

## Journal 40 - in Shadow and Amber

The next morning Victor asked me how far we were from Amber. I shrugged and admitted my ignorance in that regard, so we asked the most senior Ranger. He said we were about five days from Amber. Victor then inquired about which direction Amber lay in; I was confused a little by that question, knowing some of the way Shadow flowed away from Amber. After all, 'All Roads Lead To Amber.' The Ranger just said it lay in whichever direction he wanted.

Victor nodded and took himself off a ways before pulling out a Trump. He had a short conversation with whoever it was before turning away and walking, soon flicking into two dimensions and vanishing from sight. Clearly he had found where Julie was and was headed that way.

I turned back to the senior Ranger, who was at that time overseeing the breaking of camp, and asked his opinion which method would be best for reaching Amber: using Trumps or walking through Shadow. He said either worked well enough, it just depended on how quickly one wished to get to the destination. So I decided that we would use the Trump of the Arden road to get into Amber and then take the western trade route up Kolvir to the castle. He told me the Rangers were almost ready; he would send a few men with us on the caravans, maybe two on each.

I sought out Arnold; he was packing some of the engineer's gear into his caravan. Jessica was running around nearby with some of her newfound friends. I asked him if his family and the rest were ready to go. He looked up and down the line before announcing that they looked almost ready. I informed him that we would be arriving close to our destination by the same means that had got us to this place, though hopefully we would not need to come to so sudden a standstill this time.

He asked if there was any way he could help and I told him that no, there was not. I offered him the opportunity to come and watch, but he declined, saying he could watch from his caravan if he really wanted to. I walked with him up and down the line as he checked everyone was ready; they tended to look rather uneasily at me. That was to be expected, I suppose.

When Arnold told me all was secure, I took my place beside Henry one more on the lead caravan. I told him we would move once we got the word all was ready, and that we would be Trumping to Amber. He nodded and told me with a grin that he had improved the brakes.

A few minutes later Arnold came up next to us and announced everyone was ready to leave, then walked back to his caravan. I told Henry we would get up some speed before I used the Trump, and he got the oxen moving. Slowly we built up speed until we were moving at our normal pace, at which point I dealt out my Trump of the Arden road.

Before long the image of a wide road that wound through forest solidified and became animated. The trees moved in the wind, the leaves rustled, and as far as I could tell the road was clear and unobstructed. I reached out with my mind and 'pulled' us through. It was better than the last time; there was no need for any sudden stops, and the most perturbed of our group was the oxen.

Henry sat back and left the oxen to lead us onwards; he told me they had done the journey so often they did not need to be told where to go. On the other hand, he did need to know if we were to go to the city or to the castle. I thought it wise to ask the person who would probably know best, so I Trumped Random. He said he was glad to know that we had finally arrived and told me that the city was still undergoing some substantial rebuilding. When I asked where we should go he said that it would be better if we came to the castle; the road was clear for us to come up.

I told Henry of our final destination and he directed the oxen to a certain lane on the road before sitting back again. At my quizzical look he explained that he always travelled along that part of the road when going to the castle, and the oxen knew that; they would probably not need any further direction until we reached the castle.

I decided to take my ease for the rest of the journey, so I climbed into the lead caravan and pulled out a book before sitting in one of the comfortable armchairs in the main living area.

A few hours passed before I was disturbed by one of the caravan lads; he told me we were almost to the castle. I climbed back out to join Henry and watched as we reached the top of the road and entered the courtyard before the main castle entrance. Stopping around the fountain, I was surprised to find that no one was waiting for us. I would have thought, under the circumstances, that we would have been met by footmen or other castle attendants at least, by the king and his entourage even, but our arrival was a quiet and understated one.

After the effort we had expended for the kingdom, we could at least have got a formal 'triumphant return' or something.

