacket and hat aside as he ran, not even breaking stride as he put his weapons away. He ran at full speed towards the large oak tree. Pulling the blade free from the trunk, Murray retracted it and then quickly climbed up the tree using the rope. Once he was on the branch, he pulled the rope back in, and pressed the button to collapse the whole thing again.

Unfortunately, this took precious seconds that the guards used to catch up with Murray. One shouted for him to raise his hands and surrender, but another simply opened fire. Two blasts came from the guard's gun. The first seemed to miss him entirely, but the second bullet grazed Murray's shoulder.

Although he was uninjured, luck again changed sides. The shot had severed the refrigerated case's strap. Murray barely caught the edge of the case as it fell. Something wet soaked Murray's glove. He figured that it was blood, but there wasn't time to check himself for injuries. The guards were about to open fire again and Murray doubted they would miss twice. Quickly, he jumped to another branch, past the walls of the compound, and from there he dropped down to the street. He heard shouting on the other side of the gate. The guards were fumbling to unlock it. Murray took advantage of these few seconds to disappear down an alleyway.

For the rest of the tale, visit

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