

## Journal 45 - back to Bek

By the time I returned to the King's Arms everyone was long abed. Fortunately, someone had had the presence of mind to leave me with a late supper; just some bread, beef, cheese and a re-corked bottle of wine covered by a cloth. I quickly devoured it before taking myself to bed also.

In the morning I set to packing to leave. I had finished everything I thought I could in Magdeburg, but probably left several small problems unattended to behind me. I did not do a complete job, as I was planning to leave the next day and there was plenty of time till then. Besides, I needed to see Schmidt one last time before I went. I still harboured some suspicions regarding his links with 'them' and wanted to be sure he was just the person they had happened to contact, rather than an actual agent.

Around the middle of the afternoon some time I rode over to the Carpenter's Plane to find Schmidt and Pieter in their usual spot. As was practically customary by then, I bought a bottle of wine and joined them when a slight inclination of the head invited me to do so.

He asked me if I was done meeting with his contacts; I told him I had, but went on to say that it was possible that he might not hear from them again. He looked a little put out, and I tried to assure him that it was not entirely through my doing. I do not think he was satisfied with my explanation or guess that they would not reappear, but said that his payment was more than enough compensation.

He then told me that I should be safe from his more zealous associates from that point on; I asked if that included my family and he said that his more devoted colleagues would be unlikely to seek to harm them. I nodded my head in what passed for a bow and stood, leaving the bottle in the customary fashion before taking my leave.

Back once more at the Arm's, Johann told me that his messenger had returned with word that the manor house at Bek was eagerly awaiting my arrival. I began to wonder if I looked forward to my return as eagerly; I would be raising some possibly painful or embarrassing questions that my mother could well not want to hear.

The rest of the day was spent finishing my packing, eating a very hearty dinner and sinking more than a few drinks. Farewells were made, final reminiscences were made and old stories retold. A good final night in the old town in the company of friends.

The next day I fetched my jewellery from the 'strongbox' before saddling my horse and packing the saddlebags with my copious purchases and acquired accoutrements. Then with a final farewell to the stalwart Johann, I set off on the long road back to Bek.

I always knew I would go back eventually. Even in the height of Revolutionary fervour, renouncing rank and privilege in the name of the Good Of The People, I always knew that old Bek would draw me back. It has been said for generations that while you can leave Bek it will never leave you, and that this memory of it's hills and it's halls brings everyone back eventually. I had just taken a very circuitous route.

The weather was the usual for autumn; windy, cold, with bursts of chill rain. I took the opportunity given by the rain to take advantage of the numerous roadside taverns that semi-regularly measured the route between Magdeburg and Bek. I resisted the urge to stay longer in Dresden by staying in the first half-decent inn I found and leaving the next day.

It took about a week and a half in all to reach the family estates; good time, considering the fact that I allowed myself so many unnecessary stops on the way. Little had changed; still the same fields, the forest where I had 'hunted' as a boy, the hills I ridden across on old Woden, the peaceful village in it's green valley, the great house at it's far end. Did it all seem smaller? Or was I just too used to cities?

Sitting there astride my horse, looking down into the valley, I decided that I was glad to be back. Resolving to keep the outside world(s) outside the valley, I decided that until I left I would refuse every Trump contact I received; if it was important, well, that was just hard luck.

I rode through the village towards the house. It had not changed either; still solid, grey and slightly castle-like with it's tower and crenellated balconies. The oak just to the left of the gate might have grown a little larger, but it was hard to tell; it was older than the house,

older than the family. I used to like to sit under it on hot days after a long ride; it was like an old friend welcoming me home.

No sooner had I finished unsaddling my horse (my father never employed many servants) than I found I was being watched by a burly figure standing in the yard. His brown hair had gone all grey, and he wore much the same cut of sober gentleman's garb he had always worn since I was little more than a baby. When he saw I had seen him he crossed his arms and told me that they had servants to do that, and called a footman over. The footman, someone new since I did not recognise him, saw to my horse, and I stepped outside to stand by my stepfather, though to me he would always be my father.