I got my luggage and was soon joined by both Arnold and old Zeb. They asked what they were supposed to do now; I shrugged and suggested we go to the throne room. After a few false starts and a couple of wrong turns I found the way there to find it had seen some redecoration. The carpets had been cleaned, the stones polished and, surprisingly, Bill Roth was hard at work replanting the square stone tubs. I only recognised him because I had taken a look at his card a few days ago.

He looked around as we entered and nodded, declaring that finally the guests had arrived. He called over the two pages that sat one either side of the vacant throne looking rather bored and handed them a page of parchment he drew forth from an inner pocket. He directed them to see to the arrangements regarding the rooms for the engineers and their families; the details were on the parchment. The pages led Arnold and Zeb away.

Roth then turned to me and asked if I had been assigned a room yet. I told him I had not actually stayed in the castle long enough yet for that to be necessary. He suggested I go upstairs and pick out a spare room; if I knocked on a door, received no answer and the door was unlocked then the room was free for taking. The maids would also know which ones were free and would take note of which room I occupied. I thanked him, and as I turned to leave he reminded me that there was a ball that evening to celebrate the return to normality and the arrival of the engineers. It would start at about six; it would be preferred if I arrived before eight.

They must have a lot of tardy guests in Amber society for him to have to make it so clear.

With a little help from a maid I picked out a room on the east side, overlooking the sea. It had a good-sized living room with chairs, table, desk, bookcase and fireplace, and had a bathroom (complete with shower and bath) and a bedroom besides. A pair of double windows looked down over the eastern face of Kolvir and over the wide blue sea. The room was a little lacking in identity, rather bare and empty of character, but hopefully I would soon change that.

I emptied the contents of my suitcase into the wardrobe in the bedroom before taking a better look around. I examined the desk, checked the size and estimated the capacity of the bookcase, and tried out the cushions on the armchairs. It was all very satisfactory; I had not had a room like that since the embassy in St. Petersburg.

I spent much of that afternoon in search of attire suitable for the evening's soiree. I sought out a good gentleman's clothiers in the city and inquired after the possibility of purchasing some formal wear and receiving it that same evening. The rather dry and dusty old fellow who ran the place asked if it was for the ball, and when I answered in the affirmative he desired to know if the suit would be charged to the von Bek account or to the family account.

Obviously my fame, or perhaps infamy, preceded me. By a good half a mile and an unknown array of Shadows, it would seem.

I told him it would be charged to my account and he proceeded to take my measurements. As he did he told me that formal wear in Amber was doublet and hose, presumably of the sixteenth century variety; to be ready for that evening he would have to adjust some 'off-the-peg' clothing they had in stock. He said that with extreme distaste. When I asked if it were possible to instead have something more to my tastes, of the late eighteenth century European variety, he said that it would not be possible on such short notice. I thanked him and told him he might as well not bother himself at such short notice; he nodded and said he would keep my measurements for another occasion.

In the end I had to resort to wearing one of the business suits I had bought in Houston a few weeks previously. It was a pleasant dark green and went well with the silk shirt and tie that I accompanied it with. All in all I looked quite dapper.

I arrived at the throne room (an odd place for a ball, but it is quite large) by around a quarter hour past six. The flower tubs had all been restocked with very colourful blooms of various kinds and several multi-coloured banners were draped over doorways and windows in an attempt to produce a very festive atmosphere. It came close to working; most of the engineers were there with their families and many of them actually looked happy. Some even talked to people not of their party.

Their children were kept amused by two things; the strangeness of the place and Gerard. He was playing some sort of game with many of the younger ones that mostly involved him hiding behind the throne and leaping out only to be jumped on by a small horde of giggling children.

To one side of the room, about halfway along, was a small group of musicians. They were not playing as I arrived, but soon began to perform some cheerful piece obviously intended to make everyone feel much happier and perhaps to get them dancing. Several small tables, each of a size for a half dozen people to occupy, were also arranged around the edge of the room, leaving the centre space open for talking and dancing.

