

Journal 22 - in Shadow

That evening Intruder returned, and by the time the hot-bag food was ready Zatharuss and Morianna had also returned. Morianna had something to report; on the floor where she worked as the supervisor the central point of the offices appeared to be a large pillar in the centre of the floor. It was warm to the touch and had a feeling of air moving inside it along with a slight vibration. She had not seen it on the lower floors she had been in.

Intruder commented that it was probably a node of the main Spire computer, where all of the sorted and prioritised information ended up to be examined by their superiors in the floors above.

All Zatharuss had to add was that the flyer hangers seemed strangely empty, and that if the effects the flyers had on the power systems of the City were so dangerous, why were they so far inside the City? I think his plan was to disrupt the security of the Spire and sneak in during the confusion; I would have thought that to be more than a little risky.

An imprecise plan was drawn up; Morianna and Intruder would affix some form of spying device into the computer under the cover of a distraction supplied by Zatharuss and Bernard (whose mere appearance would worry the enemy). Intruder would modify Zatharuss' scanner to broadcast the anti-gravity energies used by the flyers.

When I asked about my part in the plan, Intruder calmly told me that I would be going in with Morianna, shapeshifted both mind and body to get past the Spire security. Naturally I balked at this suggestion, and once he had backed me into one corner of the room he began to attempt to convince me. His technique involved me falling into sudden and slightly painful unconsciousness.

I eventually passed back into what could be called consciousness to find myself strangely shaped. My head felt odd, strange cloth hung over an oddly thin body, and what was most disturbing was that I had no control over myself. Instead of standing suddenly and looking around myself I continued to read steadily through a great sheaf of papers. Their content varied from short notes about 'Class D-3/6 Canines' seen in various places described only by a code of letters and numbers, to long reports discussing the political situations in yet more codenamed countries and the likelihood of interference by hostile individuals.

Through my shock and dismay came memories, of a sort. Intruder had hit me, knocking me unconscious; Morianna then used her strange powers to transform me into the clerk I had, in effect, become. I think I sensed some slight hesitancy from the residues of Morianna's mental touch, though it may have been wishful thinking.

The next hour or so passed uneventfully, and when only three others were left in the area I was in, one came over to me and reached out, touching 'me' on the temple (or whatever). With a most horrible, rasping kind of noise of bone and cartilage I twisted back into my more usual form, not without some pain. This pain was compounded by the fact that I suddenly tried to stand up, turn around, crouch down and run at the same time. I merely fell off my chair and hit my head on the desk.

My hands shook, my head hurt and I was sweating as if I had run for miles. My rescuer from my strange captivity turned out to be Morianna; she sounded at least slightly upset at my predicament as she handed me two large tablets. They would make me feel better, she told me. I took them, swallowing them painfully without water. I struggled back up onto my chair; the other two had not seen fit to intervene, probably not wishing to trouble their supervisor (Morianna).

After a few vague minutes I stopped shaking and my headache cleared up, though I gained a fierce hunger. Once I was steady on my feet, Morianna and myself dealt with the other two. I (rather clumsily I think) rendered my one into a deep sleep; Morianna achieved a similar effect with more finesse. Then reaching under the illusionary robes projected by her holo unit she brought forth a Trump card and set to concentrating on it.

After a short interval Morianna reached out with one hand and the air before her shimmered with a rainbow effect as Intruder came through the contact. He quickly used some small devices to remove a panel from the pale, slightly humming pillar in the centre of the room. Behind the panel was a large metallic block; a current of slightly warm air flowed upwards between the block and panels. I could feel it blowing out of the open panel. Much of

the block itself was featureless, but there were patches where wires and small lights were visible beneath small windows in the block.

Intruder spent a number of minutes removing a couple of these windows and affixing small devices like metallic spiders to the wires and tubes underneath. This done, he replaced the windows and then the panel, sealing it all up with yet another small contraption that glowed slightly at the utilised end.

Brushing off his hands he turned to me and apologised for knocking me out and causing me to be shapeshifted against my will. Understandably, all he got from me was the silent treatment.

