

Journal 34 - in Shadow

We were all suitably prepared and ready to leave when Morianna suggested to Random that a poison from the Courts of Chaos might be a possible solution to the problems of the mines. He, however, said that it was not really a good idea; not only would it take some time to identify and then procure the chemical, it could either leave Amber in debt to Chaos or introduce the risk of a dangerous, adaptive poison in the environment of Amber instead of the mines, or both.

He then asked what ideas we had come up with for finding people suitable for the job; I suggested that we could find somewhere where the technology was sufficiently advanced and magic equally so. Then we could look in libraries to determine if similar devices to the mines existed in that world, and then locate and employ the sort of people who would know how to deal with them. If equivalent technology could not be found in a particular place, we would try elsewhere.

Random seemed to think this was a good idea, but was interrupted from making any more comment by a page. He was carrying a large plain box, which he handed to me. Random told us it was an almost correct 'mock-up' of a real mine. I asked Random for verification that we were authorised for the offering of land and (presumably) minor titles as payment. He told me that yes, this was definitely so. In a light moment Morianna made a passing comment that they could always offer her mother's hand in matrimony as payment; Random commented that Florimel could be more of a punishment than a reward.

Morianna's mother is the famed Florimel, the most beautiful woman in Amber? That would explain it, I suppose. I did not comment on it then; I decided to save it for a more relaxing occasion.

We decided to modify my original plan somewhat; we would first find a sufficient level of magic and then seek a sphere where technology was similarly highly developed.

So we set out that same hour, collecting horses from the makeshift stables (mine, fortunately, was still there) and rode down the steep pathway down the southern face of the mountain. This way, I was told, was the quickest way to Arden; because of its rather sheer nature and twisting course, it was not a particularly forgiving route for an invading force, but was sufficient for riding up or down in small numbers.

The view was magnificent. The forest was a great green expanse below us and to our right; the valley below, which was known as the Valley of Garnath, was pleasant except for large burnt areas where the dragons had set off the mines on the day of the battle. The rolling blue sea lay to the right and before us could be seen the distant mountains that bordered the realm of Amber.

In more carefree circumstances it would have been nice to just sit up there with a picnic and some interesting people, but other considerations prevented me from dwelling on such things.

Once sufficiently far into Arden, as we had agreed on the way down Victor began the work of shifting Shadow. After a few hours I suggested a brief stop to equip ourselves, and perhaps to get what could be our last real rest for some time. They finally agreed to my suggestion; it appeared I was the only one in need of supplies. Morianna travelled light, fitting all she required in her rucksack; Victor just seemed to have no requirement for anything beyond what he was wearing. I, of course, have never been able to travel light if I can help it.

Victor started to count out coins from a pouch; he told me they were coins from Amber, part of the allowance that he, as one of the royal family of Amber, was due. I quizzed him further on the subject and he just said that I would probably be getting one soon myself. He passed me a double handful of coins to last me until then; of course, with Victor's hands this meant I received quite a princely sum; literally, in fact.

The city we finally arrived at was a marvellous place with just the right blend of open-air markets and well-appointed shops. Although the sun had not yet passed overhead for midday it felt like afternoon, so we sought a tavern and rented three rooms for the night. Leaving our horses behind Victor and I went out so I could make myself feel suitably provisioned. I bought two sets of average clothing and one good set along with a good jacket

and an ankle length coat, all of which amply filled the extra large saddle panniers I also purchased.

We found the best store for wilderness gear and there I added still more to my purchases with a 'survival knife' (essentially a large, sturdy, multi-purpose knife with a hollow hilt that held numerous small but 'vital' necessities) and a profusion of other peculiar items. Fortunately the proprietor included a survival guidebook that helped explain the purpose of most of the survival articles.

I began to pay him in the coins Victor had given me, as I had done everywhere else with no problem; when he saw them he paused and looked hard at the two of us. He very seriously asked if we had stolen them; when we told him we had not, he just nodded and declared we were clearly 'royals'. Victor yielded to the truth in his words; I just looked apologetic.

