

Journal 43 - in Magdeburg

I finally set off on the pilgrimage home. I decided that I would stop off in Magdeburg first, to see Johann at the King's Arms on Rudenstrasse. I had not seen him for almost as long as my parents. He had fought in the Revolutionary War in America; he was not an ardent Revolutionary, he just knew right from wrong.

So I set about bringing into focus the elements that made up Magdeburg; the sky, the usual clouds, the roads, the grass, the fields.... The people were next, and the sounds. After maybe a week I could feel in my bones that I was in the right area, so to speak; another week and it was home. I was not sure for a time; a lot can change in six years (hopefully; any more than that could have gotten painful).

It was late autumn. The fields had been harvested; the country folk were resting after the work and preparing for the snows. The city was a haven from the chilly winds and rain, and as I rode in through the old south gate with the sun low on my left everything came together and I *knew* I was back.

I guided my horse towards the district where the Arms was almost without conscious thought. Some of the houses looked a little more weathered than they had been when I last saw them; some looked better. As I neared the Arms I recognised a few of the locals, though only just; time had weighed more heavily on them than it had on me.

The thing that really stood out was the number of tricolour cockades worn by the townsfolk. Some were surreptitiously worn at the belt or as a badge under the coat, while some were proudly displayed on hats and lapels. I only hoped that this did not mean that the madness was spreading this far, or that it already had.

The fact that the King's Arms was still standing and not a burnt out ruin was a good sign. Obviously the badges were meant only to show that they sympathised with the cause of the French. Or so I hoped; the last thing I wanted to see was blood flowing in the streets of dear old Magdeburg.

The Arms had not changed at all. Well, the ceiling had got a little blacker, several of the windows were newer and some of the furniture looked new too, but everything else was the same. Most of the barmaids were still in evidence, and Johann had got some new ones in too. With a nostalgic sigh I took a place at the bar. One of the older girls (well, women) recognised me; Heidi, her name was. Her jaw dropped and she gaped at me for a while before all but running over to serve me. She asked how I was and almost before I could answer she rushed on, saying how they had heard nothing from me for *so long*, I was looking well, they'll all be glad to know I'm alright, and so on.

I answered her through the torrent as best I could, and eventually she actually served me; my 'usual' ale too, no less. It warmed my heart that she remembered, though that could have been the potency of the stuff. I downed it with gusto; it was like nectar from an angel, I told Heidi. She giggled; she had not changed in the slightest, except for some extra weight. But she still looked good.

Johann, she told me, was getting a new barrel from the cellar; he would be back up soon.

I rested and looked about, drinking a second tankard. Some of the old hands nodded vaguely at me (one of them waved at the beam over my head) and a few of the serving girls waved at me over the crowd. The newer ones just looked at me curiously.

Eventually Johann appeared. He still had those bear's shoulders and the thick black moustache and beard. He had put on a little extra weight, but if he could still lift barrels he was still well. He dropped the new barrel on the bar to a rough round of applause and banged in a tap with one blow of a hammer. He filled the silver tankard that he kept under the bar for "testing" new beer and filled it up. He was almost about to take a deep swig of the dark ale when I leaned over and asked if there as any for me.

He almost dropped the tankard when he saw it was me, but only almost; he was a true tavern keeper. He stared for a moment then took a *really* deep pull on the ale; I could have sworn he finished it in one swallow. Then he said that he had heard I was dead. When I asked what he had heard, he said that the rumour was that a contingent of elite soldiers had tracked me down and killed me, but fallen foul of bandits and lost half of their number to them.

I grinned to think of the trouble the soldiers would have had explaining being routed by one man, and said that that was the sort of thing Montsorbier would say. Johann had met him once or twice, of course, before the Revolution, and so knew a little of his ability to speak convincingly. I had no doubt it was he who had fabricated the story; it was just his kind of tale.

Johann surprised me then by saying that he had gone to look for me in France, despite the fact that there was a price on my head and had been for some time now. It is always nice to be valued.

Johann looked squarely at me then and said that he knew I was a good swordsman, but surely twelve men was beyond the reach of even the best master swordsman? I smiled and said that a friend had come to my assistance. He nodded slowly and announced that it sounded like a good story; he stood and snagged a brandy bottle and two glasses from behind the bar. He led the way over to the prime spot by the fire and cajoled two old fellows away from the fire with the promise of some good brandy if they did so.