Intruder led the two of us through a Trump contact that put us just outside the big ironbound door of a large stone building. The surrounding land was grassy, with irregularly placed copses of trees and woodland; the ground was mostly flat, with numerous knolls and small hills.

Intruder suggested that we go and eat; my stomach agreed with him loudly. Morianna asked after Zatharuss and Bernard; he told her someone else had collected them from the outskirts of the City, but he did not know who or where they were taken. In a distinctly blunt and impolite way I suggested he get to work finding out.

He did not look impressed at my ordering him around, but I was unconcerned.

When I asked about having a good, long bath he told me that they only had showers in this place; something about their religion said demons lived in dirt and having a bath meant sharing the water with demons. A strange belief, but not so bizarre; the most fanatic revolutionaries in France refused to bath at all simply because the 'aristos' did.

Morianna and I went into the dining room, where we ordered another of the Royal Stag sized meals; a big, thick venison steak with potatoes of a sort and some form of secondary vegetables. I felt *much* better after that.

No sooner had we finished than Bernard came bounding into the room straight to his mistress. Zatharuss followed him at a more sedate pace. Once he had ordered his meal he told us how he had been hit on the head by some assailant and fallen unconscious, waking later in one of the rooms upstairs. A short woman with red hair and green eyes (he was very descriptive) was applying a cold cloth to his bruised head. By his description Morianna and I concluded his nurse was Fiona.

He seemed a little taken with her, so I made what counted as a warning to him; I mentioned how she could be harsh, relating how she said that anyone not for Random was against him and thus her. This warning of her more implacable side failed to completely dissuade him, I think.

Intruder picked that moment to surprise us as usual, manifesting just behind Zatharuss' chair. He agreed with the more general points of my summary of Fiona; I told him we did not need his opinions right now. He shrugged and went to sit at another table.

As Morianna went over to the bar to get a drink, Andreas walked into the room; he declined Morianna's offer of a drink and came over to our table. I noticed Zatharuss became somewhat uncomfortable in his seat; he was still uneasy around Andreas. Andreas announced he would debrief us in a few hours. When I asked when, he suggested around midday; it was currently in the region of ten. I uncivilly suggested he postpone it to after four, and turned back to my drink in a way that suggested dismissal.

I do not think he was pleased with the dismissal but I found it was occasionally useful to use his role as some sort of protector to my advantage. I found I could be discourteous to him and order him around more often than I would have been able to otherwise, or indeed at all. I had to be careful not to push it to far though.

Bleys came in at that point and joined Intruder and Andreas at their table. The conversation started off civil enough, but it slowly degenerated into an argument. I was not sure what it was all about, but from the occasional shout it seemed to relate to Andreas and Intruder's handling of the mission we had just completed. Bleys seemed unsatisfied as to our subtlety and stealth.

Fiona arrived before it got too riotous and quietened them down with a few words, mostly directed at Bleys. Going over to the barman I asked where I could get some new (or at least cleaner) garments; he said his wife would arrange it for me. I ordered some simple clothing and returned to my table.

After the long, restful hours after midday, once I had got my new attire, Andreas approached us where Zatharuss and I sat in the lounge. It was time for the debriefing, he told us, and we followed him out to a small group of rocks perhaps a couple of hundred yards behind the inn. The centrepiece of the small cairn was a small rock altar, and upon this sat Andreas, next to a hamper of food.

Between us, Zatharuss and myself related the main points of the episode in the City of the Big-Heads. We covered everything of real importance, leaving out anything not really vital (hopefully).

As a consolation Andreas directed us to a hot spring nearby where we could bathe and relax. I immediately pulled a bottle of wine and a glass out of the hamper and went looking for it. It was as soothing as Andreas had described, leeching away the small aches and pains that had not yet left me from when I had regained control over my shapeshifter-stolen body.