Looking around the room I picked out family members from amongst 'my' people. Florimel and Bleys were surrounded by their own little groups of listeners; each group seemed fairly equally divided between men and women. Fiona was there with the rest somewhere, and I could see Random and Vialle standing near the bar that had been rather quickly installed in one corner of the room, near to the doors.

Interestingly, it was on the exact spot where the sniper's round had cracked the tiles.

I could see Llewella off to one side watching, well, everyone. Several of the children and many of the adults found her a compelling sight; with her jade hair and green-tinged skin she did make a most remarkable spectacle. Even by comparison Vialle drew less attention, despite having the same base complexion; I suppose the more normal hair and the hint of a tan made her seem more normal.

I saw Roth was there too; he appeared to be lecturing a fellow of medium build with a mane of blonde hair that I recognised from the Trumps. After a moment's thought I remembered his name was Danan, another of 'my' generation who had come to Amber before me. He listened to Roth's comments with no expression, and the young girl next to him, a pretty little thing with long, curly blonde hair and a flattering dress, looked rather put out by what was being said. By the look of her, it seemed likely to me that she was related to Roth; his daughter perhaps? That explained the lecturing and her reaction to it. A woman, Roth's wife by the look of it, stood by his side listening without comment.

As I had expected and been told, everyone was dressed in the height of Amber fashion; the men wore doublet and hose of varying quality and style, the women gowns and dresses with long sleeves or short, low cut or to the neck as desired or deemed appropriate. The children almost universally wore clothing that had been brought with them, though some older ones wore simpler versions of what their parents wore.

As a result, I elicited quite a variety of looks from the crowd upon my arrival, from slight envy from some of our guests to irritation from our hosts for being out of place. Mind you, I like to stand out on occasions, and this was definitely an occasion.

I got myself a glass of wine and went over to see Random. Once the pleasantries were over he asked me if I knew what had happened to the others. I shrugged and suggested that perhaps they intended to be fashionably late. He looked a little sick at this comment and advised me to go and circulate.

I sought out the Hollister family and found them grouped around one of the tables near to the entrance. Arnold greeted me as I approached and I asked how he and his family were settling in. He told me they were all still very confused by everything; their rooms were pleasant enough and the attire took a lot of getting used to. Especially the codpiece; he gestured at it like it was some strange growth. Which I suppose it was, to him. But then, I was not familiar with them either.

He told me that George was at work somewhere in the castle, checking and calibrating their equipment. He was not, he said, much of a one for social gatherings.

He gestured in the direction of Bleys and said he might well go and see what he was about later in the evening; he must have something interesting to say with all those people around him. Jessica, the daughter, picked up a glass of something orange (probably orange juice) and wandered over to watch the children at play, which put her within talking distance of

a blonde youth who looked to be a local. They eventually got talking, a development which Arnold took rather badly.

I excused myself and decided to pay a visit to Florimel's little group. I had not had the opportunity to talk to her, and was especially interested to do so since I knew she was Morianna's mother.

She was even more beautiful in person than she was on her Trump, and carried herself with a grace and confidence queens would be jealous of. But then, she was a princess herself. She held her audience totally in her thrall with her tale of a dance in Paris and the artist she met there. It seemed a good 'comedy of errors' sort of thing, and it did not matter how truthful it was; it was a fine tale either way.

She greeted me with a sparkling smile as I approached and took one arm before kissing me gently on the cheek. Her lashes flicked against my cheekbone and I felt her hot breath momentarily on my face before she turned back to her audience. My legs felt slightly weak for a moment before I regained what little self-control I had left. When I saw the envious looks I received from the male members of her congregation it got through to my befuddled head that she had done it to play games with them, and probably me too. Not that I minded particularly.

I was distracted for a moment by the appearance of Julian at the doors. He came in only long enough to get a good look around before leaving again with a rather determined expression on his face. Random, I saw, looked a little peeved by this turn of events; perhaps he thought his guests were deciding to abandon him.

