

Journal 37 - in Shadow

The days passed in comfort. Mexico City was an interesting place, predominantly Spanish but with a number of influences from around the world, as would be expected in a modern city. Warm and sunny with little or no rain. The perfect place for a holiday.

I made the best of the week we had, spending my time around the city and the 'nightclubs' after dark while those engineers we had contracted slowly moved into the hotel in small groups, most of them accompanied by their families. The Heltan itself was luxurious, with large televisions, cleverly positioned art in places where they could not be missed, some remarkable furniture and a fine décor.

Arnold Hollister was the first to move in, having the least distance to go to assemble his family. His daughter, Jessica, seemed very attached to Morianna, following her around almost everywhere. She seemed remarkably fit for one who had been so ill so short a time ago. I got the impression from Arnold's expression that Morianna had done something incredible to produce such a recovery, and my best guess was that she had pulled some shapeshifting trick on her.

On the second day I Trumped Benedict to ask how Amber was doing, and to ask after his health. He assured me both were in fine shape, just before he told me of the favour he required of me. He knew of the current details of the plan regarding transporting the engineers to Amber, but he wanted me to bring the engineers to another place before they went there, a 'strategically important Shadow' that would serve as a kind of test for them, to see if they could accomplish the task. And probably, I thought, to check their reaction to strange circumstances.

The contact sufficiently solid, he then handed me a Trump of the place they were to be taken to; it showed a copse of trees and little more, probably to prevent anyone from guessing where it was. A number of Rangers would be awaiting our arrival; they would tell me what needed doing and also convey the engineers to another, very close site where they would have to clear some more mines.

I agreed (how could I not?) and he seemed satisfied. He then told me that I had made some errors recently – he only told me this, he said, to put me on my guard, presumably against further errors. Before I could question him on exactly what he meant the contact was closed.

I could only presume he meant the prolonged contact with the first dark figure that had Trumped me in Amber. I had done nothing else recently, though what he meant by 'recent' I did not know.

The next day was the start of all our troubles for the rest of the week. As I prepared to leave on one of my morning jaunts around town I happened to notice a car parked opposite the hotel. It was not particularly remarkable, nor did it stand out from those around it in any way. It was the fact that it was resolutely parked exactly opposite my window and that two men sat in it.

Not that odd, you might think, except that they took no great interest in the street around them. When a number of attractive young ladies ride past on scooters one tends to look, unless one is blind or a eunuch. They did not, or at least they did not move their heads to do so. They seemed especially interested in the entrance to the Heltan.

I fetched myself a simple bottle of lager and watched them a while longer. After a minute or two they suddenly started up the car and pulled away, moving down the road until they reached a junction in the road and turned off. I looked up and down the road but could see no other people as unsubtle as they. I shrugged, finished my drink and headed out.

Had someone warned them they had been spotted? Or did they have some other means determining if they were being watched? I had no idea, and quite frankly I did not really care.

The morning went by quite fast. I looked around in markets, visited some galleries and sat in public houses drinking and listening to the vibrant if rather confusing and jumbled music blaring out of the speakers above the bars.

The only thing that ruined the experience was the slow awareness of the fact that I was not moving around the city entirely by myself. Several individuals appeared to be following me wherever I went. Not obviously, nor overtly; one or two of them just always seemed to be there somewhere. Occasionally they would change some part of their attire, a shirt or sometimes a hat, but I would always recognise them.

I stopped for lunch in a pleasant little open-air café and took my rest for perhaps an hour and a half. While I ate I kept my eyes open for my escorts, and saw I had gathered a crowd of perhaps a half dozen. I was, it seemed, really rather popular. While anyone likes to be popular, right then I did not want to be, so after lunch I set about trying to lose them. Unfortunately for them, I had means other than ducking into shops or alleyways at my disposal.

Once I was suitably buried inside a crowded market I set to work shifting Shadow; ever so slightly, so as not to confuse my escorts, I moved the lot of us into a very close Shadow, so to speak. It was in all respects the same as the their home sphere, save that they did not belong there. So they would in all likelihood have doubles, who would probably complain when *their* doubles started trying to live their lives. Their superiors in their home sphere would be quite confused as well by the complete disappearance of their men.

