

## Journal 39 - in Shadow

Later that evening, I was eating and watching the international news on the television in the Heltan bar when Victor joined me. I told him that we would be making a diversion before we returned to Amber, a kind of demonstration and aptitude test for our engineers. I told him I possessed a Trump of the place we were to go to, and asked if it were possible to transport all the caravans at once if they were tied together. He shrugged and said he was not sure; perhaps we would need to have people standing between the caravans holding onto the back of one and the oxen at the front of the next?

I suppose it was a little too much to expect Victor to know any more than that. Perhaps I should have asked Morianna, had she been there, of course.

Victor then asked when our flight to Kezekstahn was, and I told him that the big pouch containing our tickets had been delivered earlier; we were scheduled to fly out at just after an hour past midday tomorrow. A coach would be arriving an hour earlier to collect us and transfer our party to the airport.

Rather glumly Victor announced that he would have to stay sober. I cheered him up by saying that he would only have to stay sober in comparison to drinking enough to fall unconscious; as long as he moderated his drinking and was in full health in the morning. This we did, watching some television and listening to music while partaking of light drinks until we took ourselves to an early bed, by comparison at least.

The next morning at just before midday we were directing our employees and their families aboard the scarlet and blue coach that had come to collect us. I was a little concerned that the agents of The Chief or others like him might be watching us, or even go as far as to bar our exit from Mexico, or even the whole continent. As far as I could tell we were not observed during our preparations, or during the journey to the airport.

All was going well at the airport until, unsurprisingly, something reared up to try and trip us up. Just luck, I guess.

At the counter where a young lady in some form of blue and white uniform inspected our tickets also asked Victor and I for our passports. I had been too busy organising our people and keeping my eyes open for observers to take note of what exactly occurred when tickets were inspected. It transpired that special papers were required to allow passage from one nation to another; Victor had seen such items handed to the girl behind the desk.

I suggested to Victor that he fetch our passports from our bags, but not to hurry; others could have their tickets checked while he searched. While I waited Arnold handed over the tickets for his family for inspection; however, he only had one passport where I would have thought he would have had three. I could tell by the expression on the face of the uniformed girl that this was indeed the case, but her protests were quickly silenced by the sight of money hidden within the pages of the passport.

I could feel Victor at work behind us, rather clumsily twisting Shadow and chance to produce suitable passports. I could only hope they would pass inspection; perhaps we would need a bribe as well?

Several others passed money along with their papers before Victor came forth with our newly forged passports. I handed them over, and with great relief they passed muster with no comment. Some others were having their luggage checked after various devices were passed over them; many contained firearms. All but the largest were allowed through, once again by the employment of bribes. It was fortunate that we had chosen to take our leave in such a corrupt place, else I fear we would never have left at all.

Another problem soon arose when I thought all had been done with; Victor's magical birds were not permitted to leave the country, as this would contravene laws governing the export of rare birds of prey. In the end he had to resort to transporting them in their alternate forms; apparently, conveying armour and weaponry was considered much less of an illegal act. Calling them antiques was enough.

With all the bureaucracy behind us we waited in the 'lounge' for our aeroplane to be prepared. I stood at the window and watched the 'planes come and go. It was still a marvel to me that massive machines could take to the sky so easily.

When our 'plane was prepared we went aboard and took our seats. I was the last to go on and was greatly relieved when the door closed behind me with no hindrance or obstruction from any who might wish to prevent us from leaving. No doubt they preferred to sit back and see where we went.

Victor took a seat to the rear of the cabin while I sat at the front. Looking back at him just before take off I could see he was a little anxious; he gripped the armrests like he was ready to tear them off and hit someone with them. I was fairly tense myself, of course, but mostly because I was concerned as to what action the watchers might yet take. Would they go as far as to shoot us down?

I had a nice view out of the small window beside me as we took off; the city looked a lot more open and cleaner from the sky.

The journey went well; the seats were comfortable, we were served free Champaign and given an uninteresting if filling meal. Victor, naturally, ate enough for three, or perhaps it was six. At about sunset one of the serving girls (they were called stewardesses, I was told later) acceded to my request to see the cockpit and led me up to the front of the 'plane. There I greeted the captain, his co-pilot and his navigator, who were friendly enough fellows. They pointed out which parts of the terribly complicated control panels governed which system and what they meant. It was initially quite interesting, but soon got rather dull.

They seemed quite confused at my ignorance and curiosity regarding their 'plane, and when I said I had never been in such a vehicle before they got even more confused. I told them I had always travelled by boat before, and they seemed satisfied with that answer.

Early in the morning, at about two hours past midnight, we landed at the airport in Krasnodar. It was a far smaller place than the Mexico City airport; it could barely contain the 'plane we came in on. It looked as if it were more used to taking 'planes half our size.

