

Journal 27 - the Hidden Valley and Shadow

Our attempts to placate the technicians failed; we even tried to convince them we were Black Riders, come to observe them at work. Naturally, such a desperate bid failed completely, and Victor was forced to deal with them. The way he chased them around and soundly thumped each one into unconsciousness suggested to me that he had been actually looking forward to some violence for quite a while.

We went deeper into the complex, trying to lose anyone who might have responded to the alarm. At one point Morianna and I dressed ourselves in a pair of worker's coveralls we found in a small room. Finding ourselves heading upwards, we ended up outside on the edge of the roof, on a walkway that ran around the edge of the whole roof.

An alarm bell was ringing loudly, so any hopes we may have had of us not alerting everyone in the Valley were definitely quashed. Indeed, in the distance we could see a large group of what appeared to be armoured men riding horses at full gallop towards the refinery from the city. We moved around the walkway so as to be out of sight of the approaching riders while being able to watch them as they got nearer.

Finally cornered, Victor was about ready to escape into Shadow when I suggested to him that perhaps if we kept moving around the walkway when people came to search for us there was a possibility that we might avoid them all. He looked blankly at me till I said it again and emphasised the word *possibility*; then he understood.

Thus we did as I suggested, and we both exerted what influence we could muster over Shadow to increase the possibility that we would not be found by any searches. It was remarkably successful; I had not been sure that it would actually work.

It was not entirely successful, however. We rounded a corner just ahead of two search parties and came face to face with an old man. In this place, actually *looking* old seemed unusual, and this fellow seemed to be in his seventies at least. To me, this could only mean one thing: he was an Elder.

He was bald, with clothing that was fairly simple in cut and fashion but was clearly made of a more expensive material than the other folk used. He did not give us his name.

He smiled at us and asked us politely if we would come with him to have a little talk. Having no real alternative, we agreed to do so; he promptly lifted his arms and we all lifted up into the air as if we stood on a section of flying walkway that was also invisible. A few more gestures set us off in the direction of the city, and the council tower specifically. We moved at the speed of the fastest horse and the wind did not touch us.

The Elder led us into the tower, the guards snapping to attention as he approached. He followed him up several flights of marble stairs to a fair-sized apartment with a connected bathroom. He directed us to freshen up, and said he would return later. Morianna went first, then myself and Victor. The room was sparsely furnished with only a large table, six chairs, some cupboards and a second connecting door that was closed.

I suppose we could have left at any time by using the Trumps, but I do not think there was any threat to be found in our current situation; not yet, at least.

When the old man returned he sat down and immediately asked if we were from Amber. This certainly surprised me, but I suppose we would not have been sent here if there was not some form of interference that related to the present situation in Amber. Indeed, it seemed likely that the Amber intervention was the Black Riders.

We hedged a little, giving vague answers to his questions regarding Amber until eventually we admitted to it. We asked how he knew of Amber but he spoke instead of how his people had agreed to construct several 'items' for Eric, and how they had subsequently been denied payment. How one pays a race that lives for many thousands of years and have incredible magical powers is beyond me.

He then said he would show us the items his people had constructed and even give them to us, but only if we agreed to give him the payment Eric had offered him. The payment turned out to be some very strange articles including some prime caviar and a specific make of automobile. Victor brought out his Trumps and dealt out his card of Fiona. He stood to one side as he talked quietly to her through the contact, and announced she had agreed to the Elder's terms and that his payment would be arriving soon.

He then led us up another flight of stairs to a large room to show us the three 'prototypes' they had constructed so far. The prototypes were about six feet tall and each consisted of a long shaft twisted into a shape like that of a long spring only wide at the bottom and tapering to a 'point' to form an overall shape like that of a cone. The cone was perhaps two feet wide at the bottom and was just wide enough at the top to accommodate, say, a small apple. The shafts themselves were composed of some dark metallic substance. Just for the hell of it Victor attempted to lift one but it was beyond even his considerable strength.

The Elder said they had been designed to focus energy down the cone, presumably from base to point. Two others had been destroyed during the process of being made.

Just then he was interrupted by a loud thump outside. He all hurried to the nearest window to see what had occurred and were greeted by the sight of a large, open-topped automobile coming to a stop outside the entrance to the tower. The guards did not know how to take it and just looked stunned. The townsfolk came to watch as Fiona opened one door and climbed out. She went around the back of the vehicle and opened the rear storage box, then began to lift out a number of boxes, small and large, each with a form of writing on the side that told of its contents.

The Elder seemed very satisfied; he jumped up and down a few times and almost hit the ceiling. He ran down the stairs and out the entrance with us hot on his heels. He almost swept Fiona into a big hug, I think, but at the last moment controlled himself and just thanked her politely instead. Fiona told him she would deal with the removal of the focusing devices.

She then spoke to me, just loud enough to be heard by everyone within ten feet, and said that there was no need to worry about the egg; Bleys had found himself in the same predicament once before and nothing had come of it, except perhaps a few jokes. I had the feeling that now the secret was at least partly out, I had some trying times ahead of me.