Still in that close world, I casually made my way back to the Heltan, occasionally moving in and out of one world and the next, as close as I could tell, doing my best to completely lose my travelling companions in a different world. At the Heltan I had planned to realign myself with the world I wanted in the elevator, but I encountered a problem in that the Heltan I wanted and the one I was in were not quite the same. My key was not valid there, as they either did not have those same luxury apartments or they numbered their rooms differently.

I avoided any trouble and entered by way of the underground car park instead, shifting my way back into the right world as I made my way to the elevator. Everything, fortunately, was fine there.

I bought a paper in the lobby, just to see what state the world was in that day, but was interrupted in my reading by a strange presence about me. I looked around but was unable to determine if anyone around me was responsible for the sensation. I went to check for messages (another family had arrived) and the presence followed me. It followed me all the way up to my room, and inside.

Something about the room caught my eye as I entered. I think it was the way my glass from earlier looked as if it had been washed before being placed right back where it had been, or perhaps it was the way one of my jackets looked as if it had been very carefully placed in a messy fashion on one sofa rather than actually thrown there.

As far as I could tell the room had been very carefully searched. Nothing appeared to be missing, though of course the presence was still with me. I decided to try and do something about it.

I turned on the big television set and picked a channel that looked interesting; it was a 'natural history programme' according to the guide in the paper I had bought. I sat down opposite it and took up a position that suggested rapt interest in the programme. I then turned my attention both inwards and outwards, focusing my mind with a couple of relaxation techniques I had picked up somewhere in an attempt to localise the presence I felt about me.

It took until the end of the nature programme an hour later for me to pinpoint the presence to a position roughly three feet above and just behind my right shoulder. Of course, this did not really help much, as I was still unaware as to what the presence signified. It seemed likely that it was some form of magical observation, but I did not know for certain.

I decided to see if it was possible to lose it, either permanently or temporarily. So I went out again. I hailed a taxi and directed the driver to convey me to a place I had been meaning to visit, a cathedral with some intriguing ceiling art. The journey took about three quarters of an hour, and for the middle twenty minutes or so of the journey I took the taxi into a neighbouring Shadow. The driver did not like it much, though as far as he knew there was just a few more bad drivers on the road that afternoon.

I had almost convinced myself that the presence had gone for good when it reappeared within just five minutes of our return.

We arrived at the cathedral, and since I was there I decided to make use of the time to look around. It was quite breathtaking, even for one who is not particularly religious, like myself. I took a rest in the park opposite, lying back on a bench in the sun 'catching some

rays' as they say. This time it was easier to localise the presence, and once I had it pinned down again I opened my eyes and turned to stare right at it. I spoke to it as if it were a person (it seemed likely that someone could be watching through it) and suggested that we talk more openly about the matter. I even invited 'them' to breakfast the next morning.

I hoped that shook them up.

I got a taxi back to the Heltan again and on the way I got that cool feeling that signified someone wanted to speak to me by Trump. I opened myself gently to the contact and found myself facing once more that black-cloaked mystery man (or woman) I had come to call Monsieur Manteau. This time he did not waste time with speech or staring but got straight to the point and dropped a fair-sized rock in my lap before abruptly breaking the contact. Fortunately the driver did not notice.

Manteau's present was a roughly teardrop-shaped black boulder a foot long. It was covered in a profusion of markings like small pictograms of some sort that I could not read. Beyond that, the only thing about it was that it felt empty, in the same way that the stone Fiona had given me had exuded a sense of emptiness and depression. Needless to say I found this all rather disconcerting.

On my way across the lobby of the Heltan I felt the coolness of another Trump contact come over me. I waited until I was in the elevator (fortunately I was alone) before accepting the contact. I was glad to see that it was Morianna for a change. She told me that we needed to have a talk; it sounded bad, but her tone told me it was not. I said that since I was on the way up I would be in to see her in a moment.

Only when the contact ended did I notice that my arm and most of my side had become really rather damp and warm. I looked down to see that I was covered in blood! It worried me for a moment, but I soon determined that the source of the blood was in fact the rock. It was pouring out blood like an artery had been cut, and it seemed to be coming out of the pictograms, though it may have just looked that way.