The two gentlemen happily gave up their table when Johann called out to Heidi to give the two men the rest of 'that second bottle of brandy'. I leant back against the wall, partly shadowed by the light of the fire, and Johann sat opposite me.

I concocted a jolly little story about how a mysterious stranger caught up with me after I inadvertently stole his horse; how he had questioned me by tying me upside down to a cave roof; how, once I had won him over, he and two of his friends had helped me see off the soldiers; how the three of them had seen them off with a combination of masterful swordplay and pinpoint accuracy with two pistols. He seemed quite impressed, though I am not sure he believed all of it.

It was mostly true of course, except that Andreas had seen off the soldiers by himself and Intruder and Guin had helped to fight off the beast-men.

Then I asked how long I had been 'dead'. Johann told me it had been close to two years, about twenty months in all. I only hoped my family had not given up hope; Johann would have told them, the same way he passed on my letters to them when I was supposed to have renounced my family. I sent the last one a week after the execution of the king; almost a year before I fled from France.

He then asked me how the Revolution had fared when I last saw it at work in Paris. I sighed and said how the bright ideals of the early days of the Revolution had slowly been tarnished and destroyed by the hate and anger of the people; how the very people we had tried to save from injustice had brought worse upon themselves in the form of the brutality, the blood-soaked streets and the political and everyday paranoia. I told him how I had seen a young girl, maybe twelve at most, repeatedly raped by over a dozen filthy *sans-culottes* before they cut her open and pulled out a good portion of her innards before leaving her to die.

Her only crime had been that she had worked as an assistant to a seamstress who happened to be working for an aristo when they arrived for the noblewoman.

Johann shook his head and said that he had heard similar tales of woe and degenerate acts, but had given them little credence. By the look on my face, he said, he could now believe that many of them were true. He then added that he had heard that Robespierre was (possibly) on his way out; it was about time that overdressed little lunatic got his comeuppance.

He also told me how there had been a lot of border problems with France; not actual war or a substantive invasion, just overzealous reactionaries trying to take the Revolution to other lands still oppressed by the aristos, groups of twenty up to several hundred screaming fanatics. There were a few more substantial movements of troops along the border, but they appeared to be mostly directed at keeping people in rather than attacking anyone.

On top of all that, there were a number of Revolutionary agitators in the city. Three of them were little more than thugs who wanted to punish the rich for being rich when they were not; two more were a little brighter and better orators; but the last was more of a threat than all the others put together. Johann did not know his name, but he had seen him; he described him as intelligent but not the sort of man one would turn one's back on. He described him for me, a fairly average man with blonde hair and reasonably expensive clothing.

Johann also informed me that it was possible the fellow had a powerful sponsor back in France; he was apparently capable of having consignments of high grade brandy sent straight through the border stations into France, despite the tensions along the frontier.

I asked him if he thought that this fellow would attempt to recruit me or just have me killed. Johann thought for a moment before answering that he thought it most likely that he would attempt to have me killed. This was not particularly encouraging.

He did say, though, that most of the louder, possibly violent Revolutionary factions had been curbed; they had not yet roused any crowds to clash with the duke's men, or started any general riots. I was gratified for that, at least.

I told Johann that I was considering travelling home to Bek to see my family. He said that they were well, the last he had heard of them. He had heard that they had bought a quantity of marble; he was not sure how much. It may have been possible that it was enough for a tombstone..... As I digested that piece of information he suggested that someone be sent to warn them of my arrival, to soften the blow as it were. Still in thought I nodded vaguely in the affirmative.

He called over a young lad by the name of Wilhelm, and told him to fetch pen, ink and paper. The boy returned promptly and Johann penned a quick letter saying I had returned and would be visiting soon. He then told the lad to take a fast horse and ride to Bek; Wilhelm looked pleased at receiving this duty and hurried off in the direction of the stables.

I was surprised he let him go off on such a long journey by himself; he only looked to be fourteen, or maybe fifteen. I asked Johann if perhaps Wilhelm was too young, but he assured me the boy was a jockey of some ability who had won a number of prominent races. He then told me that he was also the son of Wilhelm, Johann's son, so he could be depended on. When I looked surprised (Wilhelm senior was never well known for his ability to settle down; Wilhelm married seemed unlikely) Johann laughed and said that even his son had not known about the boy until recently. Johann had forged a deal with the girl's father to get them married and get himself an extension put onto the back of the common room and kitchen.