The proprietor consequently removed some items from the box of items I had purchased and replaced them with equivalent but superior versions, and added a small, one-man tent of some sort for good measure. I thanked him, but he just smiled in a slightly pained manner and handed me a form for me to sign.

Back at the tavern I did my best to pack all my gear into the oversized panniers I was glad to have bought. Morianna had not looked particularly impressed as we arrived, each carrying a good-sized parcel. But then, if she can live out of one small pack, good luck to her.

Victor went out that night in search of a good, rowdy bar; I declined his invitation to join him, preferring to get some real rest before the long, laborious journey ahead of us. Morianna stayed behind too, and after a moderate dinner we stayed in the common room for the rest of the night, drinking and playing cards with the locals while several women with a half-decent voices took their place by the bar over the course of the night to sing a few songs.

The next morning I dragged myself down some time after the breakfast bell rang to eat what I feared would be the last real, regular meal I would have in a long time. I even got the added entertainment of two of Victor's talking hawks confusing several of the merchants in a way only talking, intelligent birds can. Then once we had loaded up our horses and prepared ourselves, we set out into Shadow.

As far as I could tell, we spent the next six weeks, or possibly more, forging our way through the worlds. Victor and I split the work between us, which made it a little difficult to keep going in the right direction, so to speak.

The worlds we passed through went by so fast I had difficulty distinguishing one from another.

We passed through so many one could not list them all; the city populated by people whose eyes glowed with so much light that street lighting seemed unnecessary; the plain where we had to dodge a cavalry charge with knights on armoured but invisible horses; the mountains where the mud around us boiled and gave off a foul grey mist. Then there was the time we were pursued by some breed of fire elemental through a forest for a time; and later we passed quickly though a Shadow where the natives screamed and pointed at a sky that was quickly turning green and roiling like a swift river.

When we could we stopped at a convenient roadside tavern or hotel in a city, if we saw one. I at least was glad to do so, if possible; my companions seemed content to sleep beside the road every night. I preferred to be comfortable whenever I could.

We eventually found a starting point from which to begin the real work; a world which could best be described as medieval with an extra bit of spice. Practically everyone we met displayed some magical ability; no secretive wizards here. People muttered and waved their hands at almost any opportunity, from lighting fires to heating up food that had cooled, or sometimes even just to bring something closer to them if they could not be bothered to stand up or lean forward to reach it.

From there we worked on adding more technology to the blend, while trying to keep the magic much as it was. It was another four or five weeks before we reached a level we were satisfied with; a level of technology we could build on.

The world could best be described as equivalent to a possible early twentieth century Earth, very similar to one I had read about in Rebma. The Twenties, they called it; just after the Great War, a time of growth and exploration enhanced by the presence of real, working magic. Of course, it was the Twenties I had read about that gave me the inspiration to lead us in the direction of such a place. Combined with some suggestions I made to Victor it was easy enough to locate such a place once the groundwork had been laid.

The magic was such that while the requisite energies were available, only those who had at least some training could use it. So while not everyone was a sorcerer they were not uncommon.

We found ourselves in the New World, coming in just west of the city of New York; the influence of that book again, no doubt. It was all light up and awaiting our arrival. Seeing it, we reached an almost simultaneous decision to rest for a while, finally settling on a week as a good period of time to relax and clear our heads before continuing. Fortunately, we found ourselves suitably furnished with the local currency to make our stay very, very comfortable. The hotel was luxurious with fabulously opulent rooms, a magnificent lounge and a casino as well.

From what I could gather, Victor spent much of his time in bars and clubs in search of bare-knuckle fights. Somehow I think any attempt to introduce him to real culture would be a dismal failure. Morianna, on the few times I saw her, explained she had been travelling around the city taking in life in the better and worse parts of town. I, naturally, divided my time between visiting the sights, libraries and museums during the day and the vibrant, exciting nightlife after sunset.

