

28. S02E03 – In Search of Brand’s Artefact

Aleyn related Kato Zen’s tale of his journey with Brand, fifty years earlier.

Zen is drawing close to the end of his life and finding Trump Artistry more and more fatiguing. He had one major regret in his life...

“Many years ago, I studied with Brand of Amber. Although he looked much younger than I, his skill and depth of knowledge was astounding. One day, he offered to show me an Artefact he had created that had increased his understanding of the Art greatly. He led me on a journey of a few days, riding through the forests of my homeland but soon through strange, twisted woods and forested hills that were unknown to me. I have realised since that we walked in Shadow worlds. He talked excitedly about the thing I was about to see and all the while the forest about us grew darker and more foreboding.

I lost my nerve and used a Trump to return home. I was afraid I had angered Brand and fled to the City of Amber to take service with the King as a Trump Artist. We were in short supply at the time as there had been a spate of deaths and disappearances of those with the talent. It was always suspected that House Jeseby were responsible, clearing away rivals so they could charge more for their own work.

I failed to take samples of soils or leaves, but I have sketched from memory several scenes from that journey. Perhaps these pictures will be enough to let you Shadow Walk to the place. Brand is long gone now, but perhaps the Artefact remains and I have always wondered what it was and whether it did indeed hold secrets of our Art.”

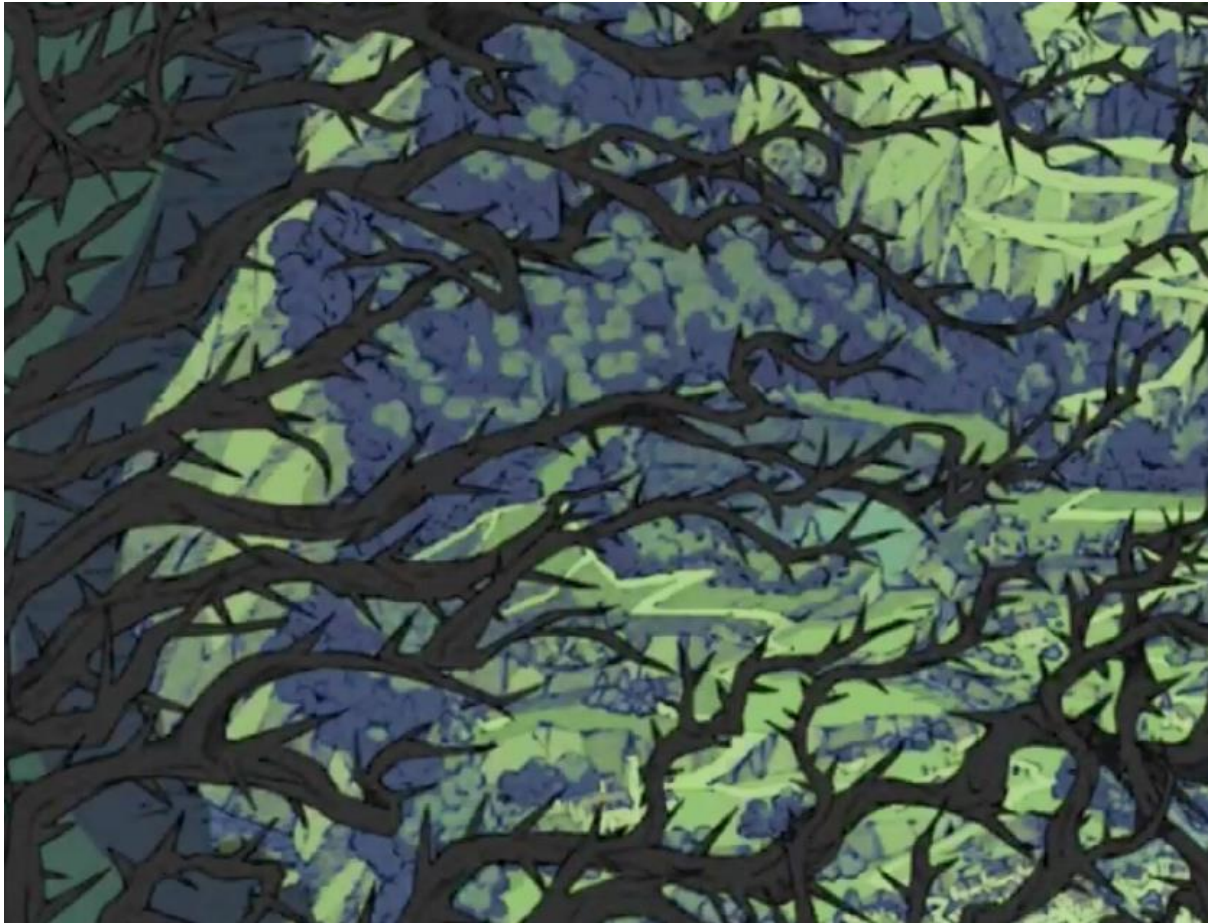
Aleyn has three detailed paintings from the old man which should be enough to let them Shadow-walk to it, but it will be challenging as neither of them has seen it for real and these are distant memories of an old man.

[GM: Focus rolls with a target of +4]

They set off from Kato Zen’s homeland – Kara Tur, one of the more distant Golden Circle realms.