Florimel continued with her story, bringing it to the glorious conclusion where heroic artist overcame and duped the lecherous captain before the whole of polite society and thus won Florimel's undying affection. We all laughed at the appropriate moments, namely the funny ones, though I think some laughed to be seen to do so.

As Florimel's story concluded there was a small tinkling of some glass breaking somewhere, and as people turned round to locate the source the band suddenly abandoned the cheery air they had been playing with no recognition of their hard work and struck up a new tune. It was racy; it was energetic; it was quite possibly even seductive. Then all eyes turned to the doors as Julian swept in with Morianna, moving with enthusiasm to the rhythm of the dance.

I do not think I had ever seen her in a dress before. It was always either her armour or men's clothing; shirts and hose and the rest. She certainly did it justice; she really should wear them more often.

As I took my most gracious leave of Florimel's little gathering I heard her sigh and tut in response to Julian and Morianna's dramatic appearance. Maybe she was just jealous of the stir they produced. Then again, probably not.

I was on my way over to the group where I could see Zeb talking to Random when another startling sight entered the room. Benedict, dressed in a peculiar white suit, entered the room carrying some form of polearm. The suit was fairly 'normal' except that the jacket was distinctly wider at the shoulders than at the waist. They were also quite clearly padded. The shirt underneath was also white, but the wide tie was orange. Everyone turned to look as he entered; he looked around with a rather embarrassed expression and leant the polearm up against the wall beside the doors before going over to talk to Bleys.

With the end of Julian's tune another fast dancing air started up and couples began to take their place on the floor. More and more slowly filtered into the dance area; I even saw Danan and his female friend join in. I circulated around the engineers and their families, exchanging greetings, asking how they were and how they were fitting in. To tell the truth, they had been in Amber itself for only a few hours more than I had, all told, so I was almost as new to the place as they were. It was more a matter of how they were settling in to the place and everything associated with it.

About a quarter hour passed before I noticed the newest arrivals. Victor and his girl, Julie, had arrived; Victor looked rather peculiar in his doublet and hose. It looked as if someone had been forced to take two sets and sew them together to get him to fit in them. Julie, of course, looked ravishing in a floor-length ballgown. Then I saw who had come in just behind them; Joe, and his wife Florence, no less! I had thought them still in Corwin's Paris. While her dress was suitable to the surroundings Joe instead wore, like me, a suit, though his was a medium grey with narrow, white, vertical stripes. At least my father and I were not the only ones who looked out of place.

I was all for going to talk to them but I found myself interrupted by a small succession of the older daughters of the engineers who wished for a dance or two. Naturally, I never pass up the opportunity to dance with any young woman, so was kept from talking to my friends for a few turns about the room. I did see that Joe and Florence were dancing too while Victor and his lady was talking to Random.

My final dance was with a delightful brunette girl who danced rather badly but smiled like an angel. When we finally broke apart to become separate people again she said to me that she had heard that we were supermen. I just winked as I turned to go; she blushed, as expected. I laughed to myself as I went in search of Joe.

I found them by the impromptu bar. I greeted him, shaking him by the hand, and smiled at Florence; then I asked how they were and what they had been doing since I last saw them. They were well, and had most recently been busy repairing the damage done to their house and vineyards by the occupying forces. Joe did not say anything about what they had been up to in Corwin's Paris; I suppose I did not expect him to. I took the opportunity to get myself a new glass of wine.

They asked what I had been doing and I said that I had been kept busy for the last few months in Shadow on a mission. I did not expand upon that comment, and they did not pry. Florence did comment, however, that if I was not presently occupied I could help them in the east field. I declined that dubious honour as gracefully as I could.

We engaged in some meaningless small talk for a minute or so before I looked between them across the room to see Benedict looking rather uncomfortable in his unusual suit. I told the couple that I just *had* to go and talk to Benedict, but asked if I could steal Joe's wife at some point this evening for a dance. Florence smiled in acceptance while Joe said something about there being trouble if I really did steal her. I just nodded rather obliviously and passed between them, cutting a path through the crowd to Benedict's table.