He always was one for getting a good deal; a grandson and daughter-in-law for the price of expanding the tavern was one of his better ones.

I guessed that I would probably stay for about a week, to allow the message time to get to Bek. Johann said that my "usual room", the one overlooking the canal, was probably free but that he would have to check. While he did so I had another glass of the fine brandy that I had barely touched. He returned bearing the keys and handed them to me; he then told me that he had to get back behind the bar. People were starting to come out of church and harvest time was always busy, as I well remembered.

True to his prediction the room quickly filled over the next hour or so with a great many joyous folk and the entertainment began soon after; singing, dancing, some gambling, and drink. I spotted a few people I recognised from years before, in the Arms, the university and around the city. All in all it was a very good homecoming, even if I was not exactly home yet.

The next day I went out into the city. I had a look at all the old places I knew, and discovered some interesting new ones. I also sought out some clothiers, since all I had to wear was the simplest and least different looking clothing I had bought before that long search through Shadow for the engineers. First I acquired some simple, everyday and tough clothing, good for looking unassuming and for travelling in; then I picked one of the more respectable tailors that I had not made much use of in the past.

They measured me and we discussed what cut and colour of clothing was appropriate for going to Court in these times. We eventually settled on a couple of pairs of white trousers, another two pairs of black ones, several white shirts, waistcoats in black, white, dark red and dark blue, and three topcoats, in black, dark blue and dark green. We arranged for a second fitting the next day; when I asked about boots he took measurements of my feet, too, and compared them to boots they already had in. His calculations complete, the shop owner said he would arrange to have the right size boots made by a cobbler; we would check how they fitted at the fitting the next morning.

I paid part of the fee in advance with Marks I just happened to have acquired earlier and, after a moment's thought, gave my name as Garath. The owner looked at me rather dubiously but accepted it. I then asked him where the best place to buy jewellery from was; he probably had a deal going with a nearby jeweller. He suggested I try on the appropriately named Jeweller's Street; most establishments there would suffice for both men and women.

This all took up most of the afternoon, but I had little else to do at the time.

Back at the King's Arms I had one of the older Wilhelm's fine dinners (he may be a bit of a wayward fellow, but he is a good cook) before taking my ease in the common room for the evening. It was quieter than the previous night, and I spent much of the time talking with Wilhelm about his new wife. She was actually quite agreeable, he said; he was even enjoying married life, which surprised me as much as it surprised him, I think.

The next day I went to the second fitting before heading to Jeweller's Street. Picking a suitable establishment I talked with the proprietor for a time over the merits of certain pieces over others, and what was in style at Court at present. Eventually I purchased a pair of earrings for me (one and a spare), a pearl trapped in a platinum cage, and a matched set of earrings and a necklace for Guin; ruby and amethyst in platinum. The price turned out to be rather heavy; I winced when he said it. For anyone else it would have been exorbitant; even with the use of my Pattern skills it grievously eroded the store of currency I kept in the inner pocket of my coat.

I picked through the thick wad of notes I carried and counted out the price with the largest of the notes I had. The proprietor carefully checked and counted them himself, of course, before fully accepting their validity. He then asked if I wished to have the services of one of the guards they employ for escorting expensive purchases. I agreed that this would be wise and he said it carried a further charge of a twentieth of the price of the purchase. Fortunately I still had some money left.

The two guards were burly chaps who carried swords but looked as if they preferred to use the clubs they loosely carried by their sides. Not unsurprisingly, no one chose to interfere with us on the way to the King's Arms.

We were a few streets away from the Arms when we passed a blond fellow who so closely matched Johann's description of the most dangerous of the agitators that I knew it had to be him. My suspicions were confirmed when he smiled a little as I approached and nodded to me as we came level with each other. I just glanced in an uninterested fashion in reply, as it were, but in truth I was very concerned that he (apparently) recognised me. I began to worry that I would soon have to be constantly alert for possible assassins.