Aleyn wants to practice his Shadow-walking and begins to lead Cassie towards dark, twisted woodlands as shown in the first painting. He soon gets distracted, talking of various lady friends and romance.



They find themselves in suitably twisted woodlands, but being hemmed-in by some ever-growing blackthorn vines. The way forward closes off and when they turn to retrace their steps, the vines close to cut off the way back.

There isn't enough space to let them shadow-walk, but a couple of hundred yards ahead they spot a stone turret emerging from the forest of thorns.

They lead their frightened horses to the turret – some kind of Way Station or Watchtower. And cut a way to the heavy wooden doors to find them barred.

A voice from within – an old man, scared and tired demands to know who they are. He heads up the stairs and looks down from the turret, sees they are human (not some manifestation of the demonic vines) and comes back down to let them in.



Farouk Al-Qadim is a merchant. He was on his way to his daughter's wedding from his new home in the city of Qadim to the town of his birth Retsina.

As he travelled the vines began to clog the road and drove him to take shelter in one of the Caliph's Way Stations. These are meant to be temporary lodging/rest stops for travellers. He has been stuck here for a week, running short on water and rations.

The Vines don't seem to be able to rise higher than the floor of the upper storey where the Caliph's Grand Vizier has placed magical protections. As there are no windows on the ground floor, this has prevented the vines from breaking in.



Farouk is a grower of flowers and maker of perfumes. He has a rare orchid with him, one that flowers only once every few decades. He has had it since he was a child in Retsina and has kept it alive all these years. As it recently bloomed, he is taking it to the wedding as a gift.

Aleyn decides to try and draw an image of Retsina from Farouk's descriptions and using some soil from the pot (as the original soil came from there). That way they can not only escape the Vines, but help the old man to finish his journey. [GM: these Amberites are getting soft! They could have left by Trump any time]

When Aleyn is taking out some soil, he breaks off a few thin white tendrils of root and the Vines outside surge forward noisily in response.

Losing patience with Aleyn, Cassie heads to the roof and begins threatening the plant to see if she can communicate. The vines surge each time but no real communication seems possible.

Much to her annoyance (and Farouk's bafflement) Aleyn then draws a Trump Sketch of the plant and attempts to communicate with it. The thing isn't intelligent enough to speak but definitely has urges that get communicated. It YEARNs to merge/fertilize the vine!

He manages to reassure the plant that they will help and they are able to open the door and plant the flower in the ground outside. The roots of orchid and vine inter-twine and the flower releases a fine pollen and then dies. The Vine stops being animated although it is still thick and impassable.

They use the Trump Sketch of Retsina and are welcomed into Farouk's daughter's home.

After a couple of days as honoured guests they set out again with Aleyn promising to not let thoughts of "Romance" cloud his mind.

Farouk may be able to help them with the horticultural project on Nsi Ton Teraton as he has many skilled gardeners working for him. They may return after their current quest. Morgan and Trakka will be happy to get off the Isle of Monsters.

It also seems like a good opportunity to add Qadim's Shadow to the Golden Circle, so Aleyn contacts King Random to try and set this up.

They travel to other scary forests, matching the paintings and spend a night camped in a sort of Halloween Nightmare – fortunately they are made of tougher stuff than most people and aren't too unsettled.

[GM: I decided to trigger Aley's Trouble Aspect – with a message from Neferu, servant of Setep which might advance the plot of "Setep and the Soulblade" as well as let Aley have a point of FATE back as he had to use all his points to reach this place.]

Neferu politely repeated the request to come visit Setep at House Amon. She even offered to assist with whatever Aley was currently doing. Setep himself has other interests at the moment but has ordered Neferu to arrange this little get together and she is clearly afraid to disappoint her Lord.

Perhaps the thought of Setep and Neferu and Egyptian-style architecture affected Aley's Shadow-walking the next day as they arrived at a place in the forbidding mountains that looked like the right spot, but instead of a small peak with a cave mouth, there was a giant Ziggurat capped with a Pyramid. The building seemed fairly new so perhaps this WAS the right place, but the construction had happened in the last 50 years.

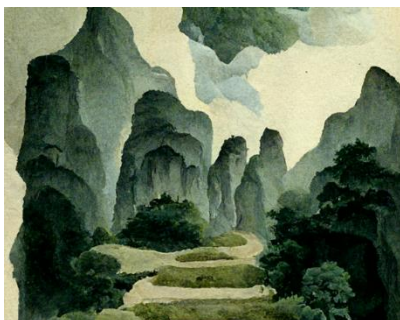


Nb. Imagine this but placed over a the middle peak of a mountainm of three peaks.

They rested again overnight then led the horses up shallow flights of steps onto the lower terraces of the Ziggurat. They had been wakened at dawn by the scream (cut short) of what sounded like a human sacrifice!

On the far side of the Ziggurat are stepped terraces with gardens and rice paddies and scenes of Egyptian-style dark-skinned inhabitants.

Cassie is sure that they are in the wrong place and Aley had allowed his subconscious to interfere with the Shadow Walking. She leads them away and then back towards a similar geography but no Ziggurat.



This looks a lot closer to Kato Zen's painting. The cave mouth looms ahead, shaped like the maw of some gigantic beast. It even has stalactites hanging just inside like fangs!

Somewhere inside should be Brand's fantastic Artefact.