An indeterminate period of time later Andreas joined me, bringing the whole hamper with him. When he had settled in the conversation turned to Zatharuss, and I told him of the time Zatharuss had discarded the magical ring that enabled him to travel through Shadow, and somehow knew more about Amber than it was telling.

I finally dragged my self out of the pool before I fell asleep there, and trudged back to the inn to sleep.

The next at breakfast I was surprised to see what I thought was two Fiona's. It was not long before I noticed the small differences, most particularly in the clothing area. Fiona's 'twin' was introduced as Bethal, who was of Amber but also of Chaos; apparently, she, like Dworkin, was somehow neutral in the current 'friction' between Amber and the Courts, mostly due to her relationship to each side and her position as a 'sage', whatever that meant.

In the small amount of conversation that occurred between them it was obvious that they did not like each other. A number of sharp comments were made, most of them alluding to personal traits and some to events I had no knowledge of. I do not think they agreed on matters of methods, and their personalities clashed like two rival swordsmen.

Looking as similar as they did probably did not help much either.

Fiona informed us we would be moving on soon, probably in the early evening. As to what we (Zatharuss, Morianna and myself, probably Victor too) would be required to do next, Andreas would tell us once he knew himself.

Feeling the need for some fresh air, I asked if it were possible to borrow a horse for riding purposes. I was told that the people in this part of the Shadow did not have horses but some other form of riding beast. However, I was free to make use of the horses Fiona and Bleys had hidden in a copse of trees about five miles to the north.

The walk sounded like a little too much effort to me, so I settled down in the lounge for a restful day. Zatharuss joined up with Andreas for an afternoon of boar hunting, using large, barbed spears; I only hoped they would not end up using them on each other. Morianna took Bernard out for a walk a short while after.

It was not long before I could no longer cope with staying in the inn any more. The long walk in the open air to find the horses became more and more attractive. Succumbing at last, I sought out Intruder and asked him where I could find the horses. He directed me more precisely to them and suggested I make use of Andreas' chestnut.

The walk cleared my head quite satisfactorily. The day was pleasantly warm with only a hint of a breeze; good riding weather. I finally located the horses in the copse after perhaps two hours of walking. There was about half a dozen of them, and I found the chestnut close to the back. By the look of it, it would make a good short distance racehorse, or a light cavalry mount. Similar to Andreas' other horse, which I had of course unwittingly taken from him when he needed it most, back on the Switzerland border so long ago.

I saddled him with the unostentatious saddle wrapped in linen next to him, and set off. He had fine form and great stamina, though he had a tendency to want to run free. Probably trying out a new rider, testing me.

We flew across the fields and grassy banks for a few hours, alone at last and away from all the tensions and expectations of the family I found I had come to accept, even if only a little. Their casual confidence and arrogance was perhaps a little aggravating, but I too was capable of such ego, and that, I think, was telling in itself. Maybe, in time, I too would come to act like them, at least a little. I hoped I could maintain for as long as possible what I suppose

you could call my youthful frame of mind, compared to the confidence and ego of great age they displayed.

My contemplative frame of mind was disturbed by the arrival of a number of large dogs. Powerfully built, they easily kept up with the horse. The horse, naturally, was not as impressed with them as I was, and as they began to surround us they also caused us to slow down. As our speed decreased their frantic motions slowed and I was finally able to get a good look at them.

As I had begun to suspect, they were of the same breed as Bernard and the other hounds I had seen in the forest of Arden in Amber. These, however, seemed a little smaller and perhaps a little leaner than Bernard; no doubt the result of more proper care.

Once we had all stopped I heard the approach of another horse. A rather large and fast one, by the sound of it. I looked around to see myself approached by an immense grey horse, bigger than even the shire horses I had seen. On its back was perched what looked like a man, wearing some form of rigid white armour. More dogs ran beside them.

As he got closer (it was a he) I got a good look at him: long, dark hair, slightly weathered skin, dark eyes, and a solid-jawed face. He appeared to be wearing some kind of white, scaled armour. He looked familiar in some way, though I could not immediately place him.