As soon as the elevator doors opened I dashed for my room, leaving a big pool of blood in the elevator and several large drops of it behind me as I went. There was no time to worry about that then, though, as I had to deal with the source of the problem first. I all but threw the rock into the bath and set the taps running before tearing off my red, damp and sticky clothes off and throwing them in with the laundry.

Just as I had finished washing the traces of blood off of me and pulling on a clean pair of trousers and a shirt the laundry basket began to hiss and steam like a steam engine. I feared that the clothing was somehow alight, so I pulled out all the stained articles of clothing (including those stained my contact) to find the stains were hissing like boiling acid. I threw them in with the rock.

Whatever it was about the clothing appeared to stimulate the previously quiescent bath into activity also. It began to steam like a bucket of water thrown over a red-hot stove, filling the whole room with its vapours. I pushed the bathroom window wide open and it cleared somewhat.

I was just heading towards the door to call on Morianna when there was a knocking at the door; I opened it to reveal Morianna. She had wondered where I had got to, and one her way down the corridor had been confronted with what looked like small pools of blood smoking like they had set the carpet alight. She looked around the room, which had all but filled with quite thick steam by that point. She just turned to look at me, a question written clearly on her face.

So I explained how a mystery figure, not unlike the one who had delivered the Trump of this world to me, had deposited a strange rock in my lap on the taxi ride back to the hotel. I told her how, after my Trump contact with her in the lift, the rock had started to bleed, and I had just got to the point where the laundry basket started steaming when I quite clearly saw a large eye about half a foot across floating just behind Morianna's head. It was completely disembodied, and appeared to trail what would best be described as ectoplasm. She turned to look what I was staring at and saw it too.

While I quickly focused my mind on it she tried to poke it. Her hand appeared to go right through it with no resistance or ill effects. By the time she had run her hand through it a couple of times I had determined that it was definitely the source of the presence that had been following me. I look around the room, realising that 'they' had probably seen everything that had happened, though they would not understand it. I certainly did not.

I looked squarely at the eye once more as Morianna attempted to poke it again with one finger and told whomever I was talking to that we should definitely meet for breakfast. I

think that 'they' had had enough of our particular brand of strangeness for one day, because the eye finally retreated from the two of us before rippling as if through a heat haze and vanishing.

No sooner had they eye departed that one presence was exchanged for another. This one was different; it appeared to be everywhere all at once. Morianna opened two of the windows to try and clear out the steam that was slowly filling the room. As the steam dissipated so did the presence somewhat. The two were obviously connected.

Morianna asked after the rock and I directed her to look in the bath. As she headed that way there was a heavy knocking on the door. It did not sound threatening, just a little heavy handed. I was heading for the door when Morianna called out for Victor to come in and sure enough he did. I had been right.

Victor had barely drawn a breath when Morianna called me into the bathroom to look at something. I went in to see her standing over the bath; just visible in the murky red water, lying on the bottom of the bath, was a large heart. Bigger than a man's heart, and it looked as if it could still be alive. I was almost as confused as Victor looked.

Morianna then asked if I had been followed while I was out today. I told her I had, and that the eye we had seen had been following me around since lunchtime. She too had been followed, she revealed, and had approached one of them to join him for lunch. His name, apparently, was Edwardo Peterson.

Somehow, against all odds, Victor managed to look even more confused.

Smiling, I told them I had (hopefully) invited 'them' around for breakfast the next morning. Both of them seemed unimpressed, and they probably thought it was a bad idea.

Turning back to the heart, Morianna reached into the water and pulled it out. It did not look decayed, but it did not look wholly alive either. It just sat there in the palm of her hand. She held it out towards me and suggested I touch it, to see what it does. I was a little wary of doing so, but I reached out nonetheless. It felt warm to the touch but did not pulse or throb as if it were a living thing. It certainly appeared inanimate. Presumably it was the literal heart to the rock, and probably the source of all the blood. This was all guesswork, as I had not the faintest idea about the magical techniques for putting hearts inside rocks and making them bleed out through them.

I decided to chance a mental contact with the thing. I had just formed what you could call a preliminary rapport when the damnable thing started smoking! It was almost as if it had been plunged into a raging fire. It was not hot, at least not for the brief period of time my hand was on it before I hastily drew my hand back. As I did it caught alight! Morianna threw it into the bath where it continued to burn for a minute or so before going out.

