

Journal 26 - the Hidden Valley

When we awoke from our half-dozes I felt extremely revitalised, ready to run a mile or some perform some other form of physical activity. By the way the others looked and moved I could tell they felt the same way too. We brushed ourselves off, had a quick meal from our self-heating packets and prepared to set off.

It was then that Victor noticed the side path. Up until then, the pass had been the only route available, but now a smaller, less-used trail was available. I could just hear the faint tinkling of water falling on stone coming from up the path, so we went to investigate.

At the end of the path, some way from the road and hidden behind an outcrop, was a small fountain constructed from blue stone. The centrepiece was a woman sculpted in the Grecian style, holding some form of bottle reminiscent of a cornucopia. There was writing around the base of the fountain that, surprisingly, we could not read. Morianna set to work, however, mumbling something about having done similar work before.

There was a feeling about the fountain; a tingling in the air that suggested some Power was at work here, or at least dormant. We did not approach it too closely.

After a few minutes Morianna informed us that the language was similar to an ancient tongue used by a legendary race from her world. The only words she could reliably pick out were 'fountain', 'eternal' and some phrase about age. Naturally we were rather wary.

As we turned to leave, of course, Bernard decided he was thirsty. We turned in horror to see him lapping at the water, but it did not last long: he suddenly hopped backwards as if he had been rapped on the nose. No doubt it was due in part to the fact that he now sported a peculiar blue glow in the manner of an aura. Morianna called him over and bent to stroke the rather distressed hound only to bring forth a blue spark from him. Bernard leaped back with a yelp and Morianna started as she too began to glow. More than that, though, was the fact that her hair had suddenly sprung up on end like a cat's.

Understandably, perhaps, Victor chose that moment to dash off back towards the pass in order to avoid getting affected by whatever was occurring. I was considering following him, but other things caught my attention and held me fast.

Morianna kept trying to get control of her hair, but it resisted her, and as she struggled I began to notice just how attractive she really was. That hair! Her eyes flashing as she wrestled with her rebellious tresses! Her fine figure and features! She was the pinnacle of womanhood!

I grinned like a loon as I took in her vigorous, wild beauty, and no doubt I worried her somewhat. Probably more than somewhat I would think.

I think the only thing that saved her from being ravished on the spot was three thoughts, one after the other. The first was that she was a shapeshifter and no doubt had odd ways of dealing with unwelcome advances; the second was that she was a friend, and one simply does not force unwelcome advances on a friend; and the last, and probably most significant, involved a man in white armour on a very large and mean-looking horse.

I have to say that, for once, I was glad I showed some restraint.

After perhaps ten minutes or more (it seemed like an eternity to me), the glow began to wear off, her hair allowed itself to be subdued at last, and she regained her normal, unexaggerated charms (not unexceptional in themselves).

We led the similarly recovered Bernard back down to the pass road and continued on until we found Victor standing atop a small rise, the sled jut behind him. He joined him and gazed in wonder at the huge, bowl-like valley that lay before us. It was mostly arable land; numerous fields and pastures centred on well-spaced buildings that resembled farmhouses and barns. In the far distance it was just possible to make out what appeared to be some form of city.

The oddest thing was that the whole valley appeared to be in the height of summer. Until now we had been in deep winter, though since we had entered the pass the temperature had increased somewhat. But in the valley it was warm and sunny. We could just see a heat haze about halfway down the long, winding slope that led into the valley.

Heading down that slope we found it slowly became noticeably warmer; once we got within perhaps a hundred yards of the edge of the haze we were forced to remove the

outermost layers of our winter clothing until we wore only the lowest layer. We piled the discarded clothing on the sled and Victor continued to drag it behind him.

There was a feeling to the air; a slight tingling one would notice only if one stopped to sense it. Once noticed, however, it was hard to miss; a faint buzzing in the ears, perhaps, or goosebumps. There was certainly some mighty magic of one form or another at work in that place, though that was fairly obvious. What it was beyond the weather was not evident, however.

The fields we passed were ripe with crops, if not overflowing. The crops themselves even appeared to be overflowing in and of themselves, flourishing beyond any farmer's wildest desires.

We finally reached the first of the farmhouses along the main road to the city. It was solidly constructed from red brick and had a slate roof. Behind it I could see a yard with some geese in (or certainly something very similar) and beyond that was the barn. On the veranda of the house two men sat on a swinging bench. They seemed to be of roughly middle age, but it was hard to tell; much the same as I had noticed it was with the elders. They were dressed in simple clothing of earthy hues but had an air of relaxed strength about them.

They greeted us and introduced themselves as Dallon and Kail. We stopped to talk with them and they revealed several truths about themselves and their people. They were very old; thousands of years old at least. Their people had moved to this world aeons ago. Their leaders, called the Elders, were older still, and dwelt in the city, which was a four to five day journey away.