One evening I was in the mood for some company, so I took Guin up on her offer and fetched out her Trump. I was greeted almost instantly by a very friendly kiss. Guin was definitely a sight for sore eyes, even dressed in the sturdy 'fatigues' she wore. I suggested that she join me for an evening of music, dancing, wine and fun, and her wicked smile told me she was game. I pulled her through into my arms and eventually got round to asking what she would like to wear; perhaps we could call a tailor? She told me she *really* needed a shower; the place she had just come from was almost unbearably hot and dusty. She looked at me in a mock-irritated way then and berated me for leaving her as long as I had; it had been more than seven months! I tried to tell her that for me it had only been perhaps three, but just then she looked out of the window of my plush hotel room and gazed at the skyline.

In a pleased tone of voice she exclaimed something to the effect of "ah, Thirties!" and promptly vanished. I can only guess she went in search of that shower.

I kept myself busy reading a book until, an hour later, Guin reappeared. Freshly bathed and dressed, she was a vision in a woman's suit that blended well with the local fashions I had seen up to yet, while perhaps being just on the edge of being what the older ladies of the city might consider scandalous.

That is to say, an interesting slit up the left side of the skirt and a slightly lower neckline that could be considered decent. Needless to say, I had no interest in their opinions.

She brought out a metal cigarette case from within her jacket and placed it in one of those long cigarette holders. I took out the lighter I had acquired and lit it for her before proceeding to light up one of the thick cigars I had been attempting to become comfortable with over the last two days. Guin pointed at it and warned me of the possible repercussions; while my natural regenerative abilities would protect me from the harmful, long-term effects of the nicotine and tobacco, I still had to get rid of the 'bad stuff' somehow. She grinned rather evilly and just said 'hairballs'.

That did not sound good, so I decided to give up the next morning. It was not a hard decision; they really were very smelly.

The night went very well. The clubs were lively, the music energetic and relaxing by turns. The company was excellent too, of course. She was very good at dancing and drank more than I did. She even joined in several games of cards. I just watched her on a couple of occasions; she was incredible. She seemed to be able to read their hands without fail every time, and sometimes got *exactly* the cards she needed at just the right moment.

We took a bottle of wine back with us to the hotel, and I was definitely glad I had called her.

The next morning she had gone. The only sign she had been there was her scent on the air and a note on the table beside the bed. Beside a red, lip-shaped smudge she had scribbled a suggestion that I not leave it as long next time.

The night before we had decided we would leave I noticed Morianna in the casino section of the club I had gone to. She was sitting at one of the 'craps' tables, a variety of

dicing game. She seemed to be doing about average, not really winning or losing. So I decided to help her a little; a little practice with this business of probability manipulation was in order.

I set about concentrating on the game, trying to manipulate the odds when she threw in her favour. It slowly began to work; I tried not to push our luck too much, so as to make it look more natural. After a particularly big 'push' I noticed one of the casino staff taking an interest in our table. By the look of him and the sense of him that I got, he was almost certainly a magician of some kind. What was important, though, was that it appeared that he could somehow sense me manipulating the game. I had not thought this was possible, though he may have been catching the base resonance of Pattern at work on the world around him. Or something like that.

I lay off for about a half hour, until Morianna had turned her attentions to the roulette tables. Her luck varied a little at that table, but seemed to run in every increasing cycles of winning. The magician returned, looking a little perturbed. He seemed to wince when a particularly big push on my part caused Morianna to more than double her money on one spin of the wheel.

The next time, however, he shuddered and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his bleeding nose. I think Morianna and I had all but broken the rules of probability enough for one night.

While she went to collect our winnings, I went over to the bar and bought us drinks, and waited where I hoped she would notice me. However, she was stopped on the way over by an elderly gentleman whose appearance and manner suggested he was a fairly important member of staff in the hotel. He guided her over to the bar and was talking to her about who has helping her. She denied everything, genuinely believing it had all been simple luck. He said the hotel was interested in who her partner was, since they could be interested in employing them. He went as far as suggesting it could be one of her two friends, and naturally turned round to face me.

I, like Morianna, denied everything, of course. Though the slight smile may have been a little bit of a give-away. He eventually let it go, seeing I was going to maintain my pretence and did not (presumably) wish employment at the hotel. He also mentioned, seemingly in passing, that we might be interested to hear that our 'large friend' had been set up for a fistfight in the morning.

