

Journal 47 - in Shadow

I began to work on Shadow with the bottle of vodka as a guide. Once the “feeling” of the bottle matched the “feeling” of the Shadow I would know I had found the right place; that was the best way to describe what was a partly instinctive affair. It would take a few days, I was sure, so I made sure to get plenty of rest before doing the real work.

Actually I stopped off at a pleasant entertainment spot that offered music, dancing, wine and women in roughly equal amounts. I will admit to lingering there a day or two more than perhaps I should have done, but I can easily be delayed by the pleasures of the flesh if I give in to my baser instincts.

I was reminded of my mostly self-appointed task on the third morning when I awoke with a headache and two delightful girls. There was a scent in the air that lingered, a perfume that was in every way superior to that worn by my two companions. It reminded me of Guin; was it one of her scents? Pulling on a robe I wandered around my lodgings with a glass of wine in one hand but found no tangible sign of her presence. So I raised my glass and gave an acknowledgment to my guardian angel.

The girls soon left with barely a farewell (they were professionals, in their way, so it was not surprising) and I took a long, hot bath before a hearty breakfast and the road once more.

A few days passed as I worked to align bottle and Shadow in accordance with each other. My destination turned out to be another “modern” city of the style I had come to associate with the twentieth century; skyscrapers, automobiles, all manner of conveniences. The city was called San Francisco and was situated on the west coast of the United States (the end result of some parallel American Revolution).

I worked the stuff of Shadow subtly to blend in with the locals; under my jacket (I had gotten so used to it I did not want to lose it) I wore a baggy, short-sleeved shirt and dark blue trousers with large, wide bottoms with some kind of red splash of material on them. Before long I had “acquired” a strong-bladed knife that I concealed in the small of my back and a pocket full of the local currency in a variety of denominations.

I found stables for my horse in one of the outlying districts of the city. The place appeared to be run by a rather pretty lass with help from two rather unattractive female companions and several hefty lads. They all seemed to follow the same fashion for long hair, flared trousers and flowery decorations. I politely asked them for a stable for my horse, suggesting they exercise him often and paid enough to keep him there for a week.

I took a taxi to a moderate hotel (one suggested to me by the driver) and rented a room for a week. It was simple but pleasant; a sink, a comfy bed and air conditioning to keep the room cool, since it was apparently the end of summer and still very warm. I bought lunch in the restaurant on the ground floor, since it was midday; it was an agreeable meal, a little spicy.

My hunger satisfied, I went in search of the source of my vodka. It led me to a warehouse district relatively near to the docks; one warehouse in particular had a large number of cases of the correct spirit in stock, but I really needed somewhere smaller to try and trace the distributors I was in search of.

I sought out the foreman of the warehouse and he directed me towards the two main brokers in the city that dealt in that particular brand. Rather than appear ignorant of the city I sought out a map of some kind and managed to locate a large poster map apparently intended for visitors to the city intending to see the sights. A large red arrow helpfully showed me where I was and how to get to the nearest “tourist information office”. There I acquired a free A to Z Street Map of the City of San Francisco and marked the places where I could find the offices of the two brokers.

I took a short walk to the nearest of the two and found it was little more than a smaller warehouse with an office at the front where they took delivery orders. As I waited in the queue I listened in to the orders made by other people to get an idea of the scale of the orders the place took. Few were more than a half-dozen cases of roughly ten bottles each,

most for drinking establishments, traders or the like. Clearly, in order to make an impression so as to entice a useful observation out of the staff I had to make a substantial order.

When it was my turn I ordered twelve cases of bottled beer and another twelve of my particular brand of vodka. The person serving me seemed surprised at the size of the order and I told him it was for a party at the university (I had seen there was one on the poster map). He nodded in a knowing fashion and remarked that that brand of vodka was popular at the moment; this was the second big consignment in recent weeks. I showed surprise and asked who else was partial to it. He said it was "just some guys in suits" and we both agreed they could definitely not have been from the university. I arranged to have the entire load delivered to just outside the main university building tomorrow at noon, saying that I, Joe McClane (his name was the first to mind), would be there to collect them, or someone I sent would be.

The way I saw it, someone at the university would be having a fun tomorrow night....

I paid for the consignment in cash and left.

The question was, what would I do next, now that I had appeared to have tracked down my cross-Sphere distributors?

Over a meal I considered my options. They came down to either breaking into the office and locating the documents I needed, providing I could find them or that they existed, or approaching the person in charge in the guise of some kind of law enforcement officer. I settled on the latter, as it meant that I could use the staff's knowledge of their filing system to my advantage.

For a day or so I examined a number of sources; newspapers and television suggested to me that posing as an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation was the best option, as it enabled me to say I was investigating a crime committed in a state far enough from the city so that any inhabitants I met would be unlikely to be aware of the crime. Additionally, from reading a few books in the city library about the FBI I learned that I could lay claim to numerous special policing powers.

Rather than attempt to completely fabricate the necessary identity papers I elected to acquire them from a Shadow in close proximity instead. After a short walk into Shadow I happened upon such an agent as he went about his business. I accosted Agent Thompson and easily overcame him, stealing his wallet with identification card and his revolver while I was at it. I had probably got him into some serious trouble with his superiors, but some might have killed him.

Once I had an original template to work with I changed the card as I returned to my hotel; soon the photograph bore my rather sober visage instead of that of my victim, and the card identified me as one Special Agent John Michaels. Since Mr Thompson and his compatriots in the books I had read all wore dark coloured suits I purchased one on the way.

Finally ready for my subterfuge, I kept watch on the offices of the brokers until I was sure the fellow who had served me before was not there. It was not until lunch on the third day that I observed him leaving with an attractive blond girl, presumably to go for dinner. I waited an hour or so, eating a large sandwich and watching from behind a newspaper, to be sure he would not return. After an hour and a half had passed I decided that it was time to go into action.

Going to the front of the shortest queue I showed my identification to the person behind the counter and asked to speak to whoever was in charge. The manager was called and when I showed him my identification he immediately proceeded to assure me that all was in order, his license was in order and there were no "irregularities" in his books. I told him I was there to investigate a report that some individuals in suits had recently purchased a large consignment of spirits from his establishment. When he asked me in a rather concerned way what "this" was all about I told him I was not at liberty to discuss the case with him but that he and his establishment were not under investigation. He seemed to be placated by this statement and took me to a back office where he showed me his paperwork.

After a few minutes he located first my order and then another large order from a few weeks before. That seemed about right, so he gave me the address the delivery was sent to and asked if I wanted a copy of the delivery note and the other paper work. I said that I did and I paid out of "FBI funds" (Thompson's wallet) to have them "photocopied". After ten minutes the chap he sent to get the copies made returned and I thanked the manager for his assistance.

I located the site on my A To Z in the high class area of the city. I had a taxi drop me off just around the corner from what turned out to be a building something like a small warehouse. The main entrance was a metallic door that rolled up into the ceiling somehow, with a normal door set into the wall beside it. Above the door was a sign that said RENICK DELIVERIES. Just in case I decided to watch for a while and settled into a seat in the open-air café just down the street.

Over my newspaper and a coffee I observed several men who appeared to be loitering around the area and watching the building and the street. By the way they observed the latter more than the former I was sure they were guards of some kind.

Again I was in a bit of a quandary. Should I try to sneak in and see what I could find? Or should I attempt to gain entry in my guise as FBI agent John Michaels again? I was still not sure that I had even really found the mysterious vodka distributors. I mulled over several plans before I came to a decision.