He looked rather despondently at me as I sat down opposite him. After a moment's silence he explained that he was only wearing what he called a 'zoot suit' because he had been conducting business in a place where it was the standard dress of businessmen. He had just come from conducting a deal and had not had time to change. I told him it did not look too bad; he replied that he looked like a wedge of cheese.

The thing is, he did.

With regards to my attire, I told him that I did not think I would look very good in hose. I had thought that when I had chosen to wear something other than the standard garb, but since seeing them actually being worn I had reconsidered. My father just mumbled that he would have preferred doublet and hose to his 'cheese suit'. I was forced to agree.

He then pointed out Llewella; she was across the room, besieged by a group of children who appeared to be asking her questions. They probably wanted to know why she was so green. Benedict suggested that she could do with being rescued, and got up to go and do so. I agreed with him and followed; besides the gallant rescue bid I had a question or two to ask her.

She was grateful to us for taking her away from her little tormentors, and nodded thanks when I handed her a glass of wine I acquired from a tray being carried around my a servant. She asked how I was doing and I told her I was well and glad to be back in Amber instead of running around in Shadow. I asked her how Rebma fared, and she told me that they had been left alone after the first few attacks and since then concentrated on rebuilding the damage inflicted by those assaults.

I then asked how the lady Yvonne was; apparently she was spending her time studying and generally keeping herself busy. She was, however, eager to learn 'the answer' one way or the other.

My father then asked me if I had obtained the answer to his question yet. Since we had been talking about Andreas, indirectly at least, I presumed he was asking if I had questioned Zatharuss regarding his disappearance. I remembered that the last I had heard of him he had taken a Shadow Gate out of Amber into Shadow, so told I him that since his answer was currently out of town I had been unable to find out any more since the last time he had asked.

Llewella suddenly looked around and announced that she had to go and ask someone a question; she stood up and headed towards the doors; I looked that way myself to see that Sand, Andreas' mother, had arrived. The two of them got deep into conversation.

I leaned towards Benedict and asked if we were talking about the same thing; by the look on his face and the way he glanced briefly at Sand I guessed we must have been. He

then declared that he was going to change into something less 'distinctive'; if anyone asked, I was to tell them he had gone after Llewella and Sand, who had just left. Then he made a quick exit.

I was heading over to where I could see Victor and Julie standing by the musicians when two things interrupted me. The first was someone I had not seen before entering the room; a slim fellow with classical features and swept back, shoulder length blonde hair. He wore understated doublet and hose in silver-grey. I noted his presence as he stood in the doorway and looked around at the gathering; then as I continued on towards Victor the second thing made its presence felt.

A sense of Power came over me like a splash of ice-cold water. The first sense of it was sudden, like a wave breaking over me, but it remained at a lesser level for a few moments afterwards. I noticed as it dissipated that while the guests and servants had not noticed it, all the members of the family had, even Victor. I watched for a few moments as Random casually led Vialle over to where Julian and Morianna were sitting.

As I continued on my ceaselessly interrupted journey across one room I also noticed that at some point Fiona had taken up position on the balcony overlooking Arden that the 'rifleman' had 'fallen' from. As I watched Bleys went through the balcony doors to join her, firmly closing the doors behind him on the way.

Something serious was afoot; even I could figure that out. The guests also began to notice the tension that was slowly building in the room.

By the time I finally reached Victor Julie had apparently gone over to the bar to get drinks while Morianna had joined him; Julian was nowhere to be seen. They finished whatever they were saying as I arrived. I greeted them both before asking where Julian was. Morianna looked over my shoulder and said he was behind me. I moved to one side to allow him to go past, and as he did he said to Morianna that 'it' was 'not Arden'. I could only presume he meant the 'Power' we had all felt not long beforehand, since I would think it was the only thing the family was talking about at that moment.

So I said something to the effect of "Really? Not Arden?" and he just said "correct".