As I rounded the corner onto Rudenstrasse I noticed a number of people were standing around as if watching something. I caught a brief glance of a running man ducking into a side street; the only impression I got of him was his trousers and footwear, the rest being occluded by the bystanders. They were distinctly out of place; dark blue material with numerous thin white stripes running down the length of the leg, and very well made leather shoes. Without doubt, someone from outside this sphere was present in the city, other than me, of course. I only hoped they were not unfriendly to the place, or me particularly; I also hoped they were not the mysterious backers of the blond agitator, whom I elected to think of as Herr Schmidt.

I turned to one of the bystanders, a fairly average fellow with the look of a shop proprietor about him, and asked what had occurred to draw such a crowd; it was merely that he was dressed so peculiarly. I made the suggestion that perhaps he was from America; when the fellow looked a little confused I said that such modes of dress were common in the New World. He just shrugged noncommittally and continued on his way.

The guards and I entered the King's Arms, where I took my purchases from them and paid them both a small gratuity; I was required to sign a note to the effect that the package had been safely escorted to its destination. They then left.

Seeing Johann in his normal place behind the bar I asked him if he had heard of any strange people being in the city, dressed in a peculiar form of suit. He claimed to have heard of or seen no one of that description, but he would ask the girls when they returned; many of them had spent a few hours at the market. Noting the package I carried and the men who had arrived with me, he asked if I wished to store it in the strongbox. I agreed that this would be wise.

The 'strongbox', of course, was little more than a particularly heavy flagstone in the cellar that could be lifted by two or three strong men to reveal a small, metal-lined pit below. While I knew that I could probably lift it by myself, I helped Johann while making all the suitable sounds of exertion. I did, however, keep one of my earrings back in case I required it.

Over dinner an hour or so later Johann told me that one of his girls had seen a chap not unlike the man I had described in the market earlier that morning. They were definitely up to something then, even if I did not know who 'they' actually were. Agents of Amber? Of Eric, unaware of his defeat? Or perhaps of Chaos, playing some odd game with someone? Since I knew very little about the Courts of Chaos I knew less about this final possibility than the others.

The afternoon was spent visiting the university. The grounds had changed little, except for a little growth in the younger trees and additional wild flowers in the borders. The statues had been weathered slightly more, and one still bore the mark from where a particular drunken student had thrown a bottle and wrecked an ear.

Many of the old lecturers were still there, some of who recognised me with responses varying from pleasant surprise to shock and fear. I had gained quite a reputation for study and carousal in (almost) equal measures. One especially actually seemed genuinely pleased to see me; old Professor Liebewitz, a man with great knowledge of law and political history. We had vocally sparred many times over a variety of issues in which were frequently almost completely opposed; and yet we relished the opportunity for such discussions, and were actually quite good friends.

He never took me up on my invitation to have one of our discussions in more relaxed surroundings; I believe he actually considered having one of our discussions in an inn once, but he always balked at having them in one of the fleshpots many students such as I visited.

We caught up on lost time for a while before he told me how he was rather concerned at the growing number of Revolutionary agitators in the city and Germany in general. He seemed unconcerned though, as our nation had always resisted such movements before. Somehow, almost before I knew it, he had drawn me into one of our old arguments regarding the strength of the Saxony nobility of the fourteenth century. He always managed to do that; it was good he was still quick enough to do it now.

After our discussion had reached it's usual conclusion (we agreed to disagree) I went for a stroll though the park behind the main faculty building. It brought back many old memories; the parties, the rallies, the women. Such times.....

I found Helda and Gretel at the back of the kitchens like it was those old times again. They always contributed to those summer picnics of yore; sometimes with the food and wine, sometimes with the company. Helda's strudel particularly was highly memorable. Both looked older, of course, something I was getting used to; even before I had become aware of my heritage I had noticed the years weighed less heavily on me than on others. They complimented me on my obvious good health; they still looked quite well, considering, but I was disturbed by how much they had aged, even though it had only been something like ten years since I had last seen them.

Our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of one of the young lads from the King's Arms. He came out from the kitchen and looked about, then came over to join us by the wall overlooking the park. He told me in subdued tones that Johann needed to see me urgently; he did not know why. I said a fairly emotional farewell to mother and daughter (they had not seen me for a while and it could be as long again; possibly never). I followed the lad, whose name was Hansel, to the stables where we saddled our horses and rode back to the Arms.