I could tell that Morianna had avoided a burning as I had, since she did not react to any pain, at least not visibly. But then, you never know if shapeshifters can feel pain; do they allow themselves to?

When it had gone out, Morianna carefully drew the heart out of the water again. It did not change in any way, in an incendiary specifically. I watched her as she looked around and I tried to figure out what she was looking for or at. I did notice that the presence I had felt earlier, the presence in the steam after the eye had gone, had lessened further still. It was almost certainly associated with the heart in some way, without doubt.

Morianna opened the small cabinet on the bathroom wall over the sink and pulled out a clear plastic bag; she put it under the water next to the heart and let it fill with water before putting the heart into the bag. It was quite a snug fit. She tightly sealed it with the self-sealing fastener around the mouth of the bag, and placed it back in the water.

Leading us back to the living room Victor suggested we tell someone of this strange occurrence; he proposed Random and Fiona as possibilities. They certainly seemed like good people to tell to me, especially as this involved Monsieur Manteau. Morianna expressed a desire to examine it herself. I, however, decided that I would deal with the matter myself, especially with regards to the heart and Fiona, as the original rock and the stone she had given me appeared to share some identical origin.

I did not tell them this, of course; I simply told them that I wanted to clean up my room and would keep hold of the heart for now. I then arranged to meet them at dinner in an hour and they left.

I quickly tidied up the room and put the bag containing the heart on the desk in the corner of the living room. I then flushed all the water out of the bath, hoping it would not

cause any mischief anywhere in the plumbing, and gave it a hurried scrub with cloth and showerhead. The blooded laundry I packed into a plastic bag that was a spare for the living room bin.

Then I dug through my months of accumulated belongings to find that stone I had taken from Fiona. I found it eventually, right at the bottom of one of the horse panniers I still kept at the bottom of my largest suitcase. I gingerly opened my mind to it and was 'rewarded' with that same desolate feeling that had assailed me the last time I had done so.

Then, carefully opening the bag with the heart in I attempted to do the same with that. The sense of the presence was still there, though greatly weakened, but it was not of the same order as the stone, nor of the rock it came from. It was empty, without form, but without the desolate disquiet of stone or rock.

I put stone and heart on the desk, and the laundry beside me. Then, pulling out my Trump of Fiona I concentrated on it until it animated and Fiona greeted me. I told her I had come to possess a strange rock, how it had bled and changed into a heart, how it steamed and the steam was a presence, and I showed her the heart when I had done. She was interested, I could tell, and said as much, saying how my predicament appeared to be part of a larger puzzle.

I was glad that something made sense to someone; it meant that the matter could be taken out of my hands and given to someone more able to investigate such peculiar and arcane matters.

She told me that I should Trump Random to inform him of the matter, in about ten minutes. Presumably she wanted to talk to him about it first.

Then I casually told her that I had received the original rock from a cloaked and hooded person of indeterminate identity through a Trump and that I had encountered said individual before on at least one other occasion. She looked at me for a moment before telling me to Trump Random in a quarter hour instead. I asked if she wanted the heart and the stone but she told me to give them to Random, and closed the contact.

In just over a quarter hour I gazed upon the likeness of Random until his image gained motion and dimension. He told me he was expecting the call, which I thought was obvious. I asked if he wanted the heart and the stone and he said he just needed the heart; Fiona would have had a good to give me the stone, and it was best he not get involved with it or interfere with her schemes. I could understand his reluctance.

I handed him the heart and asked if he also wanted any of the clothes with blood on. He said yes, so I rummaged in the bin bag and pulled out the shirt I was wearing at the time and handed it to him. He just looked at it and said that I could have just given him the bag. I shrugged and handed it to him.

He then remarked that he was not sure about the cloaked man; it was possible that he could be on our side. I agreed but added that he could be giving helpful hints or leading us deeper into some trap. He then suggested that I Trump him again in about twenty minutes so as to come through to Amber; then he all but immediately contradicted himself by saying that it was too dangerous (though I was not sure what he was talking about) and telling me to complete the mission first. He nodded to himself and closed the contact. I can only guess that he had a lot on his mind.

