

Journal 36 - in Shadow

The next couple of days were occupied almost entirely with interviewing the candidates suggested to us by our hosts. They were primarily questioned on their qualifications, experience and teaching or leadership qualities. In many cases we had to ask them to bear with us if we asked what to them sounded like stupid questions, explaining away our ignorance of their world as a need to hear them explain things in a way that could be easily understood by just about anyone. Which was quite true, as we could not be sure the people they would be working with would understand what they were talking about.

I did most of the work, with occasional help from Morianna.

We also asked for references and questioned their willingness to relocate to another country; naturally, we kept the true nature of the destination from them. We would save *that* little revelation until later.

We threw them lures such as free housing, a distinct social standing in the community and hinted at some pretty serious "health benefits"; I think extension of one's lifespan by a factor of several thousand years counted in that respect. We also asked about their families; would they be able to come along? Who would not mind leaving them behind?

After the first round of interviews we had narrowed the field down to fifteen hopefuls. Seven were distinct from the rest in their skills and attitudes, four were of lesser quality but still capable, possibly better as supporters of the main group, while the last four showed varying signs of slight instability. They gave the impression that they lived for the danger and excitement their occupation gave them.

One of the better ones, an Arnold Hollister, had a very sick daughter, aged around thirteen. She was in the grip of some disease they called cancer, some form of wasting disease that affected the 'cells' of the victim in some way that was not explained to me. We brought up medical care during his interview, but approached him afterwards to tell him that our employers possessed some very potent restorative procedures that could help heal his daughter, who was called Jessica. We assured him that those procedures would be of definite help, and he told us that would be a good motivation for taking the contract.

Victor and Morianna arranged with General Lang to be flown by helicopter (a fabulous machine!) to Mexico City, where the hospital caring for Jessica Hollister was. An hour or so later and they were away, taking Hollister with them.

I was left with checking through the notes and curriculum vitae of our candidates to be sure of their compatibility and to try to come up with any more questions to ask them in the second round of interviews.

I also took the time to Trump Random to update him on our situation. I gave him a summary of the potential numbers of people involved, and he asked about what land and/or housing they might require. I told him the group included seven families; that was all the information I had at that time regarding exact numbers. He then asked me what was the timetable of training that was being considered with regards to producing a semi-skilled, non-specialist workforce; I simply told him that that question was in the second phase of interviews.

The conversation over, I got back to taking notes, collating information and generally shuffling paper around. Fortunately, I was disturbed by a Trump contact; opening myself to the call I found myself regarding my father, standing in a rather nondescript location somewhere. He asked how I was, and how we were progressing; I told him I was doing fine, and that we had found a likely source of combat engineers (as the more military versions of 'our' people were known as). He seemed satisfied, and then asked if I would contact him when we were ready to leave; he had a favour to ask. I shrugged and agreed, and he nodded before closing the contact.

All in all, I had spent a few hours preparing myself for the next lot of interviews, and was glad to be interrupted once more by the cool, niggling sensation that heralded a Trump communication. This time it was Morianna, and she told me that Mr Hollister was suitably convinced and was willing to enter into contract with us. I remarked that they had acted quite

fast, and she just shrugged it off. She then told me that they were planning to stay longer, at least until the next day. I simply told her I would see her tomorrow.

She looked a little tired; I was quite curious as to what she had done to persuade Hollister.

A blissfully short period of time later I pulled out my Trump of Random once more. When the connection was formed, I asked him if it was worth hiring the rest of the mercenary group for future use, perhaps just keeping them on retainer. He just told me to do that if I thought it necessary.

Who knows, perhaps I would have a use for my own small, private army sometime?

So I went and sought out the general, and found him working with several other men stocktaking in one of the large sheds at the far end of the compound. I mentioned to him that our employers were considering the possibility of a general, open contract. I told him this could involve the prospect of being called on at almost any time to react all but immediately with any or all of the unit's manpower or equipment. He digested this information before announcing that in the worst case scenario the retainer fee for such a contract could go up to six figures (on the order of millions, in other words). I think the way I readily agreed to the figure he put forward worried him somewhat.

I returned to our dormitory and was unable to bring myself to look at the same pieces of paper again. Instead, I tried to operate the computer in one corner of the main room, but found myself unable to get past the password. I had to resort to reading a book on survival and fieldcraft I found in one of the rooms; at times it was slightly interesting, but the rest of the time it was damnably boring.

The next morning I received a Trump contact from Victor; he told me the two of them were ready to return. Neither he nor I was sure as to the location of the helicopter that had taken them to Mexico City, so I told him to wait until I found out for them. As it was, I still had to conclude the interviews.

I conducted about half of the secondary questioning that morning, deciding to leave the others till after I had spoken to the general.