They then asked us if we were new here. When we said yes they seemed pleased, and went on to say that it had been about two thousand years since the last people entered the Valley.

It was then that Kail's wife, introduced to us as Jenfer, brought us out some food. She was extremely attractive, with long, flowing, brown hair paled somewhat by the sun, and blue eyes like gems. She had a figure a eunuch would cry over and the thin dress she wore did little to conceal it. She certainly seemed interested in me, too, smiling as she handed my food to me; a plate of simple vegetables and meat with a thick, dark sauce. Later, when she handed out glasses and served a rather pleasant little wine, she bent over me somewhat more than was really proper; she was unquestionably a healthy young woman, though for all I knew she was thousands of years old.

Dallon and Kail asked us if we wished to stay the night before we continued on to the city; Victor and Morianna suggested that we should move on, while I argued for remaining, so as to ask our hosts more questions about the Valley and their Elders. Of course, my opinion was rather swayed by the way Jenfer looked at me through her eyelashes and smoothed the wrinkles out of her dress.

Our short discussion was interrupted by what at first sounded like a fight, but we soon determined that Bernard had found the female dogs in the yard behind the farmhouse. Dallon and Kail seemed unperturbed about the liberties he was taking, so no comment was made.

In the end it was decided that Victor and Morianna would continue on while I would remain overnight and catch up later. I do not know if they were aware of my real intentions, but they did not show it if they did. Ten minutes or so after they left, Bernard, his carousal completed, sped off down the road after them.

I spent the rest of the afternoon listening to Dallon and Kail talk primarily about their crops the weather. They probably remembered the state of the weather for every day in the Valley for the last thousand years and more, and also the exact state and quantity of crops they harvested in those years. It was not the most interesting conversation I had ever known, though it was more of a monologue (or perhaps duo-logue) than a conversation.

Fortunately, after another simple but very filling meal it was time to retire. Kail directed his wife to show to one of the guest rooms, and I followed her like a puppy follows it's mother. Her smile as she bid me goodnight was suggestive to say the least, and the way she walked away down the landing almost had me run after her there and then.

Later, when the moon had risen and I was in danger of falling asleep, I heard my door open quietly and looked round to see her standing in the doorway, gloriously naked and clearly eager for a night of dalliance.

I am not averse to making free with another man's wife when there is enjoyment to be had; lechery is one of my favourite hobbies, after all, and I am not one to allow legal or religious vows stop me if the lady is willing. Usually, the only thing that would stop me is the threat of pain or death, and so far it never has come to that yet

Famous last words.

Quite probably the last thing I expected was the golden glow that grew about her head as the situation reached its natural conclusion. It grew and grew until she gave a great cry and I lost consciousness.

I awoke on the floor, of all places, with a pain in the vicinity of my ribs and a back that tingled like I had been kicked by a horse. It felt like I had broken a couple of ribs at least, and could not account for it.

The first thing I noticed when I slowly turned over was Jenfer, smiling happily and contentedly at me. The second was the light of the rising sun coming through the window. The third thing was what I would swear was a man-shaped indentation in the ceiling above the bed; I rubbed my back and was rewarded with a handful of what could well have been splinters. The fourth and perhaps most disturbing thing was the large egg that Jenfer produced from under the covers beside her. It was close to two feet high, grey and slightly speckled, rather like the egg of a gull.

Jenfer explained that now I had made her mine and we had had our first egg, I had to fight her husband, who, she proudly claimed, was a powerful magician of the 'twelfth level.' That way our future together would be assured. When I tried to explain I had only bedded her for the pleasure of it and was unaware of their customs, she just looked at me blankly, confusion written clearly on her face.

She asked me again about fighting her husband, and I told her I would consider it. Naturally, the only thing I was considering was a way out of my predicament, so as I dressed I decided it was time to leave as soon as possible. Pulling out Morianna's Trump card, I concentrated on the image but to no avail; she either refused to answer or was unable to. I tried Victor instead and was more successful.

I put on a calm, relaxed and unworried face and told them I had learned all I could (which was not much) and was now ready to rejoin them. He reached into the contact and I found myself further along the road, a good six hours or so closer to the city.

Seeing how I was favouring my left side, Morianna set about giving me some medical attention. She gave me a syringe-full of painkillers from her medical kit, and before long everything went swimmy and I lost consciousness once more.

When I awoke yet again, I was loosely strapped to the sled Victor was still doggedly pulling behind him. However, we had stopped before a set of simple city gates made of some dark metal with no embellishment whatsoever. They were open, and two gentlemen with swords and spears who were evidently guards had stopped us from entering.

