

## Journal 28 - in Shadow

I woke with aching head and a sour taste in my mouth. For some reason the world was very dark. I felt around and immediately found I was not alone: I was accompanied by two wine bottles. Further exploration revealed I was inside some large and spherical, no, *ovoid* object.

Naturally, it was an egg.

It moved in a rather peculiar way that seemed familiar to me. In my state I could not quite place it, so I kicked hard at one side until I broke open a hole big enough to look out through. I was lucky to have made it where I did, for I was floating in the middle of a lake!

Carefully standing up, I made another hole in the pointed top and surveyed my surroundings. A rope was connected to the edge of the egg and held it about twenty feet away from the shore. I appeared to be moored quite close to my house. I set to work tipping the egg over with my weight just enough so I could reach the rope and pull myself to shore, but my efforts proved worthless when a trio of squirrels came down out of the trees and bit through the rope.

I was left with only one option: I overbalanced the egg entirely and swam out. I swam about a little to clean myself off and dragged the egg ashore. In an effort to make myself feel better about the whole situation, I smashed the egg up with several large, thrown stones and a few hefty stomps.

I quickly jogged back to my house only to find the front door was locked fast with a weighty padlock. The glass doors around the back were also locked. My attempts to break the remarkably tough glass with a rock were halted by the appearance of Guin just beyond them. She seemed surprised to see me but amused all the same.

She opened the doors to let me in, but before I entered I found myself a particularly large stone and then went in. I closed the doors and calmly threw the stone through one of them. Guin looked rather startled by this action, but did not ask why I did it. I do not think I could have given her a suitable answer anyway.

She began working on breakfast while I took a shower and got dressed in some casual clothing from the wardrobe.

When I finally returned to the living room Guin was nowhere in sight, and she had not even had time to even begin cooking. Instead, a chess game awaited me on the low table. Two small clocks stood at one side of the board and a note lay behind them.

A game was already underway, and at first glance (to a bad chess player) white was in trouble. Close to half his pieces had been taken and black looked poised for an easy victory. From the way the clock on white's side was moving while black's was not, I guessed it must be white's turn. The note read "Standard rules apply." I made the obvious guess that I was supposed to make a move for white.

While considering that move I went to make myself a simple breakfast of bread, meat and cheese. While in the kitchen I noticed three dogs outside, of the same breed as Bernard but just slightly smaller. They sat just beyond the strangely repaired glass doors and appeared to be looking at something. When I tried to see what it was I failed to see what was holding their attention so absolutely.

Then I almost dropped the bread I was holding in shock. A huge bird sat in a tree just at the edge of my field of view. It looked like an eagle, but was easily five feet tall at least! Then it turned to look right at me. Its eyes sent a shudder right through me so I closed the curtains a little and went back to making my breakfast.

When I was ready to eat I sat and contemplated the chess game as I ate. After almost an hour I had determined that the best I could do was hold black off for three turns before I was defeated. Glancing out the glass doors I could see the dogs had a tendency to glance my way on occasion, and they seemed rather hungry when they did so. So I collected some uncooked bacon from the kitchen and proceeded to feed them. I had to go back for seconds, and found they also liked eggs (of all things) and ate them whole.

Out of the corner of my eye I spotted a figure in the distance, partly concealed in some trees. The figure seemed strange somehow, but I was unable to see it clearly because it vanished almost as soon as I saw it. The hounds did not notice it, but after some attempts

at vocal commands I forcefully turned the head of one of the dogs in that direction. It stayed fixed, looking that way, for quite a while; the other two looked that way occasionally, but concentrated on looking everywhere else.

My decision on the chess game made, I made the move that should slow black down for three turns before pulling on a jacket, picking up my sword and leaving the house to see Zatharuss.

He was not in, or did not respond to my polite knocking. As I was trying to decide where to look next I felt a wave of Power wash over me from the direction of the main road. As I recovered from the shock I noticed one of the dogs had joined me, and I soon heard the sound of running feet approaching.

Zatharuss came running around the corner towards me. He barely stopped as he opened the door and rushed past me to begin hastily packing. When I asked him what was happening he told me we had to leave very soon. As I turned to dash for the door I found my way blocked by Fiona, who held up a hand to halt my progress. She told me that there was no time to go to my house for anything and that we had to join Morianna at the party area where Bleys would see to our escape. She then left.

I was glad I had brought my sword with me after all, as well as my deck of Trump cards and my pocket watch also. I would not want to have left them behind.

Zatharuss had finished stuffing clothing into his pack and so we headed out the door to find ourselves facing a rather stern-looking Benedict. He looked at us and said just one word: hurry. He then continued on his way without another word.

We ran to the outcrop and met up with Bleys and Morianna, who tightly held an angry Bernard in her arms. Bleys raised a small device to his mouth and spoke into it, saying we were clear and the charges could now be activated. He then put it back in his pocket and waved us to follow him. He took us towards the road, but in almost no time at all he was leading us into Shadow.

After an indeterminate time he stopped, and we found ourselves standing in the rain in the middle of the night in some back alley somewhere. Even though it was night I could still hear loud noises that I quickly associated with motor vehicles of some sort, and in the background there was a variety of music that sounded mostly like metallic grinding with an underlying beat that sounded like a small chorus of birds, or perhaps squeaking mice. A light at the mouth of the alley flashed and sparked in the rain; it was reversed, but I think it said "Club Divine."