About half an hour later I went down to the huge dining room on the ground floor to join the others for dinner. As we started I told them that I had sorted the matter myself, but did not go into details how. Victor seemed relatively unconcerned (I think he was satisfied that someone higher than us was aware of the situation), but Morianna looked a little put out that she would be unable to get a good look at the heart for herself.

I then mentioned that my room had been searched. Morianna made no comment but Victor said that he would ask his birds if anyone had been into his room during the day. Naturally he had left them behind in their alternate forms; I wondered how the searchers reacted when they found his golden armour and a very large axe in his room. My swords, at least, might not look completely out of place.

After dinner Victor went out on the town; he asked if I wished to accompany him, but I declined, wishing to rest for the next day. Unsurprisingly, Morianna declined also.

The next day I waited for two hours at breakfast to see if 'they' would take up my invitation, but, alas, they did not. Once I had finished reading my paper the three of us went

out for a walk to see if 'they' were still around. There was still no car outside but we were definitely followed.

I asked if we really cared that we were being followed; after all, we would be leaving in a few days anyway. I think our curiosity got the better of us, however; I think we all wanted to know *why* we were being followed around everywhere we went. I was fairly certain it was because of who we had been dealing with recently, and that we had brought a lot of them to the city.

Victor was really quite desperate to talk with one of them; he had not hit anyone for a good week or two and was probably feeling a little testy. I said that we could try to acquire ourselves one of our travelling companions but it may not produce any information of use; those watching us would probably not know why they were doing it. Morianna said that she could try to contact the fellow she had talked with before, Edwardo. It sounded like a good idea, so we agreed to try.

The plan we finally came up with was that Morianna would telephone Edwardo using the number he had given her and meet him at a café somewhere. Victor would trail her at a distance, and I would trail him as support and to keep an eye on the surroundings somewhat. So she called him and arranged the meeting at a pleasant little café I had stopped in the previous day. Then came the most difficult part: Morianna had to convince Bernard the Faithful Hellhound to stay with me. It took some effort, holding his ears to keep him looking at her and talking slowly to him, until he acquiesced. He then walked over and sat down beside me with a kind of a lost puppy look in his red-tinged eyes.

I was glad that went easy.

Morianna led the way to the café, of course, with Victor following at a reasonable distance. He could see her easily; with his height he could see over the crowd with ease, partly why he had taken that role. It also made it easy for me to follow him. My task was made even easier by the fact that people seemed to want to get out of Bernard's way. I could well understand it.

Eventually Morianna must have reached the café, because Victor took up a none too subtle position on the other side of the road, standing just in the mouth of an alleyway where he could keep an eye on her. I knew that was the case, because one of my escorts had taken that same position the previous day.

I found a far more comfortable position at a table outside another café. I kept a close watch on Victor as I ordered coffee and some sort of sugared pastry, then ordered another for Bernard when he whimpered at me and put his head in my lap in a begging kind of way. How could I resist such finely crafted artifice?

A few minutes went by and while I was watching a particularly attractive woman pass by something must of happened, because when I looked back at Victor he had gone. I followed Bernard's gaze to see the impetuous lummo scrambling across the road. By the sound of the cars screeching to a stop and the frantic beeping he was causing quite a commotion. He kept going through the crowd and I lost sight of him.

As for myself, I ordered another coffee and two pastries.

I was too far away to do anything by the time I could have reacted, so I decided there was really no point. Victor and Morianna could deal with any threat that faced them, at least where the local inhabitants were involved. Since I had completely lost sight of them I would not be able to find them now.

I stayed where I was for another half hour, watching as the local law enforcers arrived and bustled around before towing a small car away. It had a large dent in the front, as if some one had hit it with a big hammer. Or a fist. Then I Trumped Victor. He seemed a little sheepish as he explained that Edwardo had reached into his jacket as if he was going for a gun. Naturally Victor had overreacted and leaped to Morianna's defence. She, however, had picked up a very surprised Edwardo and run off down the street, practically carrying him under one arm. She had moved incredibly fast, making improbable jumps over obstacles in the street and shouted "Stop, Victor!" the whole time.

Finally he got the message.

Victor was now in a gymnasium somewhere, either building up his already overdeveloped muscles or just breaking their machinery. I told him that the police came and looked around at the mess he had left, and taken a damaged car with them; he looked rather abashed at this, and closed the contact.