For a change I knew something useful! At least I knew where 'it' was *not*, even if I did not know *where* 'it' was or *what* 'it' was.

Victor looked around to point out the new chap I had spotted earlier and asked who he was. Both Morianna and I remarked that he must be the new member of the family we had heard about; Julian added more information by telling us that his name was Ansalom.

Just then another incident successfully interrupted just about everybody. The sound of a slap resounded through the room and was followed instantly by the cry of "bastard!". Everyone's heads turned like we were puppets guided by some unseen puppeteer to see Florimel standing with one hand outstretched and an incensed expression on her face. A fellow had just come to rest on his back about five feet away from her and looked to be both the source of her indignation and the recipient of her chastisement.

Victor began to dash past me towards the fallen gentleman and suddenly everything began to slow down as if everyone were moving in a fast current. It all began when I noticed that none of the older members of the family were looking at the spectacle Florimel had created; they were all looking towards one of the side doors. In fact, it was the door next to the one that led to the gunman's ledge.

I turned my gaze that way and saw what had so captured their attention: another of those cloaked figures, probably Monsieur Manteau again, had appeared out of the doorway bearing a large, blanket-wrapped bundle. It was about the size and shape of a man. 'He' placed his burden on the floor and stepped back into the doorway and quietly closed it behind him.

With the click of the door latch time suddenly sprang into full speed once more. Gerard leapt up from where he had been sitting and ran the short distance to the bundle in a few scant seconds. Morianna was close behind him, and by the time I had put down my glass and headed over there myself the new fellow, Ansalom, and Julian had arrived as well. Joe was not too far behind.

In a surreal moment I realised that only now were the various families beginning to notice that something was amiss besides Florimel's furious response to some insult or other, and that the band was still playing the same tune they had been only moments before.

I had apparently missed some important exchange because Gerard picked up the blanket-wrapped mystery man and quickly exited the room, closely followed by Joe. Morianna asked Julian if he heard; he replied in the affirmative. He looked rather grim about it. Presumably it was someone he knew. He then added that it was bad that Gerard had to identify him from his fingerprints. I looked confused at this and enquired what he meant.

He stared at me for a moment before telling me it was Caine. Once I got over my surprise I remembered that Caine was supposed to be Julian's full brother; I decided that it would be better if I kept quiet, under the circumstances.

Ansalom headed over towards the side door but was stopped by Random, who had just arrived after leaving Vialle in the 'care' of several of the wives of the engineers. He told Ansalom that it was pointless going that way as it led down into Kolvir; the cloaked man would be long gone by the time he got down there.

Julian headed off somewhere; I did not notice where, but I suspected he might have gone in search of Gerard and Joe. Ansalom decided at the moment to leave the room, as did Morianna, probably in search of Julian. Victor passed them on the way in and returned to Julie's side.

I was watching the reaction of the engineers and their families to the evening's surprise events. They seemed mostly interested in Florimel's antics; any mention of members of the royal family dashing about the room was definitely secondary. I began to wonder if the two incidents were related; Florimel's little drama certainly captured everyone's attention perfectly. Too perfectly.

Ansalom had returned and was standing in the vicinity of where Florimel had stood when she had delivered her remarkable blow. I thought that I might as well talk to him, so I rescued my glass from the flower tub I had stood it on and went over to speak to him.

I greeted him as I approached and introduced myself. He passed by any pleasantries and instead commented on how it had been an interesting night. I agreed with him noncommittally. He then said that Florimel had made a good job of the distraction; I nodded and wondered aloud if 'they' could have picked him specifically for fulfilling that role. He answered that they could well have; he said it so seriously I think he believed it. I told him that it worried me that he thought that was true. He just shrugged.

A short while passed while neither of us said anything (I was taking a drink of my wine), then I said that I hoped such 'interesting times' would not interfere with my holiday plans. I had been running around through Shadow for quite some time, I told him, and felt I needed a rest. I finished my little announcement by saying that I would probably not be of much use in Amber under these circumstances; I had too many gaps in my knowledge regarding Amber to be of any help.