Victor explained to me that we needed passes to enter the city, and wondered if I had an idea about how we could deal with the problem of how we did not have any. I thought for a moment and called over one of the guards. I asked him to refresh my memory as to what they looked like so I could remember where I had put them; my memory was betraying me, suffering as I was from a brain sickness.

He did so, and furnished with a description sufficient to produce reasonable facsimiles with a little application of our Pattern skills I directed Victor to look in my pack, since I think I had put them there. I felt the flickering in Shadow as he exerted his will upon it, and soon produced the passes we required. We were allowed entry.

The city was quite small and unexceptional. No building was over two stories and they were of a rather uniform reddish brick. Some had various forms of decoration about the window or doorframes while others had window boxes of bright flowers, but other than that they were quite plain.

We found ourselves a nice little hotel and booked rooms with money that Victor just happened to have on him (praise be for the Pattern!) and I dragged myself off to bed.

I woke feeling much refreshed, if a little groggy, to find I had a visitor; Tim, one arm in a sling, stopped prodding me once I was awake. He said that he would deal with the angry husband for me, being more skilled in the magic arts. Kail was on his way, apparently, and

was more angry about how I had broken tradition by abandoning Jenfer than my bedding her. He handed me a small green pill and said it would help clear my head. I swallowed it, and wondered why he got up from the edge of the bed and stood to one side.

The reason for his movement became clear mere moments after he did so. I felt an almighty movement in my bowels and a terrible light-headedness and leapt up to dash from the room to the lavatory down the corridor. Thank God I reached it in time.

I staggered back in a few minutes later and drained two large cups of water before throwing the empty cup at the grinning Tim. He handed me a small glass vial, sealed with a cork, that held five more of the Hell pills, which he called Flush, some creation of Dworkin's. The vial of pills was for future use, he told me, but quite how anyone would use the things out of choice is beyond me.

He then smiled at me and said I owed him a favour. He promptly vanished.

Tired out afresh by my latest exertions, I returned to bed once more.

The next morning I was woken by Victor knocking on my door. I tottered out of bed and was just finishing getting dressed in clothing more comfortable in the climate of the Valley when a massive thunderclap almost knocked me off my feet. By the residual tingling I set off on my skin I sensed it had strong magical overtones; no doubt Tim was at work in my stead.

The breakfast was good; in fact, it was incredible. If the animals that had provided the meat flourished in the same way as the crops we had seen, then there was no doubt that the magic-enhanced abundance of the Valley was responsible for one of the best breakfasts I have ever eaten. I certainly ate enough of it.

Morianna joined me with the landlord close behind her. While I ate she quizzed him about the Valley and its inhabitants. He told us that the Elders had moved their people to this world because their overuse of magic was damaging the place where they lived. He seemed uncertain as to what overuse actually entailed; presumably the way he then proceeded to pull a full tankard of ale out of thin air was just normal behaviour as far as he was concerned. Of course, several hundred thousand people performing such feats every day for their not inconsiderable lifetimes would probably constitute an 'overuse', possibly even taking the magical or vital energy out of a world in the process.

It sounds like a reasonable theory.

The landlord then asked if we were new here. We answered vaguely to the affirmative. He continued to tell us about the Valley, and specifically mentioned the arrival of the black riders (or perhaps Black Riders?). They wore black armour and rode black horses; however, their leader rode a white horse. They rode into the city and went to the council hall, the place where the Elders meet in the centre of the city. They entered and talked with them for a long time before they came back out, and whatever was said or done then caused more than two thousand people to rebel in protest.

At this point I happened to see what looked like a white handkerchief flutter at the window. I had a good idea what it was, so I stood up and went outside. Morianna and Victor, who sat close by, seemed perturbed by my unexplained departure.

As I guessed Tim waited for me around the corner. He looked very pale and staggered slightly as he leant against the wall. He announced that he had dealt with the husband; he was dead rather than unconscious, but would regain his senses in two days. It would probably be wise to leave before that occurred. Pushing himself upright, he staggered off down the street.

As I sat back down in the inn I felt a momentary flash of some Power; I froze in place, halfway down onto my seat, and noticed Victor had frozen in much the same way. Morianna just stared at the two of us in confusion, so I would guess she had not felt it. It felt a little like the sparking in my head I associated with the action of Pattern on Shadow, but different.

Our business in the inn completed for now, we set off to have a look at the council hall of the Elders. We were perhaps halfway there, taking in the marvels of the inner city region as we went, when Victor suddenly looked to his left and ran headlong down an alley, bellowing as he went. He appeared to be chasing a young girl. Interested in this odd turn of events I followed him; Morianna continued onwards to the hall.

I arrived in time to Victor looking angrily at a closing door. He told me that he had failed to get an answer out of the girl's father; I was naturally confused, as I did not know what question he was asking. Nevertheless, as Victor began to head back to the main road I

knocked on the door to see if I could achieve more than he had, despite not knowing the questions to ask.