Before he left he warned us that we were banned from gambling at that establishment from then on, and in the other gambling clubs they ran in the city; however, for the rest of the night our drinks were covered by the management.

It was just as well we were leaving the next day.

I handed Morianna her drink and grinned, saying half her winnings were mine. She seemed caught halfway between disappointment at finding it had not all been luck, and the thrill of winning big. She did not argue, though.

We stayed for another hour, enjoying the hospitality of the house before we left. We found an expensive and luxurious limousine had been laid on for us; again, our host's generosity at work. I think they just wanted us gone. Morianna cashed ten thousand dollars of her winnings for spending money and ordered the rest delivered to the vault of our hotel.

The ride back was comfy and relaxing, at least until we saw we were for some reason passing through one of the bad areas of the city. I had forgotten the near-slum district lay between the club and the hotel until that moment, so flushed with success I was. I wonder if the owners of the establishment had arranged that we go this way than by a more direct route.

As the minutes passed we saw more and more vagrants beside the road, some gazing at us listlessly as we passed them by.

My conscience started to growl at me a little like an empty stomach, and I could see by the almost concealed look in Morianna's eyes that she was thinking the same thing. I always find it depressing how bad circumstances or sudden twists of conscience can conspire to take away something nice one works for, or does not really work for, as the case may be. Such as the in the case of easily acquired wealth.

Morianna called out for the car to stop just before I did, and we were all for handing out hefty notes to the people around us until the driver (rather smugly, I thought) suggested we take it to a charity organisation that was nearby. We rather grudgingly agreed with him and he drove us the 'Dortmund Street Mission' five blocks distant.

The posters on the walls both outside and in claimed they worked hard to make the lot of the homeless better, providing food and shelter for the truly needful and somewhere for the others to stay when they needed to. The two men and the woman we encountered there were rather surprised to see anyone at that time of night, and even more surprised to find we had come by to donate money to their cause. The amount just made them completely speechless.

The next day we managed to ask the right people the right questions and made our way to the place where Victor was supposed to taking part in his fist fight. It was in a fairly quiet part of the city, down by the river amongst the warehouses. A circular ring about ten yards in diameter stood in the centre of the open area behind the warehouse, bordered by a ring of battered boxes and rusting engines. About two dozen people were gathered behind one of the warehouses; I could see Victor amongst one small knot of them. I waved, but I do not think he noticed.

The first fight was between two fairly muscled fellows who did not look as if they had even reached their twenties. I bet on the one who practised the most diligently beforehand, stretching and shadowboxing. Naturally, he lost.

Next came our boy, Victor 'The Crusher'. His opponent looked as if he had been in the game for at least twenty years and was currently down on his luck. Of course, Morianna and I placed our bets on Victor, and after a bit of skipping around and a few tentative hits the older man was dropped by a solid (but hopefully restrained) left.

We congratulated Victor on his (easy) victory and listened as he tried to set up another, more challenging fight. He was told, though, that it could be another two weeks before a serious fight could be arranged. The fight organiser took a good, calculating look at Morianna before suggesting that perhaps it could be for her to fight instead. When he said the fight would be in a pool of mud wearing only a 'bikini' (very skimpy and interesting swimwear) she, surprisingly, was willing; however, it would still take a week to arrange even that.

Victor eventually managed to convince him to set up a fight against a dozen fighters of his choice. The arranger was even more surprised when Victor said we would take them all on at once. Morianna was all for joining Victor, but the arranger was not sure anyone would want to fight her. In the end, the three of them managed to convince me to take part instead. I tried to tell them that fisticuffs was not my forte, but they just assured me that I would far better than I thought I would.

The old fighter Victor had just defeated came over and introduced himself as 'Hammer' Dindson, and once he began to get an idea of the sort of fight that was coming up (mostly due to the expression of frenzied avarice on the arranger's face) he immediately signed up to join our side. He said it could be the only chance he would get to stand out from the other losers again; if need be, he could even 'take a fall' like he did against Victor to assure surviving.