Johann was waiting for me when I arrived; he looked quite agitated, so this was obviously not just some minor thing. He looked relieved when I came through the door; without a word he led me up the stairs towards my room. I was slightly concerned as to how it was going by this point. Outside my room one of the big lads who worked in the stables stood in a clumsy guard posture; he held a sword in a way that suggested he was more used to hammers. The 'guard' opened the door and Johann led the way in; he closed it behind us.

My room was ransacked; saddlebags riffled through, drawers opened, wardrobe contents scattered over the floor. At first sight nothing appeared to be missing, but it was hard to tell when something more significant drew my eyes elsewhere. The terrible centrepiece to the room was the body of a youth, sprawled facedown in a slightly contorted position. Despite the lack of the normal pools of blood he was almost certainly dead but I checked for the pulsing flow of blood at throat and wrist anyway, to be sure. I examined him for obvious marks about the head and for broken bones, but found nothing.

Johann kept quiet through all of this, though he did give a small surprised grunt when I started to pull the boy's shirt off. It was not easy and was more than a little grisly. Considering his position it seemed likely that any wound he might have would be on his back, so I looked there first.

I almost did not see it, but in the lower back in the vicinity of the kidneys I found a small red mark. It appeared to be very shallow, almost like a razor cut, and had not bled at all. A tiny dagger slice bearing poison?

Everything else having been checked, I knelt down and felt around the wound, superficially with my hands but much deeper with my extra senses. I got as comfortable as I could while I focused my Pattern-enhanced perceptions on the body. It took a few minutes but one the 'edge' of my sense I could 'feel' a fragment of something; the murder weapon?

At this point Johann asked me if I was all right; he sounded a little puzzled. I shook my head and stood, stretching, and said that I had been thinking. He gestured towards my belongings and I nodded, then went over to check through my clothing and possessions. After a minute or so of checking the only thing I could not locate was the small pebble of rock Fiona had given me before I went into Shadow after our engineers. This definitely suggested external forces were at work; no one else would steal a small black stone.

I must have looked concerned because Johann asked what had been stolen. I shook my head as if to clear my head and told him that some money could be missing.

He gestured towards the body of the youth (he had been examining it himself) and asked if it had been a knife. I told him that it looked as if it was too thin. He suggested the theory that the attacker had been behind the door and stabbed him from behind; I nodded in agreement, as it seemed highly likely. I put forward the idea that perhaps the weapon had been made of glass, but Johann said it would not work; surely the blade would break? Of course, I did not tell him that it could have been made somewhere that glass was much stronger. It seemed to me, I said, that the lack of blood loss could be attributed to the action of some chemical; Johann just shrugged.

After a short moment of thought Johann announced that he would say the youth had fallen down the stairs; he would have to tell the boy's family. Opening the door he beckoned the guard over and told him to inform the boy's family that their son had fallen down the stairs and injured himself, then died. I could see from where I stood that he did not look pleased at this deception, but went anyway. Johann sighed and said that the fellow was a devout churchgoer, honest if rigid at times.

By this time I had decided that someone in the family would have to be made aware of this turn of events; naturally the first person I thought of was Fiona, as it was her stone they had apparently been after. If they had not actually been in search of that, it was the only thing they had taken.

I told Johann that I had a friend who was visiting the city who could help shed light on things; she was knowledgeable of many things and could be of great help. If he seemed surprised that a woman was to help us he hid it well, suggesting I fetch her immediately (it was his tavern, so he could give orders).

I took my horse and rode to the largest of the city's parks; I knew of a copse of trees that was very good at concealing all sort of activities. There I dealt out my Trump of Fiona and concentrated upon her flame-haired visage.

Before long she answered; she looked to be in the castle in Amber somewhere. She smiled when she saw it was me and asked if there was something she could do for me. I gave her a crooked grin and told her my room had been broken into and someone killed in a particularly singular manner. I saved the theft of the stone to last. She certainly seemed interested and said she would help. Taking a look at my clothing she asked what sort of society the place I was in had; guessing she meant the society's attitude to women I told her that while female professionals were not unknown they were rare and generally looked upon as being peculiar for many reasons.

She nodded to herself before going across the room she was in and picking an appropriate coat from a wardrobe and picking up a small case from inside also. She put the coat on, picked up the case and extended a hand. I pulled her through and thanked her for her time.

