

Journal 38 - in Shadow

I wandered around the main market for an hour or so, interrupted only by a contact from Morianna. She explained that she had taken Edwardo with her to Amber to avoid any unpleasant encounters with his employers, which sounded like a fair idea.

She then asked me if I would send Bernard through to her, so I knelt down and held onto his fur and tried to get him to see Morianna through the Trump contact. He either did not see her or was uninterested or unaware of what he saw. Morianna tried calling him through the contact, but that failed also, so she simply reached through the contact and took a firm hold on his fur before pulling him through. He yelped a little as she did so, but I got the impression he was happy to be back with his mistress.

Morianna asked me if I would Trump her later, when I was back at the hotel, as she wanted to have her gear back. I agreed to do so and she handed me her room key; I waved farewell as the contact closed.

A while later I was in search of a café that served fine coffee and very tasty sandwiches when I noticed that I was being watched by four very severe looking gentlemen in a large brown car. They looked very capable of inflicting serious mayhem on whoever they put their sights on. I was confident, however, that they were of little threat to me. Ego, or perhaps I was just beginning to understand the full reality of my situation.

I decided to forgo the pleasures of the sandwiches and take my lunch earlier than I had planned. Taking a seat in the nearest café, I ordered as I watched the car pull up opposite me on the other side of the road. Fortunately, the sandwiches at that café were almost as good as the ones I had been in search of.

After lunch I sought out the nearest very public place that I could, guessing that a meeting of sorts was in the offing. I settled on the big park half a mile down the road; it was large and open, with a great many people moving through it. Hopefully 'they' would not do anything untoward there. I sat on one of the park benches next to the fountain in the centre of the park; a pair of nymphs, standing each side of a rearing horse, gushed water from the amphora each held under an arm. The horse issued forth water from its open mouth. It was quite nice to look at, but not as pleasant a view as the women skating around it.

Before long there was a cough from behind me, and I turned to face a gentleman in his forties, with greying hair, an unremarkable suit and a serious expression. He was accompanied by two of the large fellows from the brown car, or two very similar to them. I told the old gentleman that he may require a physician. He looked puzzled and asked if the comment was intended as a threat; I just told him that his cough sounded quite bad; he sounded ill.

A poor opening, without doubt.

He asked after his man; I presumed he meant Edwardo, which was a likely guess. I told him that he was safe, that he had been recruited by our employers. He said that it looked as if he had been grabbed. I told him that 'my large companion' had reacted badly to an innocent movement on Edwardo's part so 'the lady' had been forced to act quickly to save him from a painful end.

The old fellow, whom I elected to think of as The Chief, did not seem particularly impressed with my tale, despite it being the truth.

He then began asking after my employers; who they were, where they were based, why were they interested in hiring engineers. As I had half-guessed, it was the engineers they were interested in. I suggested that we go for a walk so I could stretch my legs while we talked; he agreed and we began to stroll along the main path.

I had begun to attempt to shift Shadow a little, as I had done before, to try and separate those three from their fellows, but almost immediately The Chief commenced his questioning so I was unable to concentrate sufficiently.

He remained concerned about the engineers and their links to my employers. He expressed the worry that anyone who could render mines inert could also build them, and went on to say that the mercenary group we had contacted had been an asset of his in the past (presumably this meant that he had made use of their services). I told him not to worry

about Edwardo or the engineers, as it was unlikely he would see either again, and then had to convince him that what I had said was not as bad as it sounded.

I did my best to ensure my answers contained nothing of substance, and he gained no further information on our plans involving the engineers. I did try to assure him that Edwardo was in the best of health and was likely to remain that way for a long time, and that he was where he was out of his own choice, but he remained steadfastly unconvinced. I came up with the idea of providing some evidence of his healthiness, and excused myself.

Moving a short distance away, but remaining totally in sight, I took out my Trump of Morianna and worked on forming a contact with her. Fortunately she was in a receptive mood. I asked her how Edwardo was doing, and she told me that Bill Roth, the king's lawyer, was seeing to his acclimatisation. I asked if she could talk to him regarding some means of affirming his health and safety: a code word perhaps? She said she would go and talk to him, see if there was anything he could provide along those lines. She would then contact me.

