

Journal 24 - in Shadow

Andreas returned after a short span carrying yet more food, as well as small tablets of what he called vitamins, which would help to strengthen us after our vigorous exercise. Once our muscles had loosened, he led us to a fair-sized room with soft, spongy floor mats and took us through a number of slow, precise movements that made the most of our balance and dexterity. Andreas called this regime Tai Chi, a form of 'martial art' mostly dedicated to physical health. It was remarkably relaxing.

This was followed by a brief period in what he called a 'total immersion virtual reality program'; this turned out to be a world created on and by a computer that could be entered by the use of a form of headset. At Andreas' suggestion we asked Intruder to show us to them. Victor found himself in a set of circumstances that most suited him: a protracted, close combat with a profusion of opponents. I, meanwhile, settled for a session with a very attractive masseuse; although the massage she gave me had no actual effect it still felt very good and allowed my mind to wander.

I pondered our next move; where would we be sent next? We had no real choice in the matter, though perhaps Morianna and myself had the least of the four of us. Morianna was bound to Julian in some way (lovers rather than related I would think), while I had a similar duty because both of Benedict and, I think, because of the trust they put in me by allowing me to walk their Pattern. Victor would follow orders like a good little soldier, while Zatharuss would follow his curiosity and the jingle of gold.

When it was over, Victor and I went in search of the kitchens and found Morianna there with Bernard. We helped ourselves to the thick, meaty stew on the cooker and set to it.

About halfway through I felt a strange sensation: a series of small pops, reminiscent of the explosion you get when a small amount of gas is ignited. They were all but simultaneous. I looked about for the source and by the way Morianna did the same I knew she had heard them as well. Victor remained oblivious. Morianna looked at me then went out to look in the rooms on the ground floor, while I went upstairs to fetch my sword and check those rooms. I did so carefully, as it was getting very cold and ice was beginning to form.

In my room a fire was burning, without fuel. It just crackled merrily away without any wood or coal to feed it. When I looked, the other rooms had similar fires in their hearths. I went downstairs to find Morianna, and located her back in the kitchen. She had not seen any fires as I had.

I expressed my fears that the magic fires might attract the frog-men, but we decided (or hoped) that it was too cold for them to venture out of the sea. What with it being rather late, we all headed off to bed; we took some care, as the forming ice was very slippery.

The next morning Intruder arrived just after breakfast. He seemed quieter than normal, and a lot more stern. Presumably he had had a bad time somewhere; I did not ask. He suggested I have a workout and advised me to make use of the 'holo-trainer' in the room next to the weights room; I would have to go in and wait about ten seconds for the system to activate. He also said I should wear some light and loose clothing.

I sought the room out after eating and then resting for about half an hour. It was fairly small, about ten feet along each wall and a softly padded floor. After a few moments a woman dressed in a tight, short-sleeved shirt-and-shorts ensemble flickered into view before me and asked for a 'difficulty level'. Not knowing the limitations of these levels and what the workout would entail, I settled for the lowest. 'She' then proceeded to lead me through a number of simple muscle stretching and 'cardiovascular' exercises to enhance fitness.

It was quite tiring and I even felt good afterwards. And for a projected image, the trainer was a most remarkable individual. Very, ah, healthy. I showered, dressed and returned to my room where I sat and read a novel from 'my' bookshelf. It was "this year's best pulp action novel!" No doubt it had a basic and predictable plot if you knew the type, but I found it quite gripping all the same.

The next three days settled into a routine. Neither Intruder, Andreas nor Zatharuss were seen, and we made our own food and entertainment. Victor seemed to spend much of his time training in the gym, while Morianna and myself made only occasional, half-hearted

visits, preferring to swim instead. I tended to immerse myself in novels for amusement, as there was very little else to do.

Eventually I discovered Intruder on the way to the pool one morning. He told me that our next mission had been decided; another mystery to be unravelled, this time in an arctic area with high wind chill. I told him I was on my way to the pool, so he said he would get the other two and bring or direct them there. We then went our separate ways.

Intruder soon returned with Morianna, and the tow of them had a little discussion as I swam. Victor arrived not long after, still carrying a pair of the smaller weights. I swam for a little longer, and then got out to join them.

Intruder filled us in: another strange event was occurring in Shadow and we had to investigate. The place was equivalent to the late twentieth century, but as it was an arctic region not many of the newest advances were seen there. Firearms worked and we would be given some, though our ammunition supplies were not to be very large as very few people in the region had a lot of it anyway. The people in the area were similar to the Eskimo people of northern America; simple folk with little in the way of technology, tribal with many customs and great hospitality. Women were almost property, and one of the greatest honours a host can give his guests is to offer his wife to one of them for a while.

Another major thing was the food. Since all their meat is kept frozen and then left to thaw it always turned out mushy and had a tendency to cause illness. As a result they made use of maggots to 'pre-eat' their meat, and they then eat the maggots. To turn down their 'food' could be taken as a great insult, so we had to practice eating maggots.

With a grin he produced from under a cloth a small bowl of small, wriggling maggots. I steadfastly refused to try any, no matter how much they pushed me. Victor tried one and promptly staggered off to vomit in a plant pot. He then tottered away in the direction of the lavatories.

Morianna smiled at Intruder and placed a couple of maggots in her mouth. She chewed, swallowed and looked at me. I shuddered and went back to the book I had left by one of the lounging chairs. I have a feeling she cheated somehow; probably shapeshifting.

I asked Intruder if Zatharuss would be joining us; he told us that he was busy somewhere on a mission with Andreas.

Once Victor returned, Intruder handed out the various sets of extreme weather clothing and backpacks we would need. The lower layers consisted of warm woollen clothing, over which went a waterproof layer and an outer fur layer. Our packs contained a few of the self-heating food packs as well as some 'high-energy' rations and a small heater/cooker that I think ran off of some form of magical energy. Morianna and I were each given a pistol and rifle each, plus ammunition. Victor was not given either, as we already knew he hated them.

Then we were introduced to the final part of our equipment: a computerised mapping device known as a 'navimap,' used in conjunction with a 'global positioning device.' It would show our position to the nearest metre on the map on the screen; combined with its built-in compass we could find our way to any point within a hundred miles of the location we had to investigate, marked out on the navimap as areas of orange (medium oddity) and red (extreme peculiarity).

Once we were fully kitted out Intruder led us through one of his portals to, of all places, a jungle. By the time he had given me a small printed list of Shadow-walking factors so I could lead us there we had all but collapsed from the heat. I soon made it cold enough for us to avoid fainting away, and within a few hours we found ourselves deep in the middle of a great tundra; great drifts of snow as far as the eye could see.