I left the 'plane first, to look around, and thus was the first to meet our welcoming party; two soldiers, or so they looked. They carried rifles over their shoulders, and one nudged the other as I went down the steps towards them. The taller one asked how many people were on our flight; I told them, as there was little else I could do. The other shook his head and said it would take at least eight hours to process us all.

As we had to be out of there in an hour or so to meet the caravans, we could not, of course, wait that long. I sighed and almost subtly pulled some money out of a pocket. Bribes were to be the order of the day once again. I smiled and passed about three hundred dollars to the hand of the taller one while I shook hands with him and said something about coming to an agreement. He smiled back at me, and said that the amount was suitable, I could pass.

Naturally, it would not be enough for all of us.

I smiled in a rather pained (if overly theatrical) manner and went back to the top of the stairs where Victor waited. I told him to get one of his cases, and waited till he returned. The case contained about a dozen ten thousand dollar bundles; I took two out and went back down the stairs. The two soldiers gleefully accepted my donation to their retirement fund with expressions of deep greed on their faces.

I would be glad to get out of this Shadow; it seemed you could buy anyone.

We were escorted right through the airport, with no checks of our luggage or papers at all. Several of the engineers hurried through faster than the others, apparently doing their best not to be identified. Clearly they had been less than legal in this area in the past. We were approached soon after by a nondescript gentleman who asked if we were the party for the caravans. I admitted as much, and he led us to an area that was marked as 'coach parking'.

On an area of concrete marked with large white rectangles awaited about a half dozen of the big, oxen-drawn caravans we had travelled in before. There were expressions of delight at seeing such marvellous caravans, but they were mostly from the children and soon drowned out by questions and confusion.

One of the older men of the group approached me, obviously to put me to the question of everyone's behalf. His name, I recalled, was Zebediah Tolosoy, more commonly known as Zeb. He asked where the trucks that would be collecting us were; I told him the caravans would be better in the mountains where we were headed. He protested that the mountains were a good six weeks or more away travelling in 'those things'. I told him that he would therefore have plenty of time to look at the view, and suggested he get a place in a caravan so we could move on. He walked off grumbling quietly to himself.

I took a seat next to the driver of the first caravan, whose name, he told me, was Henry. My baggage had already been stored in that caravan, and Victor's too. He, however, had taken up position on the rear caravan.

We headed off out of the parking area and along the main road out of the city towards the mountains, which were about six weeks of travel away, much as Zeb had said. It was just as well we were taking a quicker and altogether more direct route to our final destination.

I talked with Henry for a time, and he told me a little of how he had spent a lot of his time in recent years transporting fine timber in and out of Amber. After an hour I lost track of the conversation somewhat when I concentrated on shifting us through Shadow a little to throw off any unwanted entourage and then excused myself as I climbed down off the caravan and walked slowly till all but the final caravan had passed me. I waved at Victor and warned him that we would soon be attempting to Trump to the required location. That meant we would be seeing about tying the caravans together; hopefully it would work. Victor suggested asking the drivers if it would work; I looked at Victor's driver and he shrugged, saying that Henry would know.

With that advice in mind, I jogged up to the lead caravan and climbed back up beside Henry. He said it should be possible without ropes, but since I was clearly new to such things (my ignorance was showing again) we would tie them together on this occasion. He leaned back over his shoulder and shouted to one of the lads who clung to the rear of the caravan to set about tying the caravans together, and he scampered off to do just that.

When everyone signalled that all was ready, I drew out the Trump depicting the copse of trees and concentrated on it. When the contact was of sufficient solidity I willed us through. It was fortunate that Henry and his compatriots were quick-witted; we appeared dangerously close to that copse and were forced to stop very suddenly. The caravans swerved violently to avoid collisions, and the complaints of the oxen were almost as loud as the noises of crashing objects and cries of pain from within the caravans themselves. Naturally many of them had been thrown about by the sudden movement, though I hoped that none of them had been badly injured.

My hopes for bringing them lightly into our strange world were dashed. I suppose it would have been boring if it were too easy.

We found ourselves in the midst of a pleasant sunny afternoon somewhere; rolling hills surrounded us as far as the eye could see. In the distance I could just make out a rider approaching; he wore the sort of cloak I had come to associate with the Rangers, and he appeared to be accompanied by two Hounds. Everyone was coming out of their caravans and looking around with very confused expressions on their faces.

Zeb approached me, no doubt to reprise his role as spokesman. He asked if we were in Greece. I said something regarding the caravans being quicker than they thought and that we were in an odd little area to the south east of the mountains where the climate was slightly different than would be expected for the region. I could tell he did not believe me; I would not have either.

I directed Victor to look after the others and took Zeb to one side, telling him that I had just nominated him as spokesman for the group. He did not look very impressed with his promotion; he started to protest, calling me Mr Montsorbier, but I told him to call me Ulrich. He shrugged, saying he was used to people with changing names.