He knew who I was well enough though; I knew I knew him, or at least of him, though I could not name him. He saved me the effort by introducing himself finally as Julian. He was the guardian of the land routes into Amber, master of Arden Forest, and the leader of the Rangers we had met in that deep forest. He was also the one member of the family Morianna consistently showed interest in the welfare of. Was he her father, perhaps, or her lover? If lover, then how would that complicate things from a more normal view of families? It would be classed incest in most places, those I know of and have been to.

We talked for a short while, mostly pleasantries and me asking after his health. Before long, though, he asked after Morianna. I told him she was in good health but worried about him. This news in no way ruffled his composure, and he calmly asked after her current whereabouts. I gave as best a description of the way I saw her going when I last saw her; he seemed unsatisfied with my directions because with a few muttered words he sent a small group of hounds to locate her.

He nodded politely to me and rode away in the direction of the inn, leaving me with about a dozen of his dogs to guard me. I continued my ride for perhaps another half hour before turning around and heading back to the copse where the horses were being kept.

Maybe halfway there I noticed the dogs seem to become very agitated. They appeared to be looking around themselves as they ran. Perhaps they had scented trouble? It seemed to me that I was in a good place for an ambush; concealing trees and small rises surrounded me. Three of the dogs turned away and ran towards a small rise.

Our concerns were justified when the unmistakable if surprising roar of cannon reached my ears. I hoped their initial fire was not in some way unnaturally accurate; in my limited experience, cannon take at least two shots to be totally accurate. I only hoped these were the same. In an attempt to aid their inaccuracy I pushed the horse a little and moved to the left of my original route, hopefully out of the line of cannon to target area.

My hopes were rewarded as several explosions threw up clouds of dust and flame to the right of me. The cannon fire continued, the ground continued to erupt around me, but I got the feeling it would not be lasting very long; four more of the hounds left the pack, headed no doubt for the position of the cannon.

I bent low over the neck of the horse and let him have his head, though I directed his blind run towards the inn. I pulled him to a near-total stop just outside, and leapt off. He was lathered and breathing heavy, but I did not have time to care for him properly. After a few moments I was again accompanied by a small dog pack, though much reduced; by the look of the injured ones, they had encountered some stiff opposition.

I was of the opinion that we would soon be leaving, so I dashed upstairs to my room and collected my things, what there was of it. The pack and coat were first, but as an afterthought I grabbed the holo and distort units. It was possible they may have been of use.

Heading back down to the horse, I arrived in time to see Intruder coaxing it through one of his black portals. The dogs had left already. Intruder saw me and said that as the chestnut was the last of the horses it was my turn to go through.

I did so, and found myself suddenly dripping with sweat in the tropical heat of a fine, white-sanded beach. The sea was big and blue, the sky was empty of clouds, but the thing

that really got my attention was the cliff face before me. It was tall and craggy as one would expect, but I did not expect to see windows and a door carved in it.

Intruder, standing just behind me, said it was a hotel, long unoccupied, carved out of the rock of the cliff for travellers to the island to stay in. He then bid me to help him move the horses inside.

That done, he warned me not to make use of any of the natural springs in the hotel; the cold ones were too cold, to the point of literally freezing, and the hot ones too hot; they would broil anyone who got in one. He did, however, direct me to a room I could use as my own.

It was pleasant enough, even if the décor leant towards early rug and stone. The sun streamed straight in through the window, and I took advantage of this to lie a while in the sun on the bed.

My doze was disturbed by the arrival of Andreas and Zatharuss. Andreas directed us to go and get some ice from one of the cold pools; there were buckets and picks there. When we had filled one of the larger buckets we were to bring it to one of the larger rooms; he gave us directions there also.

Mumbling under our breaths, we nonetheless complied. Once the requisite amount of ice was gathered, we found our way to the room Andreas spoke of to find he and Intruder lounging in a large, deep wooden tub on legs in the centre of the room. Intruder groggily directed me to make everyone a drink of whiskey from the bar at the far end of the room; I did, though I gave Zatharuss and myself a double helping as a reward for our work.