

Journal 20 - in Shadow

Later that day, after a small but filling meal of something resembling meat but somehow more tasty, I found Andreas and Intruder waiting for me in the foyer of the small hotel Guin had taken us to. Before long Morianna and Zatharuss joined us; Victor, I was told, was busy destroying things. He was upset over the fact that we would be required to use firearms, or rather energy weapons; something about them being dishonourable. No doubt a large number of pistol duellists would take exception to his opinion.

When I suggested it, Andreas took me downstairs to a firing range the hotel had in its basement. There he gave me a quick lesson in the operation of the energy weapons we were required to know about. Once I had the feeling of the weapon and was familiar with its controls, I fired off a few shots until I was satisfied with it. Andreas then handed me a small device, just the right size and weight to be held comfortably in one hand. This, he told me, was a 'multi-scanner'.

The top half was a small box that displayed words and images, relating to the information the scanner was collecting, while the bottom half consisted of a number of buttons and sliding switches, which changed in response to what the 'screen' displayed and the commands selected. Though it was incredibly complicated, its computer came with a 'help function' that explained what the scanner was reporting and how to make the most of its use.

Once I became familiar with its basic functions Andreas led the way back upstairs to the others. Once we were together again Intruder provided us with one of his portals and we passed through it into a thickly wooded area. Intruder and Andreas quickly put Morianna and Zatharuss through the same tutorial as I had, and we were then provided with a solid armband each that strapped around the wrist. The armbands, Intruder told us, were 'distort units', devices that gave false readings to scanners. These devices could allow us to be identified and scanned as being something else; a tree, an animal or even another person. Each also had a sliding scale of lights on them, running from green (safe) to red (high danger), indicating how close a scanner was getting in penetrating the disguise.

Thus equipped, we were directed to play a game of hide-and-go-seek, relying entirely on our scanners and distorters. We did well for beginners; we each found the others a roughly equal number of times.

Once that was over, Intruder demonstrated another technological marvel, the 'holo unit'. Worn about the waist, this device projected an image about the wearer so that he appeared to be someone else entirely. Intruder showed us its effectiveness by suddenly being replaced by a tree, and then by a Big-Head wearing loose clothing covered by a sort of light coat. However, my scanner still showed him as Intruder; combined with the distort units one could now go unnoticed in a whole city of them, provided the distorter held under the pressure of any powerful scanners in the vicinity.

We then returned to the hotel, where I was taken to another room in the basement. This time it was a 'shield practice room'; I was provided with another armband, this time one that somehow projected a slightly translucent disc about the size of the shields used in the Crusades. With this I was supposed to block the energy bolts fired by a number of automatons around the room. I did fairly well for a beginner, though fortunately the beams the automatons fired only stung painfully.

The next day we were divided into two groups; Victor would stay with Andreas while Intruder took Morianna, Zatharuss and myself to the Shadow where the nerve centre was situated. After some effort Morianna just about managed to convince Bernard to stay with Victor; the chances of him obeying, however, were probably very slim.

Once we were provided with another set of backpacks, Intruder took us through another of his portals to a wide plain, just a short distance away from an outcrop of rocks. The weather was warm, if not arid; too hot to move during the midday period. Intruder led us to a fair-sized cave where we rested for about an hour.

Intruder gave a form of explosive device into Morianna's keeping, to be used as a last resort; it was powerful despite its size, and would decimate an area more than five miles across. He also told us that the City was about fifteen miles away, to the north. He then left us, but said he would be nearby if we needed him.

Once the midday heat had died down we continued on our way, taking our bearings from our scanners; they also acted as compasses. Despite that, we could just about see the pinnacles of the silvery-white City on the far horizon.

Our scanners informed us that about half a mile away there was a large conduit leading towards the city, with a structure surrounding it every half-mile. As we drew closer to it, we discovered the structures served as small garrisons, and the pipes carried some form of plasma ('a gas of ionised atoms' apparently) to the City, possibly for the purpose of producing power. We did not get too close as these guard posts had powerful scanners of their own.

By the next day we could see more of the City. It was very large, and appeared to have been built around a mighty central tower in a concentric fashion. In a far more clinical way than in Corwin's Paris, it looked as if it had been built according to some cold, analytical design. From what we could see the buildings all looked very much alike. The power conduits ran to just inside the City's borders before going underground.