I do not think Victor heard this last; he was too busy arranging our fee with the fight arranger. Despite the rather large figures Victor was naming the arranger, incredibly, agreed to them; the profits he could see coming on this fight must have been immense.

The arranger set about wooing the crowd on our fight, and admittedly it did not take much effort; they all saw the opportunity to make a lot of money. By the sound of the bets being laid it was certainly going to be memorable. More money and wager slips changed hands as we waited, until after nearly three hours our opponents finally arrived.

To a man they were all tall, heavily muscled and quite fast. Some were a little slower, but made up for it in sheer size. They had the look of labourers or dockworkers about them. I commented that they looked rather impressive and expressed some concern over my ability to defeat them. Victor just laughed, and reminded me that they were only humans. I winced as Dindson goggled at us after he had said that. Then he swallowed and pragmatically said that he did not care as long as he got his share.

I told him he might as well have mine and Victor's share as well, as we were leaving later that day, and his face lit up as he turned to the fight arranger and got us to repeat that to him. The arranger did not care, caught up in his own dreams of wealth, and agreed without giving it any thought whatsoever. Not that we cared. Dindson happily said he would likely be taking a fall early on to assure he was healthy enough to spend the money on something other than hospital bills.

There was a sudden flurry of feet and a nervous twitch ran through the crows as the sound of sirens got closer and closer; then about a half dozen police automobiles stopped just around the corner from the fight area. Everyone looked about ready to bolt, until the police officers came running up clutching money in their fists and yelling after the odds. The crowd settled down almost immediately.

I took the opportunity to place a bet myself; in fact, I was surprised I was able to. But I was even more surprised to see Julian placing a bet about three places ahead of me in the queue. I hurriedly placed my wager while attempting to keep my eyes on him, and all but lost him as I dashed away from the bookies in wary pursuit. I just caught sight of him going into the female lavatory, which quite surprised me; I waited around the corner for a minute or two, but he did not reappear. I suppose I had not been expecting him to.

However, who should come out but Morianna; obviously she had been using her shapeshifting to surreptitiously place a substantial bet. A good move. She saw me and grinned, waving a wager slip at me.

Then it was time for the fight. I took off my jacket and handed it to Morianna to look after, then rolled up my sleeves. I followed Victor and Dindson into the ring where we finally stood face to face with our opponents. Closer up they looked slightly more impressive than they had at more of a distance, but they way Victor was flexing his muscles at them made them look ever so slightly nervous.

The fight arranger stepped into the ring and held up his hand. Everyone went quiet. Then he sharply dropped his hand and leapt backwards out of the ring as five leapt at Victor, eager to do battle. I was distracted, of course, by the three (or was it four?) who ran at me. I stepped back a little as they came at me, then skipped lightly (or as lightly as I could) towards the nearest and swung a good but restrained punch at his head. He dropped rather like he had been poleaxed, which raised my spirits somewhat.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Dindson go down from what looked to be a rather weak blow to the head. The men fighting him looked rather perplexed for a moment, before deciding to try to help their beleaguered companions who were fighting Victor. I refocused in time to block a wide swing from one of my opponents and gave him a hard shove that launched him back about ten feet and right out of the ring. The second approached more cautiously, but in the end a sharp blow to the gut dropped him and sent him sprawling against the piece of scrap metal that marked the border of the ring.

Suddenly I found myself alone in a strangely quiet ring. While those I had fought lay nearby groaning quietly or having water splashed in their faces, those who had fought Victor were either scrambling out of the ring or lying on the floor in strange postures. By the look of them and the silence of the crowd, Victor had neglected to restrain himself and inflicted full force blows on his opponents, all of whom were now dead.

I knew I had forgotten to do something before the fight.

Then the spell was broken and everyone began rushing to collect their winnings from the bookies. The policemen were finished first, and they left first too, no doubt wanting to get as far from the place as possible. They left just ahead of the fight arranger, who just threw our fee to the floor and ran like he was on fire.

Dindson was unsurprisingly unhurt and swept up the money in a practised kind of way and waved briefly before making his getaway too.

I grabbed my jacket off of Morianna and the three of us set off as fast as we could towards our hotel. It was definitely time to leave.