My mother always said that I was like him as he was in his younger days; I was named after him, so perhaps it came with the name.

He said it was good to see me, and I could see he actually meant it. Not to say that we never got on (we always did), but I think he would have preferred I was of a more serious bent like Manfred. I had also been concerned about how he had taken my renouncing of heritage and rank.

I smiled and said it was good to be back. He told me that he had heard the rumours regarding my death at the hands of the Elite Guard while attempting to flee France. I asked if he heard how I had single-handedly slain a dozen men while making my escape; he had not, but I quickly assured him that it was not true. He did say that he heard 'my' head was on a pole in Paris, outside the Bastille.

He then said that my mother wanted to see me; he warned me that she would probably be intending to shout at me for a short time at least. I smiled in response to this; normally reserved and courteous, she was a good shouter when she put her mind to it. I sobered up slightly when he told me he had had to break the story of my return gently to her; I had always been her favourite, I think, not that Manfred ever minded.

My stepfather led me to the main parlour, where my mother was sitting in one of the overstuffed armchairs, nervously doing some embroidery. When she saw me come in she ungraciously threw it to one side and rushed over to me. I held out my arms and engulfed her in a big hug. She had gained some weight, but it looked good on her; with her care-lined face and pale grey hair she looked every inch the beloved grandmother. Which she was of course; Manfred's wife, Agnetha, had given her two grandchildren. Johann was the eldest at twelve and Elyssa was only nine. That was my best guess, at least.

After a while the crying stopped and she began to berate me; for not writing, for causing her so much worry, for being so damned idealistic and more. Before long she reverted back to tears and my stepfather clutched my shoulder in one big hand to show that he too was glad I had returned.

A short while later we were sat in the big chairs around the low fire. My mother said how she had heard something of my escapades in Paris from two counts that had escaped from France just over two and a half years ago; I was still a Deputy in those days, fighting for the cause of Reason and the Moderates. Apparently, Manfred had also tried to find me after my supposed death, though he had been forced to rely on agents, as it was clearly impossible for him to go in person.

My mother then said I was looking very well, considering the hardships I had endured in recent times. I just shrugged and attributed it to clean living. Knowing my wayward habits my mother smiled, while my stepfather coughed into his brandy. I stifled a yawn and announced that it was time for me to be abed; I had done a long day's riding. My mother bade me to kiss her goodnight and told me my room had been prepared. I thanked her with a smile and took myself up the short flight of stairs to the round room in the top of that small tower in the north-eastern corner of the house.

I passed two servants on the way, another lad and a girl I had not seen before. Anton, the distinguished old chamberlain, was still very much in evidence as he came up behind the pair and distracted them from their staring with a cough before sending them along on their duties. A thin, bald fellow at least as old as my stepfather, he almost looked happy to see me; he must have been overjoyed to let that much emotion be visible on his face. Then his expression became solemn and he asked if I required my stuffed horse, Thor, my old companion of my very distant boyhood. I gravely told him that I did not require his company. Then Anton smiled slightly in as much emotion as I had ever seen him display in the same day and told me that it was good to see me again. I replied that it was good to see him too.

He led the way to my tower-top chamber and opened the door for me to enter.

It had changed but a little since I had last been there, over eight years before. Some of my old clothes still remained in the wardrobe, probably in a way not unlike a shrine, and some of my oldest belongings were atop the chest of drawers. Even old Woden's saddle sat in one corner.

Anton looked around as I did before pointing out the bedwarmer jar and bidding me goodnight.

Back in that old, sturdy bed, I had the best sleep I had had in ages.

I was awoken the next day by the polite knocking of a maid upon my door. I bade her to enter and she carried in a tray covered in warm bread, butter, freshly cooked sausages and bacon, some cheese and a glass of clear water. I sat up to allow her to place the tray in my lap and I could see she was embarrassed by my show of flesh; I was only wearing a pair of sleeping shorts I had acquired along the way somewhere and taken to using.