From behind the cover of some rocks a few yards from the edge of the City we examined it's 'sensor net'. With some study of the patterns in the sweeps we found several points where we could slip in through the sensor energies with minimal risk. In this case, minimal risk meant that it was possible that our distort units could be overwhelmed and allow us to be discovered. We were confident that quick action could get us through safely.

When the time was right, we each dashed across the heavily probed City border. True to my luck, I came the closest to being detected as an intruder. Once we were all across we fled deep into the City to avoid the patrols.

Night was falling and we almost became caught up in the rush as everyone headed back from wherever they had been working to wherever it was that they lived. By the look of it, life was heavily regimented and everyone's needs were catered for; I saw no beggars and no evidence of any criminal activities. There were no law enforcers as such, only the military types who made regular patrols. There was also no litter on the streets, though I would expect that of a technologically advanced society.

With rope and grapnel from Zatharuss' pack we quickly and quietly scaled a four storey building, where we set up a sort of camp for the night.

I was awoken the next morning by a wet nose rubbing my ear. Opening my eyes, I found my fears realised; Bernard had come to join his mistress. After a quick meal of heated bag food Morianna climbed back down to ground level to investigate the city, expressly for the purpose of finding any civil buildings. I was left with Zatharuss, the both of us working to keep Bernard from accompanying her.

With time available, I asked Zatharuss about the wallets. He told me that the total fee was money enough; he did not require any additional loyalty payments. He expected 'the army' to pay for his food and board; he had made use of the money I provided at the coachhouse because it was the only money we had had.

This seemed reasonable enough to me, and was much as I had expected. All I had to do now was convince those who had put this task to me of his sincerity.

At this point I got a little bored, so I left Zatharuss to attend to Bernard while I climbed down to do some investigating of my own. With the holo unit activated and the distorter doing it's work I moved through the city, heading towards where one of the plasma conduits entered the City.

The building was impressive, extremely strong in construction and home to a large contingent of soldiers. It looked as if any attempt to attack one would be a mistake.

Returning back to the outskirts of the City I found myself forging a path through thick crowds, all headed towards the central areas of the City, presumably to the places where they worked. It was hard going, especially when I looked so out of place compared to the rest of them, but I found my way back to 'our' building eventually.

My problem now was getting Zatharuss to lower the rope so I could climb back up without drawing undue attention. First I attempted whistling, but the strangely perturbed expressions of those around me made me stop soon enough. I would guess that they lead very controlled and ordered lives, and were not used to people singing, whistling and the like. There was no need for such pointless activities for them; it would distract them from their diligently pursued tasks.

My whistling must have attracted more attention than I thought; before long a group of large, serious-looking gentlemen came along and stood close by. They had the manner of

law enforcers, dressed like common folk, seeking wrongdoers amongst the crowds. Anxious to avoid them I joined the flow of workers and drifted amongst them towards the centre of the city.

The serious men moved through the crowd around me, no doubt aware of my supposed appearance. In a bid to lose them, I made some adjustments to my distort and holo units, effectively altering my visual and scanner appearance to make me look like someone else. Following a few ducks and double backing I finally lost my hounds and returned to the area around 'our' building. By this time I was more than two hours later than I had told Zatharuss I would be, and still at a loss on how to attract Zatharuss' attention while not attracting attention to myself.

Looking carefully around I noticed a suspicious-looking individual standing close to a group of people. He (or perhaps she; or even it) stood to one side of the doorway opposite 'our' building and appeared to be watching everyone going by. Was it another disguised law enforcer?

Considering the way we were both acting, I began to have my suspicions. I had my doubts when the suspicious one joined a group and joined in their conversation, but a quick and stealthy sensor scan revealed the truth: Zatharuss and Bernard were on the roof while the rather furtive personage before me was indeed Morianna.

I went over to join the group and greeted her. She nodded in return and we went around the back of 'our' building. Morianna bid me wait, and after a short time of concentration she clambered up the wall of the building like a monkey up a tree. Once on the roof she lowered down a rope for me to climb up, narrowly avoiding a patrol.

I told them what little I had found out, and then Morianna made her report. She had come across a clerk and made mental contact with him. A quick 'scan' of his mind revealed that the people in the City were, in a way, little more than drones. They were almost incapable of being bored and took an almost physical pleasure in studying of all types. As a result they were ideally suited to analysing the information put before them. Most of the work that was done involved sorting and investigating reports from spies and scouts.

An important facet of the system used in the City was that only a few saw the whole picture; almost everyone was a small and poorly informed part of the whole arrangement.

The reports over with, we began to consider plans of action.