

## Jurnal 55- Niruth, in Shadow

By following a map produced by Morianna (and presumably given to her by Corwin) we travelled through a number of Shadow Gates to the place known as Niruth. Over the three days it took to make the journey we decided on the names we would be using. Victor was to be called Hugo while I and Morianna would be Monsieur Jean-Paul Marat and his wife Annabella.

I also took the opportunity to peruse the manuals that had come with the various electronic devices that we had been given. They were fascinating, and gave me some insight into how to properly utilise the scanners and other items. I think Morianna had a look through them at some point too.

Fortunately, the route the Gates took allowed us to stop at some fine inns on the way, so our journey was not a harsh one. There was not much opportunity for diversions, however, so our stays were rather sedate.

The final Shadow gate brought us out on one of the main roads into the city that was our destination. The city itself was not terribly unlike Paris, but was distinctly cleaner and possessing larger, more splendid boulevards. As we moved nearer to the affluent parts of the city the buildings got grander, cleaner and whiter; marble began to appear more and more frequently in their construction. The gardens became larger and more elaborate also.

As we approached the house we passed what was once Oberon's mansion; easily the largest and most impressive for several streets in each direction. There appeared to be a number of people moving around inside, but I was not really sure.

Victor drove the coach up the wide, gravel drive between the green expanses of tree-dotted lawn on either side, and stopped beside the fountain in the centre of the yard before the palatial white mansion. Lending my 'wife' a hand as she alighted from the coach, I then led the way up the solid stone staircase to the huge front door. I knocked firmly upon it and waited.

A few minutes passed before an elderly gentleman in the kind of garb associated with butlers or seneschals slowly opened the door and asked us what our business was. I enquired as to whether the lady of the house was in, and he asked who we were. I introduced myself and Morianna, not naming Victor who I could feel looming behind me, blocking out the light as usual. He courteously bid us to follow him and asked if 'my man' would be entering with us or remaining outside. I said he would stay outside, gesturing my instructions to that regard to Victor. He nodded, still looking rather ridiculous dressed as a gentleman (an oversized one at that). The butler then led the two of us to a small anteroom.

The inside of the mansion was as impressive as the exterior, subtly yet expensively decorated and furnished in a style I was half familiar with. The general forms were the same but the locals had different styles of carvings on their furniture, as well as a slightly different sense of artistic taste; there were less of the expected portraits and more landscapes than I would have expected.

The butler asked if my man required any refreshment, and I suggested that perhaps a small glass of refreshment would be in order for him. He said that he would see to it before going to announce our presence to the lady of the house.

Before too long the butler returned and led us to one of the sitting rooms. There we were introduced to Julie; she was an attractive blonde woman of roughly average height, dressed in what I assumed to be good but not truly expensive clothing. She dressed in line with local fashion but she did not set it, in other words. She seemed friendly enough, but I could not quite get over the fact that everyone in the house could be part of a set-up to catch the unwary. Did we know for sure that she was who she appeared to be?

I told her we had been just passing by, in the neighbourhood and all that, and had decided to pay a visit, what with being friends of the family. I asked how the young one was and was told that she as well, though irritable at present; she was teething. Morianna asked if we could see her but Julie told us she was sleeping.

Morianna decided to get up and take a walk around the room at that point, ostensibly to have a look at the furniture and so forth. By the way she kept sneaking glances at something concealed in the folds of her dress, however, I guessed she was using her scanner

to check the room out. I kept Julie distracted by asking about current affairs. She dutifully told me about the minor events in and around the city, and not a little gossip on top of that.

I approached Julie then, holding forth a 'letter of introduction' intended to assure her of our credentials, as it were. When she opened the envelope and saw the Trump of Corwin within she nodded in final understanding; we were from *that* side of the family.

Her examinations complete, Morianna suggested a walk in the gardens. They were very nice, with wide lawns dotted with flowerbeds veritably glowing with colour. As we walked along the gravel path running down the centre of the main lawn Julie asked Morianna how long we had been married. She was told it was just over five years. Since this was woman's talk I kept quiet. Then she asked if we had children of our own. Morianna promptly replied that we had one son by the name of Bernard, who was three. Julie seemed pleased, and said that a child so early on in the marriage was a good sign. We both smiled in what we probably both hoped was a happy, contented fashion, though I must admit my smiles were mostly to do with amusement.

I took the opportunity to ask Morianna if she had recovered from her previous agitation. She said that the outside air had done her some good, but her eyes seemed to still be rather wary, so I did not inquire further.

I attempted at that point to casually ask if there had been any problems recently in the area. The only problems they had been having lately involved the workmen in the mansion next door; the noise got quite loud at times, disturbing Julie and the child equally. In an equally supposedly casual way I said that I had only asked because Corwin seemed to have the impression that something was amiss. It was probably nothing, I reassured her. She said that there were no problems, and besides, if there were the guards Corwin sent would be able to help her.

Morianna and I glanced at each other; both of us knew that had Corwin arranged for guards he would have told us. So who had hired them? The answer was painfully obvious.

We inquired about the guards and were told they had given her a letter relating their duties and signed by Corwin; there were about forty of them in all in roughly three shifts. They always stayed on the grounds, never actually entering the house.

At this point Victor approached us, announcing that he wished to speak to his lord and lady in private. Julie retreated a polite distance away and Victor told us of the heavy work he had seen going on in Oberon's mansion next door, mostly lots of moving of furniture. We told him we were aware of it. When we told him of the suspicious guards Victor was all for doing some 'training' with them. We carefully stressed that this was NOT a good idea. Morianna told the two of us to be careful as almost every ornament, flowerbed or light fitting was 'bugged' with scanners and microphones.

We quickly devised a simple plan: Victor and I would go and have a word with some of the guards while Morianna went back to distracting Julie.

The two of us soon encountered a four-man patrol. They were armed with daggers and what looked like shortwords; they may or may not have had pistols concealed on them somewhere. Two of them each held the leads of a pair of dogs not unlike Alsations.

We asked them if they had had any problems recently, mostly to get an idea of their attitude. They were a little wary of us at first but, no doubt having seen us with the lady of the house, soon told us that they had met no problems worse than dissuading the more unruly labourers from next door not to trespass while looking for food. They reported back to their 'base' at the end of their shift.

We decided not to interrupt their duties more than necessary, since only by asking outright "who sent you then, since it was not Corwin, was it?" could we probably learn anything useful.