

Journal 50 - in Shadow

An hour and a walk later and I had acquired all the money I could (hopefully) need, several thousand dollars or so. I asked to see the manager again and he promptly reappeared, carrying two glasses of beer and two smaller glasses of brandy. I told him I had the money, and the cash covertly exchanged hands. Then he asked why I wanted admission. I was a little confused by this question, and must have looked it, so he explained that the money was paid just to be granted an interview.

So I told him that I had heard Gawain's was the place to be for the best jazz and gumbo, and that I wanted to be part of it. He was satisfied with my answer; it was a better reason than the one the mayor gave. He just said it was the one place he could escape from his wife. I smiled at the sentiment.

He asked if I had a criminal record; I said no, as being branded a libertine in a city in another world would not count. Nor would being an escaped traitor in another nation in said other world. He asked after my profession and I said I was a professional traveller. He seemed to think that was a good enough answer.

He congratulated me on receiving membership and told me that the club opened its doors at seven in the evening. It would be best to arrive at around six to get the best (unreserved) seats, and because some of the acts warmed up in the outer area beforehand.

He (perhaps unnecessarily) warned me again about the edict against violence; I do not know why he mentioned it again. He then left me to finish my beer and brandies.

It was about two by then and I had just settled upon the idea of relaxing the afternoon away when something caught my eye outside. It was not that the woman was beautiful, from what I could see of her at least; it was neither her graceful walk, nor her heavier than normal (normal for that place anyway) dress. It was that her hair was an interesting shade of jade, and her skin was of a similar, paler hue.

I blinked in surprise as she passed out of view, then I quickly downed the two brandies and rushed outside. I just saw the edge of that out-of-place dress flit around the next corner, so I hurried in that direction. Around the corner no green-haired ladies were in sight, so I guessed that she had either gone into the nearby alley or run very fast down the street and around another corner. There was no immediate sense of any disturbance in Shadow that I had come to associate with the use of Pattern, so I decided to have a look in the alley.

A hand gripped me firmly by the shirt as I peered into the slightly gloomy passageway and I was tugged inside; a few of the buttons on my shirt came off as I went. I was held a good distance off the ground by a slightly irritated-looking Llewella, who relaxed a little when she saw it was me. I told her I was pleased to see her as well, and she put me down.

She asked how I was, all calm again, and I told her I had been attending to some family business. She then asked in a rather pained tone if we could talk elsewhere and gestured towards the pile of refuse we were standing next to.

I led her back to the club. On the way she said that I had pierced the illusion she wore about herself; everyone else saw her as European rather than Rebman. As we entered she asked if the club was mine; I said it was not, and she explained that she was just checking. Family protocol, she said.

We took a table near the window and I asked if she wished to have a drink. She turned down my suggestion of beer and asked for a white wine instead. I went to the bar to see if they served any; the serving girl watched as I approached. She seemed quite interested in me. I asked her about the wine and she sent one of the youths to look. When I said the wine was for my lady companion the lass seemed a little put out.

Before long the youth returned bearing a bottle of what turned out to be a quite expensive vintage. The girl rather sullenly handed me two glasses and I winked at her as I took them; she did not perk up very much.

Once back at the table I asked Llewella how long it had been since we had last spoke; I wanted to know how long I had been away in Shadow. She said it had been almost three months, which fitted closely to the amount of time I thought it had been.

Then she got down to the point and asked me why I was in that place. Seeing no particular reason to conceal how I had arrived, I told her I had found a Trump that I believed was left for me to find. I showed her the picture and she identified it as a 'sketch', a kind of temporary Trump much as I had suspected. She told me she had been following a lead she had been given; Morianna had recently spent some time investigating a baron in a Shadow fairly close to Amber who appeared to have more money than analysis of his regular income suggested. His king was concerned; I was not told exactly why, but I guessed that this baron was some kind of rival or opponent to the king.

In the course of her investigation Morianna had discovered that the baron was being funded by an external source; in other words, a source from outside that sphere.

This interested me, as it appeared to tie in with the work of the Distributors. Coincidence?

Morianna had also discovered a dagger; she had shown it to Llewella and said that she had just less than three hours to talk with the baron before "the army" arrived. Llewella did not tell me anything regarding the dagger, but presumably it was important and probably related to Andreas in some way. It certainly explained the Andreas-related clues. She had had a nice conversation with the baron, she told me, and "the trail" had led her to this place.

I told her a little about the Distributors and their activities, suggesting that perhaps their operation was in some way connected to the "source" Morianna had discovered. I also mentioned that they had some means of travelling through Shadow that involved a kind of portal. She told me that she had discovered something like a "magic circle" in the grounds of the baron's estate that appeared to serve the same purpose. Fiona was examining it.