I led her (and the horse) back to the King's Arms, with her asking some more questions about the society and the woman's traditional role in it. It took only a few of them

before she smiled in satisfaction and announced that this place was 'standard eighteenth century'. It had been emptied of all but the staff in deference to the death upstairs. I led her upstairs; halfway up she examined the banister closely before giving it a quick jerk and tugging one of the supports out of the wall. Johann, who stood at the top of the stairs, gasped in response to this action but said nothing; he did look a little perturbed, though.

Once in the room she put down her case and opened it to reveal a number of bottles and vials, medical instruments of some sort and a rolled up sheet of some clear material. I began to introduce her to Johann as a friend I had met in America but she interrupted and began to give out her orders; she unrolled the clear sheet and told us to put the body on it. We complied while she put on a pair of clear gloves and prepared several sharp-looking tools and probes.

She carefully examined the body and took particular interest in the wound, probing it and concentrating intently as she did so. Eventually she pulled the probe out and somehow the end of it had taken on the shape of a heart run through with a good two dozen barbed spikes that seemed to originate from where the probe entered the heart. Clearly the youth had been stabbed with some sort of weapon that had sprouted the spikes when it reached the heart. Definitely not a local contraption.

Holding the altered probe she went to stand behind the door and demonstrated how the attacker had come up behind the boy and thrust the weapon up into his back. Johann was already quite disconcerted by Fiona; this performance baffled him even further.

Returning to the corpse she used some more probes to take some samples from within the body and place them in her vials. She also drew some blood with a syringe. As she did so she calmly asked if the authorities had been informed yet; Johann swallowed and said they had not. Fiona suggested he do so and he left the room with that baffled expression still on his face.

I mentioned that the fellow who had told that family of the supposed accident on the stairs was a rather devoutly Christian and honest man, not much impressed with the subterfuge; she said she would talk to him about it. I was not sure if that made me feel better or worse.

She then took a particularly vicious-looking implement from her case before handing me one of her vials of blood; she suggested I go and daub the banister support with it. As she turned to the body with the tool held ready I prudently retreated from the room. Even before I reached the door a particularly nasty squelching sound reached my ears and I quickly closed the door behind me.

When I returned from my task the body was covered with a blanket. Fiona was standing over it, deep in thought; then she announced that 'distraught fiancée' would be a sufficient story. I gave a little bow and said that I would be honoured. She did not comment, instead taking a vial of some white liquid from her bag before putting the case in the wardrobe. Then she drew my attention to the view from the window; the militia had arrived, led by Johann. As they came up the stairs Fiona uncorked the vial and took a deep sniff of the contents. Whatever it was, it made her turn white as a sheet; her hand shook slightly as she pocketed the vial. Sitting down on the bed she began to wring her hands as the watchmen arrived, perfectly on cue.

The men looked at the body, grimacing a little at the new wound. They asked what had happened; Johann said he had taken a bad tumble down the stairs and Fiona took up the story at that point with the skill of a very talented actress. Her hands shook, tears flowed and the front of her dress was twisted almost into knots. Then, in a finale worthy of only the best of players, she acted as if she was going to be physically ill and rushed to the window and almost tore it open before actually, physically vomiting.

The stuff in that vial must have been remarkably potent; the fact that she managed to time it so well was almost terrifying.

The militiamen were embarrassed by this show of apparent womanly weakness and left soon after, happy that nothing untoward had occurred and that the case was closed. Fiona soon recovered once they had left, though it took a few minutes for Johann to get his jaw under control. She complained that I could have warned her that window was closed, but how was I to know what she intended to do?

Collecting her case from the wardrobe she asked if she could have the use of a room for an hour or two as she wished to perform some tests; Johann called for someone to take her to a room. Before she left she told me to come and see her in maybe an hour and a half as she might have some answers by then. Then, all businesslike again, she left the room.

Johann shook his head, and said that he could not figure her out; he was not sure if he found her attractive or terrifying. I grinned and clapped him on the shoulder before confessing that I felt the same way. He smiled ruefully and said that he had to get down to the boy's family and begin to arrange the funeral. I told him I would help towards paying the funeral fees, but he said that I did not need to. I looked at him intently and said that no, I did not have to, but that I wanted to. He nodded and left.