The door was answered by a man of indeterminate age who looked in his forties. When I asked if I could see his daughter because a friend of mine wished to ask her some questions he became rather belligerent, cursing me for a depraved seducer of children. I protested, but he just insulted me further and suggested I seek my wicked perversions at the Moulin Rouge before slamming the door in my face.

Does every place have a Moulin Rouge?

Rather irritated at his unfair portrayal of my character I kicked the door in so as to facilitate entry and exit but was immediately confronted with the muzzle of a long and rather ornate flintlock rifle. I graciously apologised and returned to the road forthwith.

I soon caught up with Morianna and Victor as they reached the council hall. Rather than the low, simple building I was expecting we were confronted with a tall, ornately decorated spire made of some white stone. It had a feeling of great age about it; they had probably brought it with them from their old world.

The guards outside denied us entry, saying that not only were we not old enough but we did not have the right passes. Since there was no other way in, that avenue of investigation was a dead end, for now at least.

I suggested that perhaps we should try the Moulin Rouge as a possible contact point for the rebels. With no other suggestions forthcoming we set out to locate it. And I did not have any other motives for doing so, whatever the others may have thought.

The Moulin Rouge was rather more low class than, say, the version in Corwin's Paris. Its primary attraction appeared to be the women in slowly decreasing states of undress who danced on various small stages, on the bar and even for specific customers. Most of the stage dancers looked bored, while the private dancers had fixed smiles. Even the girls who were obviously (and I mean *obviously*) for hire appeared tired and not too enthusiastic. It was a casual sort of place, with no bawdy music and little in the way of interesting decoration.

The barman looked blankly, or perhaps uninterestedly, at me as I made oblique and obscure references to the rebels, so either he knew nothing or was very disingenuous. Victor rebuffed the women interested in him with glares over his ale, while Morianna held the men at bay with frosty stares. I gave up with the barman and was just about to suggest that we leave when one of the more animated women singled me out. She put one arm around my neck and presented her barely concealed bosom to me to initiate her bargaining technique. I found it rather distracting, as was the way she stroked my chest before reaching down to my groin.

She licked an earlobe and fluttered her eyelashes against my cheek, then murmured in a husky voice that I had found the rebels. I think I was rather let down by that, as it signalled that it was time for business again. I controlled my response and smiled, putting an arm around her.

Once our cover of courtesan and customer was firmly established (the things we must do) she told me to come upstairs with her; my friends would be told to come up later. I followed her upstairs to a simple sort of room; bare brick walls, one curtained window, a table with bowl and jug of water, a wardrobe and a large bed. Needless to say, the cover my contact made use of downstairs did not stop there.

Perhaps a half-hour later Morianna and Victor knocked on the door and entered. Victor seemed unconcerned, but I think Morianna looked a little irritated. Our contact, who had finally introduced herself as Arell, told us that the Black Riders, led by their chief on the white horse, now controlled the Elders in some way. They had directed them to command the people of the Valley to stop their normal harvesting and instead mine and refine an ore that was found in the mountains around the Valley. She went on to tell us she was going to get some horses for us so we could ride to one of the refineries.

This entire briefing was conducted from the bed where we both still lay; I lay low, so to speak, while she sat up and gestured as she spoke, revealing almost everything she had. It was strangely embarrassing.

My companions left as Arell and I dressed; she went out to arrange for horses while I joined the other two downstairs. We joined Arell by the horses outside and she gave us directions to the refinery. I waved her farewell we rode away and we followed the route she had given us out of the city and into the countryside opposite the pass we had entered by.

The refinery was a large, rather ugly building in comparison to those we had seen in the city. It was certainly newer, and sported several large chimneys that spouted forth evil-looking black smoke. Leaving our horses outside, where they fretted in response to the smell and tumultuous mechanical noises produced by the refinery. We bluffed our way past the guards that stood outside the main entrance, saying we were observers sent by the Elders to help convince the people that all was well.

Moving through the noisy and smelly building we passed several other guards and a number of technicians, using similar pretexts to get past them and brush aside their questions. After a few false starts and wrong turns we finally found ourselves in one of the main refining chambers.

Giant furnaces the size of small houses boiled with molten ore as the impurities were removed from the rocks to bring forth the pure metal. A number of technicians swarmed around them, controlling the massive boilers underneath that heated them and carefully regulating the temperatures and flow of purified metal.

So far we had avoided drawing any attention to ourselves in this area, but then Victor went and ruined it by offering me a small leather bag. This had the surprising effect of throwing me to the floor as if someone had hit me over the head with a club. I retained my senses, but my head and hands tingled for several minutes afterwards. The workers noticed this incident, of course, and so took to sounding the alarm, declaiming us as terrorists and rebels.

Naturally, it was about time for our luck to change.