I returned to The Chief and his companions, and he offered me a hypothesis. He had reasoned that by our expenditure we could well be employed by a small government, or perhaps a corporation. He went on to say that he had links and contacts in a great many such organisations and was unaware of any movements on their part in directions parallel to ours, so our employers were not any of those. The only thing he knew for certain was that they had a great deal of land.

I hinted that we were based in Asia, but he was having none of that. He did say that it was possible that we were based off-world somewhere. From reading the papers I knew he meant within the solar system; they had not gone beyond yet, but I was not aware if they could yet. Did they have faster-than-light travel? He said that he had heard of places off-world and heard rumours of unrest and strife in such places. I just shrugged noncommittally.

The Chief then made a surprising comment. He reiterated how he had many links with corporations in that continent, and was considered an expert in security matters; bodyguards, defensive measures and the like. He was, in effect, offering his services to my 'employers'.

I told him we would not require them, however, as we would not be doing any business within his sphere of influence after the current matter was resolved. We would probably not be returning to the Shadow ever again, either, but I did not tell him that.

Then the feeling of a Trump contact came over me, and I took myself off to one side to accept it. I hoped that it would not be Monsieur Manteau offering me strange gifts again; fortunately, it was the far more agreeable countenance of Morianna that came into view before me. She told me that she had spoken to Edwardo, who had been unable to provide her with more than a note. She had tried to ask him to join me in person, but he had expressed a fear that he would be killed the instant he did so. She had left him in the capable hands of Bill Roth, who was keeping him busy with cards and whisky.

As she offered me the note I turned so that I faced The Chief, who I saw was watching me quite closely. I reached out and took the note, and the only reaction the fellow gave to a rolled up scroll appearing in my hands accompanied by a slight rainbow shimmer was a raised eyebrow. I suppose it was a better response than running away screaming or ordering his men to open fire.

I handed The Chief the note and he read it carefully before nodding; he appeared satisfied. I told him that Edwardo was presently engaged in a game of cards and would have come himself had he not feared for his life at the hands of his former employers. The Chief gave no response, and turned to go; his escorts moved to follow.

He had only gone a short distance when he turned round and warned me not to have any dealing in this area for a while, at least a year or two. I smiled and assured him that there was no need for him to be concerned in that respect.

Then he returned to his car and it drove off. I hoped that would be the last we would see of them.

I made my way back to the Heltan and used Morianna's key to get into her room. In her usual fashion almost everything she owned was in her tough little rucksack. While I had repeatedly lost and gained clothing and equipment, she had somehow kept hold of a few little items and a change of clothes the whole time. Most of what she had worn recently she kept in the suitcases we had bought before going to the mercenary compound.

I picked up the rucksack and her sword, which was leant up against the main wardrobe, and concentrated on her Trump. She answered promptly and thanked me when I

handed her bag and sword. I told her I would see her soon, and she waved as the contact closed.

I checked Victor's room, but he had not yet returned. I went to my room and slumped on the sofa for a while before Trumping Random. I asked how Amber and the mine problem were and he answered fairly noncommittally that all was well. He told me that he had been talked into holding a kind of official ball; it was supposed to be a show of thanks to his supporters and a welcome for the engineers and their families. I casually mentioned that we could be a few days yet as I was not sure how long Benedict's testing would take, and he looked quite baffled. Apparently he was unaware of our little side trip; I told him that I only hoped it was not supposed to be secret.

In a moment of jollity I asked him if he could have a good fast horse awaiting my arrival. He raised a questioning eyebrow and I grinned and told him I may need it to escape from my father if it was supposed to have been secret. He sighed in mock distress as I closed the contact.

In the mood for some entertainment and companionship I endeavoured to Trump Guin, but she seemed to be otherwise occupied. Ah well.

The rest of the day passed completely uneventfully. I drank and watched some film about a big black monolith in space and went out to find somewhere to get my ear pierced. I had not worn an earring for quite some time, as such things were for decadent aristos, and the hole had sealed up, probably because of my new regenerative faculties. So I had a new hole made, in an altogether more humane and painless way than I was used to. It did not swell up, either, nor did it fester for a time. I kept the hole open by wearing a small plastic stud the same colour as my skin.

Before long I would be able to assume my full elegant public aspect of old, with fine clothing and elegant jewellery. I would turn heads at the ball in Amber and take my place in that mighty state. It would be like the old days in Russia once again, though preferably without the threat of execution and escape into the wilderness that ended my time there.