I took myself downstairs and, finding myself in rather a maudlin mood, sat by the fire for a time with a bottle of good white wine. I was not pleased to have brought outside troubles to my homeland; and it still was my homeland, the home of my soul whereas Amber was only the source of my true heritage. And the source of my newfound power, of course; never forget that. I had grown from boy to man in this land and nothing could diminish that; it would always be special to me, as would the people who had helped shape the man I had become.

To have seemingly brought these strange powers and bizarre forces into the homes of my friends was something I would probably never forgive myself for. I had to do my best to try and solve things, whatever these 'things' turned out to be. I was beginning to get the feeling that the blonde agitator was involved somehow; it was a little too coincidental that he happened to be around and looking content when the interlopers were at work. Maybe I was just being paranoid and finding connections where there were none; I knew better than to try and locate the actual culprits, since they would probably be long gone or so well hidden within the crowds of actual inhabitants as to be invisible.

Even if he was not connected to these outside players, with his apparently close links to the government of France he could still cause me trouble, so I decided that I would have to have a word or two with him.

Johann interrupted my train of thought and supposition by slumping into the chair beside mine and pouring some of the wine into a glass he had brought with him. The funeral was dealt with, he said, and he had also sent someone to tell the Duke of Magdeburg that we needed to bring a delicate matter to his attention. Since it had long been the tradition of the Magdeburg dukes to give anyone a personal hearing with sufficient grounds, we were all but assured an audience. He had not mentioned my name, which might well have been a good idea. I was probably still not thought highly of in Saxony since the day I renounced my rank and birthright on joining the Revolution. That and a few little indiscretions....

Johann said he was of the opinion that the break-in and murder could well be related to the agitators; if they had heard that it was I who stayed in that room (and it would not have been hard to discover that to be the case as I was not being particularly secretive) they may have attempted to act against me to curry favour with the government back in France (such as it was).

Johann called for some food and it was soon brought over; we got to work demolishing the pile of bread, cheese and meats that was put before us with no more words said till we were done.

Maybe a half hour or more passed before Fiona called my name from the top of the stairs. Putting down my wine glass I nodded to Johann and went up to see what she had discovered.

The room she had taken up temporary residence in had been transformed into some kind of small scientific laboratory; all manner of flasks and piping were gathered on the main table while her case was open on the bed. She was shaking a large glass vial full of some dark liquid as I entered; she announced in a distracted tone that she had performed a number of tests.

The weapon that had killed the youth in my room was essentially organic in nature; it appeared that it grew out of the haft of the weapon into its victim before sprouting the deadly spikes deep within the body. It then retracted back whence it came. Some form of cauterising chemical was used to stem the flow of blood; it was quite simple in nature and could well have been made locally.

The main thing was that she had discovered a skin sample, quite probably from the attacker. Bley was investigating that avenue, she said; presumably they knew what they were doing, as I could not see how some tiny piece of skin was of any use.

She said that it was strange that they had taken the stone; 'it' (presumably the theft rather than the stone) could well be piece of a larger puzzle. She asked me to speak with her

if I discovered anything; if I used Trump she would know it was me. She added that Joe had attempted to contact me a little while earlier; she had dealt with it (whatever that meant).

I thanked her for her assistance, saying I owed her for her time; dinner perhaps? She smiled slightly and took off a plain ring from one finger of her left hand. Holding it up she smiled wider and commented that she always found such 'charm rings' to be quite useful. I took it to mean that it was enchanted with some sort of magic to make the wearer appear more trustworthy and amicable. I was surprised she needed it; after-effects maybe? She went on to comment that everyone (in the family presumably) had something like it somewhere.

She told me then that she had spoken with the devout fellow and convinced him to hold his tongue. She was careful, which suggested to me that she had used more than words to convince him. She told me that she had scrupulously taken care not to break the family protocol in such matters; I looked at her questioningly and she told me that the family custom when in Shadow was that whoever was first in a Shadow 'owned' it and had to be consulted if a visitor arrived or wished to do anything there.

As she led me out of the room so she could tidy up and leave she handed me a small pouch of money, to pay for the rent. Part of the protocol, no doubt. I nodded my thanks and bid her farewell; she smiled her farewell and turned back to her elaborate glassware.