So there was definitely a connection between the two. I decided to ask Morianna about what she had discovered on the estate when I got the opportunity.

Then she summed up the situation where we were; I was invited where as she had made her own way. "I presume you are here for Andreas", she asked me. I agreed that this seemed to be the case, though I thought I was following after Intruder to begin with.

She took a drink of her wine before gesturing towards the member's area and asking what the men were guarding. I told her it was the member's area of the club and probably the designated meeting place. I said I would ask the management about guests and Llewella handed me a small black bag about the size of a brandy glass. The bag was to be delivered to the owner if there was a problem, but I was not to look in it myself.

The manager responded fairly promptly to the buzzing of the intercom; I asked him what the rules were regarding guests and he looked confused for a moment before telling me that they were allowed, just not too many of them. I said that I was not sure if I still needed to hand "it" over, but I gave him the bag and the instructions anyway. He looked inside it and appeared to be completely bewildered by whatever it was he saw there. I just looked rueful and returned to the table.

When she finished her wine, Llewella told me that she wished to get some sleep and a change of clothes, so I took her back to Mama's and let her use my room for a few hours. While I had some free time I decided to try and get through to Morianna; quite unexpectedly I actually managed it!

She was sitting on a bed somewhere, the ever-present Bernard beside her. I asked her how she was; she said she was okay, and I said I was also well. Then (naturally) she asked me what I wanted, and I told her I was just making a social call. As usual this seemed to faze her slightly. I said how I rarely seemed to get through to her and she said that she had been grabbed by people and sent off to do things quite a lot recently, so she tended to block Trump contacts much of the time. That would explain it, I told her.

Then I remarked that I had heard she had been on a mission recently; she smiled slightly as the call became something more than a purely social one. She just agreed with me that she had and did not go into any detail, so I did not learn anything new just then. She went on to ask if I knew if anyone had gone searching for Andreas; I told her I had been meaning to, keeping quiet about how it was possible I had found him. She told me that Joe was investigating some leads, and I said how I had been told to talk to Bleys about it.

Morianna then gave me the news that he had been injured recently and was currently in Fiona's care.

I told her that when I finished what I was doing we would have to get together and talk about Andreas and other matters; Amber would probably be the best place for it. She

complicated matters by saying that it was possible she might be leaving soon (which told me she was in Amber), possibly even tomorrow. Hopefully day and night ran concurrent where I was with regard to Amber, which would make things simpler.

The contact suddenly broke off, fortunately in the middle of a pause. I attempted to restore the contact but failed; she appeared to be busy with another contact.

Having nothing else to do I read through a couple of the papers for the next couple of hours. They were both large paged papers and were filled with a wealth of news, political commentary, sport reports and more. We were, I discovered, in a city called Johnsonville on the south coast of America, on the Gulf of Mexico.

At around half past five Llewella came back downstairs wearing a lighter version of the dress she had arrived in, more suited to the kind of weather in Johnsonville. Since we were both ready, we set off for the club.

We took a table near to the window again, and as we got comfortable a waiter arrived bearing a tray. On it was a glass of beer and a bottle of wine and a glass; he put these on the table before moving on to another table. As I took a sip of my beer Llewella picked up the wine bottle and examined it; she laughed and showed it to me. I recognised the label from the name and the symbol of the dog above it; it was one of Bayle's wines from Amber.

I mentioned that I had spoken to Morianna by Trump while she rested, and she said that she knew the contact had been broken (I do not know how she knew; more mystery). I asked if it was possible for contacts to be broken by someone; she said that it was possible if the third party was talented enough. She looked at me a little pointedly and said that she did not think she had to say who; only that they did not intrude on others conversations very often. We both smiled at the remark. Yes, we both knew who she was talking about, and it was the most obvious possibility.

A sip or two of wine later Llewella asked me if Morianna was still involved with Julian; I responded by saying that they were as far as I knew. Then I asked her if such relationships were normal in Amber. She was somewhat noncommittal, saying that it was not "the norm" but happened on occasion.

I went on to tell her how I had tried to get in contact with Guin a few times recently too; Llewella observed that she would probably be busy with Intruder, doing whatever it was that he was doing, but that she might have been "allowed out" on a few occasions. I confirmed that that appeared to be the case; I told her I suspected that Guin had looked in on me a few times.