I sought out Lang just before midday and he told me the helicopter would be sent to collect them. We talked a little further regarding the contract, the retainer deal and the possible travel arrangements; I suggested that we would probably move everyone to, say, Mexico City before flying to join up with our employers. I was not, at that time, in possession of a good plan for getting our hired help to Amber, so I had nothing else to give him. The conversation was cut short when I felt a Trump contact coming on. I rather hastily concluded the conversation before hurrying back to our dormitory to take the contact.

It was Victor again, and he announced that Bernard had finally found us, or Morianna at least. I told him the helicopter was on the way, and he informed me that he had left Hollister with his wife and newly healthy daughter at the hospital. That, of course, sealed the decision to gather everyone in Mexico City.

I spent the next hour or so finishing the interviews, picking the best candidates (in fact, all of them) and telling them to prepare to leave within the next day or so. They took this in, and began to gather what they would need and to inform their families (if they chose to do so).

When the helicopter arrived I went to watch it land and found myself bowled over by an overzealous Bernard before it even fully landed and came to rest. I was glad that he was pleased to see me; it meant that he was not *not* pleased to see me, which would have had a worse effect than being licked and slobbered on. Morianna and Victor followed once the helicopter had settled; Victor was carrying two metal suitcases. Had he been shopping?

Lang was quite interested in Bernard; his look of intense curiosity gave it away. He did not actually ask anything about it, but I could see he wanted to. He did say that most of the arrangements had been made with regards to flying the people to Mexico City, and that he had talked with some of his officers and his partners about the retainer contract.

They had agreed on a retaining fee of one and a half million American dollars, with an additional bonus of forty percent of the fee for any contracts they had to break to answer our call. Additionally, the contract was to remain open for ten years, after which the deal could be renegotiated.

I asked (of all people) Victor for his opinion (Morianna was busy elsewhere) and he said it sounded all right. But then, he is not much of a businessman. He did say, however,

that each of the cases he was carrying contained ten million dollars, so at least he had some uses. Showing uncommon good sense (for Victor anyway) he suggested we take out the money only in the general's office. I concurred.

Once in Lang's office, I asked what the monthly fees for running the compound amounted to; the general estimated it was in the region of two hundred thousand dollars a month. I gestured to Victor to put one of his cases on the desk and suggested Lang open it. When he did so I told him the amount of money it contained (it looked very impressive, that was certain). He just looked at me, I think partly as if I was mad and partly to see if I was lying or trying to trick him.

I told him that the ten million in the case was to cover the retainer fee as well as his running costs for the duration of the contract. He looked rather perturbed by the quantity of money we had laid before him, and told us that he would have to communicate with his officers and partners again before taking the contract.

We went back to our dormitory to prepare to leave, and after a half hour or so we were called back to the general's office. There he told us that he and his partners had agreed to accept the contract, but that he had been told not to accept the full amount. So he reached into the yet again open case and pulled out a single, crisp, thousand dollar note and handed it to me.

We shook hands and signed an informal paper that briefly described the details of the contract; I signed it 'Montsorbier'.

He then told us that we could leave for Mexico whenever we wanted. I said right away, so he set preparations in motion.

While we waited Morianna, Victor and I came hammered out a plan for transporting everyone to Amber. We scoured through a world atlas and picked a little state on the coast of the Black Sea, near Turkey, called Kezekstahn to be our supposed destination. It was suitably small and remote to be of little interest to anyone further than a hundred miles away. Once there, we would meet some of the big caravans that had taken us to Amber just before the final, closing moves of the war. Then we would travel through Shadow to Amber, or perhaps by Trump; I was not sure yet, as I did not know what Benedict was planning for us.

In the short term, we would get to Mexico City, hire a lot of rooms in a hotel and wait for all the engineers to arrive with their families, which we were assured would not take longer than the end of the week. We would also have to see about hiring an aeroplane to get us to Kezekstahn.

The helicopter flight was rather uninteresting and shorter than the flight from Houston. We were deposited at the main airport and took a taxi to the centre of the city, where we solved to problem of choosing the right hotel by just going for the biggest one, the Royal Heltan. Then Victor overcame the problem of booking enough rooms by handing over the other of his well-stocked cases to the management of the hotel and effectively buying the whole hotel for the week. The staff looked so shocked I expected them all to pass out; however, only one of them did.

Suitably ensconced in one of the finest rooms in the whole hotel, I sat back on a massive sofa to watch the television while drinking fine, chilled Champaign. I also delegated the responsibility of informing Random of the latest turn of events to Morianna so I could relax and enjoy myself for a change. I was definitely looking forward to a holiday.

She returned from her conversation in one of the bedrooms to tell me that another person, possibly of 'our generation', had been found and brought to Amber, though she had been told nothing more than that. She then asked me that, since I was unfamiliar with Amber myself, if there was anything I wanted to know about the place. I just told he I would be grateful for a tour of the castle and perhaps the city at some convenient time, before turning back to my Champaign and television.