Just as I was about to try and break it to him gently the Ranger arrived and ruined it all. First he greeted me as 'sire', then he asked if our journey through Shadow had been an untroubled one. He pointed to an area just beyond the copse and told us that the mines were over there, and that the engineers could begin whenever they were ready. I could see a small area cordoned off by a ring of brightly coloured ribbon wrapped around posts.

Zeb looked even more confused than he had before; the Ranger looked at him and said he would leave us for me to talk with him. This he did. Zeb looked at me rather like a man pleading for his life. Trying to make it sound as reasonable as possible, I told him that he and his people had been employed by a nation from what he would call another dimension. I do not think that helped matters; his eyes took on a glazed look normally associated with profound shock. I patted him on the shoulder and assured him that I would explain the matter to him and the others soon enough.

He walked slowly back to join his friends and I went over to talk to the Ranger again; Victor joined us. I asked the Ranger exactly what the plan was with the mines: he said that the engineers should get to work on the mines by the copse first; they could do the others

afterwards. I asked if any equipment had been provided for the engineers and he merely said that the Rangers could get them anything they needed.

Victor then told me that he wanted to go; he had been gone from Julie for a long time and he wanted to see her again. I sympathised with him, but told him that I needed him to stay until we were done. He nodded in a rather resigned fashion.

The Ranger pointed out a large man and about two dozen Hounds that were just cresting a hill and said that he would go and talk to him while I talked to the engineers. As I went over I was met halfway by Zeb and Arnold. They wanted me to explain things to them as Victor had only confused them further; they would relay my explanation to their compatriots. I told them that we were in a world in what was known as Shadow, a realm of what some science fiction called 'parallel worlds'. The place that was our final destination was called Amber, another parallel world where there lived people who could travel through the worlds of Shadow.

They then asked what Victor had meant when he said that their equipment might not work. I told them that in some worlds the laws of physics were not the same as those they were familiar with; electronic devices and physical principles they employed as part of their duties might either not function as expected or not at all.

I took that opportunity to ask them what they required; they were uncertain, so I suggested that they check with their people to determine what they needed. They looked at each other and said "George" in unison, then went to find him.

I remembered George; he was a very well qualified fellow with a great deal of skill with the various devices the group employed and would definitely be the one to know what they needed. I also remembered he had no particular ties to his family and thus was unconcerned about leaving them behind.

I saw to my chamber in the lead caravan, tidying it up and ensuring nothing was broken. After perhaps a quarter hour a knock on the door of the caravan announced the return of Zeb and Arnold, accompanied by the scholarly George. George carried a list of equipment and devices that he thought they needed. Since the best place to get that gear was their world, it was soon decided that Victor would take George there using the Trump we had used to get there and return using the Trump of the copse of trees.

I handed him the Trumps and Victor concentrated on the first for a time before taking George's arm and taking a step forwards into that prismatic rainbow flicker. They vanished and I could hear the whispering and muttering ripple around the impromptu camp.

A further group of Rangers put in an appearance and set about using the cooking implements in the caravans to good use. To me, and probably to everyone else, it felt like breakfast they were producing but they assured us it was dinner. They had just got it ready to disperse it amongst the troops when there was a rainbow flicker to the south of the camp and Victor appeared pushing three very large trolleys of some sort, all filled to overflowing with boxes and crates marked with a variety of stamps and labels. George alighted on the middle one and looked as if he was playing with something already.

Everyone set to the food, and not long after the engineers set to their equipment while their families rested and talked, no doubt trying to come to terms with this new and very strange turn of events.

We spent close to five days in that place. Much of my time was spent watching the engineers work on calibrating and testing their gear, reading a few books I brought with me from their world. They were science fiction, of course; I had got quite a taste for it. It was, all in all, a nice rest from the previously rather hurried and troubled months.

On the third day there was a cheer; they had finally defused one! Now, at last, it seemed that we were getting somewhere.

The next day Arnold showed me one of the mines they had defused. It was about a foot across, and roughly ovoid, like a symmetrical egg only flatter. It was a dark brown-black in colour and looked slightly organic, like a large seed. He told me how they had employed what he called a 'virus' to disable the 'software' and 'hardware' that governed the adaptive and activating sections of the thing; after that it was a matter of defusing the base mechanical parts. One man could eliminate ten such devices in one day.

I asked him what the best method of training would be best employed in this situation, and he said that either one could have a great number of half-trained individuals who could remove a large number of mines but have a greater risk of injury and losses, or a smaller

number of more skilled personnel could remove mines at a slower but altogether safer rate. I shrugged and told him that decision was not mine to make.

When they had done at the place beside the copse, a group of Rangers escorted them to a site nearby where they had to remove more mines. They finished by the end of the day, which was fortunate as it meant we could move out the next morning. Victor went off a way after dinner that evening to Trump Corwin, he told me, because that was where Julie was. I presume he made some sort of arrangement with him, but did not depart that night.