Then Intruder sat down at the table, opposite the two of us. He gave us a polite nod, but Llewella ruined his big entrance by asking "what kept you?". We exchanged a few pleasantries with him (he looked odd in his white lined suit) before the two of them began to talk past me for a bit, making obscure references and in-jokes I could not quite catch.

Then Intruder related the story regarding Andreas' disappearance.

He had started to investigate a small gang war in the world where he had subsequently vanished, apparently related to the mission he had taken Zatharuss on. Some event had occurred that resulted in his capture by some local, hostile force; the details were sketchy, as it appeared that Intruder did not know the whole story himself. Whoever they were they "frightened" him sufficiently for him to react very aggressively; he left a "small crater" behind him when he left. The deaths caused by this "crater" sparked a real gang war, apparently.

As a result, Andreas was a little touchy regarding violence at that time, explaining the constant warning against weapons and violence given by the club manager.

I told Intruder that I had spoken to Zatharuss about Andreas' disappearance; he appeared interested so I told him how I had found him staying in the dragon's cave. Intruder said he had been there; the eggs had hatched almost thirty years ago, raising the possibility that a serious time differential was at work in that Shadow. There was also a lot of soot; possibly the marks caused by fiery breath? I said that Zatharuss had been waiting for the eggs to hatch, and Intruder said he had seen no sign of him. There were, however, a number of interesting books in the library; he had managed to "scan" most of them into a computer.

Intruder glanced around and announced that it was about time to enter the member's area. The two of us followed him in to find ourselves in a large, smoky room made smaller by the tight cluster of chairs and table filled with people. The woman singing was good, but the attention she was receiving suggested she was only a (relatively) minor act. One fellow who

looked the part of mayor sat quite close to the front; near enough to get a good view but back enough for his antics with the two blonds to be mostly concealed. Only the bodyguards really indicated his significance. The scent of serious money was heavy in the air.

Andreas, meanwhile, probably had the best table in the house, complete with bottle of brandy and glasses. We joined him and I made sure to sit down carefully and slowly; I did not know just how twitchy he really was, despite sitting in front of a roomful of “strangers”. He grinned at me said that I did not need to be *that* careful.

I reached for the bottle and the nearest glass but was stopped at the sight of the small stuffed toy in Andreas’ hands. It had long floppy ears and looked rather like a cross between a rabbit and a dog. He “pointed” it at Llewella and named the thing: Flopums. Llewella said that since really only the two of them knew what it meant to him it made the perfect declaration of identity. She did her best to conceal a smile as she said it; Andreas mock-scowled at me to warn me not to make any comment. Intruder looked on impassively.

Andreas thanked her for returning “beloved Flopums” to him, calling her “Granny”. She said she knew he was missing him; it was hard to tell which of Andreas and Flopums she was referring to. She berated him for being “out late” and he “apologised” saying he would “clean his room” when he got back. Her mock-sternness and his comically contrite expression soon dissolved into relaxed smiles as they reached for their drinks.

Swallowing a hefty mouthful Andreas asked me “what took you?” and I complained that the clues I had been left were a little too vague to catch. He shrugged that aside and told me that he had a few things he wanted me to do for him; I looked unenthusiastic and he put on an innocent expression before saying that the tasks were not very hard. I was, naturally, unconvinced.

Intruder glanced around and leaned over, telling me that Guin was desperate to see me again; it seemed she had missed my company so much that she had sneaked out to see me a few times. He had been forced to go and retrieve her, as well as cover up any trace of her presence. As I was aware, he had not been entirely successful in that regard.

Obviously he had seen her coming, as the beautiful Guinevere put in an appearance at that point. I stood as she rounded the table and I smiled in genuine pleasure at seeing her again; she was looking great in the formal summer dress she was wearing so I told her she looked “divine”. She appeared to be content with the complement, but you can never tell with women.

She asked how I was doing and I told her I was well; I had seen to some family matters and resolved some mysteries. She said she had been busy; I cheered her up by telling her that I had got her a present, but she did not seem pleased to hear it was in Amber.

Then Guin berated me for being “crap”; I had not complemented her for almost two minutes. I shrugged and asked how it was possible to improve on divine. She described that complement as “not too bad” and finished my brandy for me before leading me away from the table.

Later my doze was disturbed by a quiet knocking at the door. I almost did not catch it but Guin’s tensing in response to the interruption alerted me to it. I bellowed an angry enquiry as to who it was and was answered by Intruder telling me that Victor was attempting to Trump me; did I wish to take the call?

The look Guin gave me convinced me that taking it would be *very* bad for my health, so I called out “no!” rather irritably. Intruder apologised for interrupting and could just be heard retreating back the way he came.

We snuggled back down under the covers and got comfy again.