Bleys cheerfully nodded a farewell and walked further down the alley before vanishing in a sort of flat, flickering manner. We looked around, trying to figure out where to go next when we were approached by a man in dark clothing and a black leather jacket. He wore a red scarf around his head and his jacket displayed insignia that clearly suggested some form of affiliation to a group.

He greeted us warily and told us that we were protected up to Fifth Street. He then darted back out the alley and headed off on some other errand, no doubt.

Then I heard a faint complaining voice that I quickly recognised as belonging to Zatharuss' long quiet and magical ring. It told us that the magical energies of the place we were in were very low and this was somehow causing it pain; it would have to 'shut down' for the duration unless really needed.

We finally headed out of the alley to find ourselves in a street that would be described anywhere as disreputable. The "Club Divine" was a garishly lit place that advertised "the best music, the best drinks and the biggest rotating dance floor in Nu Amsterdam." It certainly attracted a lot of customers. The other, similar looking places I could see along the street were almost as popular, as were the places that advertised "live shows" and "hot girls." The smaller number of shops and hotels amongst them were nowhere near as brightly lit. The people were as outrageously dressed as the clubs were lit. The profusion of colours and smells was almost overwhelming.

We found ourselves one of the cheaper hotels where I suddenly happened to have enough money to pay for room for the night and still have some left over. The usual pay was by the hour, and judging by the clientele we saw coming and going I knew why, but we haggled a price for two rooms for the next twelve hours. The manager looked lewdly at Morianna and winked at us as we went to the lift that took us up to our floor.

Morianna took Bernard into one room while Zatharuss and myself shared the larger of the two. The room was quite squalid with a rather shabby bed, a couple of battered chairs round a table and a blanket nailed to one wall by its top edge. Underneath it was a television set into the wall behind a thick piece of scratched glass. Switches were set alongside it and controlled the volume and channels; it had no obvious off switch, which was why the volume was down and the blanket hung over it. The window with its tatty curtains looked out over a shining city of dark, blocky towers that were covered in lights. The area we were in bordered right upon a wasteland of blasted buildings and rubble, with the occasional small shantytown amongst the wreckage.

Zatharuss took some of the blankets and lay on the floor, while I took the quilt and bed. I am not sure who got the better deal out of it.

The next day I woke hungry to find Zatharuss already up and eating some ration meat from his pack. It made me wish there had been time to get mine. I watched the television for a time; most of the channels seemed filled either with dramatisations of the lives of soldiers or law enforcers fighting against some horde of subversive rebels, or entirely devoted to men and women performing all manner of sexual acts, with each other, alone using odd implements or in groups. The viewing was regularly broken into segments by short pieces espousing the greatness of the Federal Council that ruled the people of the country, its fine military leaders protecting the good folk of the nation against the evil subversives.

Suddenly every channel was devoted to a Federal News Bulletin; it told of a battle between the People's Army and a group of terrorists that had been attacking a water processing plant in Nu Amsterdam. It showed images of the battle and told of the army's success at stopping the vile subversive terrorists from seriously damaging the plant. The skyline the bulletin showed seemed familiar, so I looked out the window and saw the plant in the distance. However, in blatant contradiction to the news bulletin it was burning brightly in the distance.

Clearly, truth was not one of the things the Federal Council chose to uphold.

Zatharuss answered the knock at the door to let in Morianna, who suggested we decide if we were to stay here or move on to somewhere else. We decided that we should have a look around before we left, so Zatharuss and I wrapped our swords in blankets and we departed from the hotel.

The street looked much worse during the day. Without the night and shadows to conceal the fractured walls, cracked road and peeling paint, the area was clearly shown up for the slum it was. The rain still fell, but now we could see how grimy it was, and how the clothes people wore in the daytime seemed somehow faded by it. I bought a raincoat from a shop that was made of some slippery, almost transparent material and it kept off most of the rain.

Since I was still hungry, as were Morianna and Zatharuss, we bought various versions of something called a "Soy-Mince Pastry." This turned out to be a fair-sized pastry full of something that tasted and smelt like meat but clearly was not. I would say that it was more expensive than its quality would have otherwise suggested. But it filled me up without killing me, so I was satisfied.

As we continued down the street we were intercepted by a young man in leathers who bore the same insignia as the man we had met the previous night. He seemed a little slow, but managed to tell us we were nearing the edge of the area we were safe in. I looked around and saw a sign that said we were on Fifth Street, so he was right.

As we were deciding what to do next, we spotted someone who was as clearly out of place as we were. A short woman, all in black and carrying a large umbrella came towards us from beyond Fifth Street. As she got closer I made out long red hair under a wide-brimmed hat. I thought it was Fiona, but as she got closer I could see it was not; it was in fact Bethal, the relative and sage from Chaos. She greeted us all politely before turning to me. She proceeded to give me 'directions' to a place in Shadow, one that was in the depths of winter and featured a cabin beside a river surrounded by pine trees.

I followed her directions and led us through Shadow for perhaps two hours until we arrived at the right place, just a few dozen feet beyond the cabin. She said we would be safe there for thirty-eight hours, and promptly vanished. We attempted a similarly fast exit as we ran for the cabin; the place was bitterly cold, as was clearly shown by the frozen river. We practically threw ourselves through the doorway to be greeted by the warmth and sound of a raging fire in the hearth.