The matter of payment resolved, Fiona led us into Shadow for some time until we found ourselves on a seamless stony road in a pine forest. We could just hear the sound of a large body of water close by, and no other people were in sight. I think I could just see the outlines of a number of single storey buildings a short distance away through the trees.

Fiona then handed each of us a set of keys and directions to a chalet that were for our personal use, before walking further down the road until we lost sight of her through the trees. I followed the directions she gave me and found myself at the door of one of the modest houses I had seen though the trees. Inside it was rather simply furnished, like a hotel room. An L-shaped settee sat in one corner of the living room, opposite a low table and what I took to be one of those television devices. A small kitchen occupied the other half of the living room; at the far end were a set of glass door that led down a small slope to a big lake. On either side of these doors were three rooms; on the right, behind the kitchen, was a well-appointed bathroom. Opposite them were two bedrooms, one small and one large.

Once I had glanced around a smell intruded into my thoughts; fresh bread and spicy sausage with a background hint of beer. Then I noticed the fine and no doubt tasty meal on the sideboard next to the cooker in the kitchen. Without hesitation I set to it and before long felt very comfortably full.

I followed this delightful meal with a long, hot bath that took all my pains and worries away, at least for a time. Only towards the end did the world intrude; I heard someone moving fairly furtively in the living room, and then quietly close the door behind them as they left. I could not really be bothered to leap up and investigate, so I relaxed for a few more minutes before I climbed out and dried myself off.

With a towelled robe on, I warily entered the living room to find a blue, two foot tall egg on the living room table. It was wrapped in a bright red ribbon and bore a note saying "Your son, Eggbert." No sooner had I read it but the egg started to cluck like a chicken. That was the last straw. I carried the egg out through the back doors and threw it down the slope. The egg broke and revealed a small black box within it that produced the clucking noises. I smashed it with a rock and silenced it. Then I returned inside and made a small sandwich which I ate with some wine while I made an attempt at operating the television. It was quite easy, and I was soon watching a program that claimed to report the news from around the whole world. It was all rather depressing, with a few happy stories mixed in with numerous tales of death, accidents, crime and war.

My viewing was interrupted by a knock on the door. Opening it I was enthusiastically greeted by Guin. She then held me at arm's length and asked me what all the egg-related comments were about. Sighing, I took her into the living room and explained the situation in a

very basic way. She almost smiled, but controlled herself first, then told me that a family gathering was being held that night, specifically a 'barbecue.' This involved standing around drinking and then eating food badly cooked on a grill over an open fire.

Guin told me she now had to go and inform Zatharuss about the night's entertainment, and headed towards the door. Just before she left she informed me with a straight face that in the place where we were it was a week until Easter; once that had set in I realised that I was in for a great number of egg-ceedingly funny egg comedy.

No sooner had she left than there was another knock on the door. This time it was Benedict. He came in when I offered and refused my offer of food or drink. He asked after me, and I told him I was well save for a few injuries, physical and personal. He seemed content at my reply, and told me that Andreas was currently missing in action. He was supposed to have met up with Zatharuss 'after the assassination', which was presumably what Zatharuss had been doing while we had been busy slogging through the icy wastes and the Valley. His voice gave no indication of what had occurred.

He nodded a farewell to me, and passed Guin on the way through the door. Though I think he missed it, I clearly saw her watching him go past from under her lashes and a blush cross her cheeks. When I raised a questioning eyebrow she blushed slightly more and just said that there was something about him and I that I would not understand, not being a woman. I took her word for it.

She led me back to the settee and pushed me down onto it, then gave me a thorough massage. After the cold of the tundra and the warmth of the Valley, along with certain injuries I had acquired there, it was very welcome, and I soon slipped into a relaxing doze.

She nudged me awake some time later to tell me it was almost time for the barbecue. I dressed in some clothes I found in the wardrobe in the main bedroom; they fitted me too well to be a coincidence, and besides that I think I recognised them from the shopping trip Guin and I had made before we had all visited Corwin's Paris. I dressed in clothing of good quality, as I prefer to, with a fine white shirt, brown trousers and a decent pair of boots, over which went a dark green, velvety jacket. I thought it would be important to dress well for the first real social gathering of the Great Family I was part of. Besides, I enjoy wearing fine clothing; we all have to have some vices and conceits.

Guin borrowed a blue jacket to complement her plain but pleasing dress; as I held it for her to put it on, I noticed that she had apparently suffered some injury of her own. There was a fresh but small scar just below her left ear. I refrained from asking about it just then, to avoid any questions that might tarnish the evening ahead.

Guin led the way to the road and down it a few hundred yards until we turned off towards the lake and found ourselves on an outcrop of land that jutted out into the lake. There were four wooden tables that stood around an open area in a rough semicircle, each with about six chairs around them; at the open part of the semicircle was a sort of big stove. It was made of bricks and had a grill over the open top; under it was a large fire made of wood and coal. A large number of pieces of chicken, steaks and sausages were arrayed on small tables around it next to a large number of bread rolls and salad, and Corwin stood in front of the whole thing doing the cooking.