His face turned kind of intense as he turned to me and said that I should take the time to learn. He looked as if he took such study very seriously. And even so, he said, I could still be of use somehow.

I grinned and pointed at Victor. He was a good example of that, I said; impulsive and all but incapable of planning but still useful in a fight.

He immediately turned to me and directed the conversation towards the others of our generation. He said I knew a lot about them (more than him, obviously) and wanted to know what my impressions of them were. I suppose it was easier to do that than talk to them himself; I had noticed that he had not actually talked to anyone else yet, even if his supposed plans to do so had been interrupted by the sudden swirl of events.

One of the head footmen came over to us before I could formulate a response and offered us each a bottle to go with our now (unfortunately) empty glasses. I thanked him, and he told us that there were two more bottles going spare behind the bar that we could have if we desired.

I was almost about to speak when Julian and Bleys dashed past us out of the room; they had come from the direction of the balcony. Obviously something more was afoot somewhere; fortunately, it was somewhere else for a change.

Once we were (relatively) alone again I said that I did not really want to prejudice his opinions by telling him mine, but in the end I could see no real reason why not. I kept it simple, though: Victor I had already described, Morianna I said was quiet and suggested he make his own judgement; I said Tim was unlucky but friendly, that I knew nothing about that Danan fellow, that I had not seen Joe for some time and, finally, that I had not seen Tristan for quite a long while either.

I then asked if there was anything else I could help him with. I said it with a warm (if insincere) smile and a slight trace of loftiness in my voice. He answered with a simple no and took his bottle of wine away with him. I do not know what it was about him, but he just set my teeth on edge. I think it was the barefaced trawling for information that got me riled.

I looked about to see what had happened in the rest of the world while I was trapped in conversation with Ansalom. Nothing particularly interesting had occurred; all the excitement was over for the night, it seemed. Especially when I saw that delightful brunette enjoying herself with a local lad near the balcony. Definitely a let down.

I grabbed some food on the way by the buffet table and went out on the balcony. There I found myself in the company of several couples, the nearest of which were Albert and his girlfriend Victoria. I soon discovered that in the week prior to my leaving for Amber they had in fact got married. I congratulated them, of course, and then Albert asked about Florimel and the man bundled in the blanket.

Obviously not everyone had missed the 'secondary' events.

I told them I really did not know much more than they on that subject. They told me that he was known to be quite a womaniser, and that he was usually only that unrestrained when he drank more than his usual quantity. I was beginning to suspect that Ansalom's speculation was right.

Albert then told me that they still slightly lost where Amber was concerned. I could understand their confusion. They had, he told me, two or three more days to spend acclimatising to the place, but they still had to get to work calibrating the equipment tomorrow. I told them George had already started on it; they were not surprised.

They way Victoria glanced at me and then turned her full attention on Albert reminded me that they were on their honeymoon, so I decided to leave them to it. Once back in the room it became obvious that the ball had officially been over for at least a quarter hour; almost everyone had left. I acquired some more sandwiches from the buffet and was approached once more by the footman who had brought the wine over earlier. He asked me if it was all right to let the pages have the rest of the buffet; as the last of the royals available it was my decision. Doing so reduced waste, he told me. It probably let them have a bit of a taste of the good life, as well, and I did not begrudge them that, so I grabbed a final slice or two of ham and told him to call them in.

He waved towards the doors and a small horde of pages swarmed in to devour the buffet like a plague of rats. At least someone was enjoying it. The footman asked if I wanted my other bottle of wine, and when I replied in the affirmative he asked if I wanted the other one too. If Ansalom did not want it, it would have been a shame to let it go to waste, so I took that one too. He placed all three bottles in a 'bottle carrier', a sort of wooden frame with vertical slots for a half dozen bottles and a handle. He wished me goodnight and I reciprocated before heading up to my room.

The bed was easily as comfortable as it looked. My first actual night in Amber, finally.