I rejoined Johann downstairs with some newly found brandy. I handed him the purse Fiona had given me and he poured a glass for me before saying that he wanted to know something of what was occurring; it was obviously to do with my disappearance from France. I agreed that he was due something, but said that the matter was private; not actually secret, just private. I did say that it involved the friends I had made since I had vanished, the lady upstairs amongst them. He seemed content to know that much; I assured him that I was keeping some things from him for his own good, and because he really did not need to know about them.

He poured himself a generous measure and downed it in one swift gulp. He then bid me goodnight and went to his bed. I remained by the fire for another hour or so before going up myself.

The next morning I struggled through a breakfast hampered by the lingering after-effects of the brandy the previous night. Johann had told me that our meeting with the duke was set for midday; it would be in private, which indicated that the duke had taken Johann's statement that the situation could well be quite delicate at least slightly seriously.

I had a few hours so I returned to the tailors I had visited the morning before. The final adjustments were made and all the items were soon ready. I paid the balance of the fee and returned to change; Johann had already changed into his finest outfit. I picked out black trousers to go with the blue topcoat and we rode to the duke's city residence, a large mansion near one of the city's largest parks.

We were faithfully led through the luxurious halls to the duke's private audience chamber. The Duke of Magdeburg was a middle-aged gentleman with swept back greying black hair and a beak for a nose. His eyes were intent as we entered the room, taking his measure of us as we bowed before him. His attention appeared mostly focused on me; I wondered if he had recognised me. He looked every inch the refined gentleman of learning I knew him to be.

He sat in a great oak chair at the top of an equally massive table, surrounded by a half dozen chairs. He gestured to us to sit and we did so. Johann started by saying that a death had occurred under his roof, under peculiar and possibly delicate circumstances. The duke said that he had not heard about the death, of course; not at all surprising. I took up the story, saying that it was definitely murder; the thieves who had broken into my room had almost certainly been responsible. He then asked who I was, and I told him my name. He reacted quite calmly to having a theoretical traitor in the room with him; he raised his eyebrows before nodding and commenting that he saw the family resemblance.

I said then that it was possible that the thieves could be somehow connected to one of the many agitators in the city. The duke asked why this should be the case, and I said that they could well have something against me personally. He inquired why they would ignore other escaping noblemen and be interested in me, and I simply said that they hate traitors more than mere aristos. The duke nodded his understanding.

He sat back and thought for a time, tapping his arched fingers against his chin as he did so. He then announced that since there was no evidence to link the crime with any of the agitators he could not act. It was possible, he said, that the death was intended as a warning. He was leery to let the supposed truth of the death be publicly known in case it caused any unrest. All in all he seemed dubious of our assessment of the situation, but as he did not have enough information to act he was not required to do so.

He then looked directly at me and said that since there was also no evidence that I had nothing to with it either he would not act against me either, providing the family had been provided for. I said that they had and he appeared satisfied. He nodded then and said our business was done and bid us good day. He opened the door and waved us out into the care of one of his servants before going into the next room.

On the way back to the King's Arms Johann asked if the goal of the break-in had been theft or assassination. I shrugged and said that it was probably a bit of both, as opportunity presented itself. They may have hoped to find some important documents I had stolen from the Republic, and returned them to receive a reward.

He then asked if I was planning to head home soon; I shook my head and said that I wanted to deal with the apparent problem with the agitators first. I did not want to lead them home with me, even if they already knew where Bek was.

I had begun to get the idea that perhaps 'they' were involved with the revolutionists in some way. Perhaps to get to me (not to be too egocentric)? I was concerned that if 'they' were I might lead them back to my family in Bek. It seemed to me that the likeliest candidate was the blonde fellow I elected to call Herr Schmidt. I do not know quite why I thought this; I think it was the little smile he had given me when we passed on the street.

I asked Johann where Schmidt lived; he looked at me for a moment before saying he lived in one of the better parts of middle-class of the city. However, he did most of his 'work', predictably, in the areas inhabited by the workers and labourers of the city. I said that I was planning to pay him a visit, and he said that he could arrange to have an escort. I nodded in agreement; could he get them for that night? He said he could. I said that I did not think I would actually need them, since I was not really planning to attack anyone, but they would be good for ensuring my safety (even if I did not think I really needed them).

When we returned to the Arms I fetched out some money after changing to more normal attire and Johann sent someone he trusted out with it in search of appropriate fellows.