I did not immediately recognise him as Corwin, of course; that was because he was wearing a costume that made him look like a giant pink rabbit, one that wore a stained white apron and used cooking utensils. When he saw me approaching he grinned like a loon and held out a wicker hand basket filled with many small eggs each packaged in some sort of thin metal wrapping.

With a slightly pained expression I took one and unwrapped it to discover the egg inside was made of chocolate. I ate some and offered the rest to Guin before making my way to the nearest table.

I found myself sitting on the same table as Benedict, Fiona and Bleys; Victor and Zatharuss sat at the next table, along with Morianna and the ever-present Bernard. The small talk that ensued mostly seemed to cover inquiries after health and comments about plans, but the inevitable jokes at my expense were there too. When Morianna inquired after Julian, she was told that he was busy and might not be able to make it.

Then Gerard arrived carrying two fair-sized casks, one under each arm. His arrival was greeted with some cheering, as no real drink had made itself known yet.

With his arrival, the conversation turned naturally to the discussion of the situation with the war. Benedict, who was generally considered to be the leader of our group when it

came to martial matters, said the campaign was going well. Reports had been received that Random was imprisoned below the castle and that his condition was 'fair', whatever that meant. Florimel was still living in her own rooms in the castle and had freedom to go as she wished, but she was limited to the castle, a form of house arrest. Caine was still nowhere to be found; Julian was now in control of Arden forest and was directing raids by his Rangers against the occupying forces. On top of that, the forces from the Courts of Chaos were still massing and some had even begun to move.

Benedict announced that he had all but finalised his plans for the attack on Amber. Zatharuss asked what part we would have in it, and the suggestion was made that perhaps we could act as part of some skirmish groups. I commented that other than the Defence of Rebma, I had no battle experience beyond cavalry raiding. Benedict told me it was unlikely there was going to be much in the way of cavalry.

Some time later, after the first round of well-done meat was distributed, another found their way to our little gathering: a tall, russet-haired woman in brown and black gracefully came out of the twilight to join us. She was introduced to us as Sand, Andreas' mother. It was commented that her brother had not been invited, but no more was said on that subject. She sat at the table just along from Guin.

I was unaware of her existence; she was not among the cards I had been given, and I thought everyone in the family was to be found there. Obviously the family had yet more secrets.

She greeted those she had not met before and nodded to those she knew, then smiled at me and asked after the state of the Revolution. It transpired that she was aware of the history of another of my Shadow doubles, in much the same way as Tim had been. When she looked beyond me and smiled slightly, I looked round to see Tim had made an appearance too and was sat alongside Victor. And what was more, he was injured once again. The man's luck must be abominable.

Sand's gaze was redirected again at the approach of a man of medium height and very short black hair, wearing what looked like a jacket and trousers of black leather, both making much use of silvery buttons and zips. He carried what looked like some form of portable electronic music device that seemed to consist mostly of speakers. As he sat at the next table to ours opposite Morianna he was introduced as Martin, Random's son and Andreas' father.

As that was announced, I think I went into shock for a brief moment. Presumably Sand was of the same generation as Random, Corwin and the rest; if that were so, Martin had fathered a son on one of his aunts, or possibly half-aunt. Similarly, Morianna was in fact the lover of one of her uncles, or probably half-uncle. Such relationships were usually considered incest. Presumably, in this family different rules applied; perhaps the fact that they were not fully related, being only half-aunt or half-uncle, made a difference.

Until that moment I had not really noticed that Bernard seemed to be in about six places at once. It was only when I looked around that I realised there were actually quite a few more than that. With the arrival of perhaps another twenty hounds, there came the sound of a mighty horse and Julian came into view at the edge of the light, astride his stupendous horse. Dismounting, he handed the reins to a man that all but materialised out of the darkness and who was dressed in the garb of a Ranger. He nodded greetings to those he passed and sat beside Morianna.

Spying Sand, he asked if Delwin were here too; his tone was polite, but seemed to conceal something beneath the surface. Just as politely Sand answered in the negative. He just shrugged.

Once Julian had eaten some of the food on offer, he gestured a few of his hounds over to him and knelt down as they approached. He seemed to whisper to them as they sat before him, and as they ran off to join their fellows he held his hand out to Morianna and they walked off together in the direction of the road.

At this point Gerard and Victor started on the bawdy sailor's songs and before long everyone who knew the words joined in; the rest of us joined in with the choruses. The drink began to flow in earnest, and after about an hour I found myself beside Victor facing Benedict and Corwin over a giant chessboard. A game of drafts was set up only the pieces were full beer and whiskey glasses. The game began, and as each piece was lost the contents had to be drunk.

Needless to say, Victor and I must have lost terribly badly because I do not remember losing.