The breakfast was damn fine; it almost made me feel better than the sleep had. I had slept almost halfway into the afternoon, so no wonder I was so rested and hungry.

I dressed in the better of my normal attire (no point in wasting finery on house wear) and made sure that the Trump of Benedict from my deck was carefully secreted away in an inner pocket. I went downstairs and came across my stepfather. He led the way into his study and he sat himself in the high-backed chair while I leant on the table. Beyond him I could see the doorway into the library, the famous Bek library the family is famous for throughout Saxony and some way beyond too.

We talked a little about the rumours surrounding my escape and supposed death, before he told me that Manfred knew of my return and was planning to get home as soon as possible. He was involved in some business in Munich, apparently, and would probably be back in four weeks at the most. I sighed and said that I wish I could stay that long. He did not respond to that statement.

Then he asked the question that had probably been on the tip of his tongue for weeks: where had I gone? I told him I had escaped to Switzerland where I had met some people who had helped me; we eventually became friends. I told him that one of the people I had met was the one who had taken out some of the soldiers who had been pursuing me; he had shot three of them before they fled, so he was not all that good.

When he pressed me about my travels after Switzerland I told him I had travelled further afield, to Spain and even to America. He then asked about my horse; he had always been interested in horses. I told him he was a loan of sorts, from one of my new friends. He sat back in his chair and stared into nothing for a minute or so before shaking himself out of his reverie and saying that he would offer me a brandy but it was too early. I suggested some vodka I had acquired but he said it was really too early for that, too; perhaps at dinner.

Dinner that evening was a quiet affair, with some light talk about the estate, Manfred's business jaunts, how Agnetha and the children were doing, that kind of thing. The roast beef was excellent and the vodka went down very well with both of them. My stepfather asked if I could get more, but I dashed his hopes by telling him it was one of a limited production.

The next couple of days were spent relaxing, re-familiarising myself with the old place. I took several rides up and down the valley, walked around the village and lazed around in the family home, looking through a few of my favourite books from our esteemed library.

Twice I felt the onset of a Trump contact, its coolness trickling into my mind like icy water. I ignored them, of course; focussing my mind on other things to block the sending.

On the second evening my stepfather approached me with more questions about my horse. When he asked what breed it was I told him it definitely looked Arabian; a fairly safe answer as an 'Arabian' horse can mean any fine thoroughbred in some places. He seemed a little surprised by the answer; I told him that I had heard that there were great herds of fine wild horses in America.

He then said that he had supposed I had stolen it; I assured him that I had not, he truly was on loan and I would soon have to return him to his stable. He asked which court stable had lent him to me; was it the Swiss? I told him that the stable came from further afield, but that I would rather not say where. He nodded and accepted my secrecy.

He then smiled and went on to say that our stable should have some foals by the time I returned. When I looked at him with an expression of mock disapproval he just grinned and said it was not his fault; how could he be expected to stop a full-grown horse single-handed?

After a moment he became more serious and asked me if I had come into any money, presumably because of my fine horse (even if he was on loan) and my links with an unnamed court. I assured him that I had not; he went on to say that he could help me in that regard if necessary. The estates had been profitable in the last few years, mostly due to Manfred's industrious labour. He had paid particular attention to working to form new trade deals with mercantile groups having to work around France.

I then surprised more than I had ever done before by admitting that I had, in fact, been about to ask if there was any way I could help *him*. He really was taken aback; I do not think he had ever expected me to actually give anything back to Bek, as opposed to just taking from it.

The next afternoon I finally got an opportunity to be alone with my mother. She was in her parlour, sitting before the fire with her embroidery and a glass of wine on the small table beside her. I knelt down beside her and took one of her hands. She looked surprised; I just smiled and said it was good to be back.

Standing again, I got another glass and poured from the bottle on the table. I stood for a while staring at the picture over the fire; it was a portrait of my mother and stepfather in their finery, painted in the first year of their marriage. Not the best thing to gaze upon considering what I was planning to do next. My mother looked up from her embroidery and said that she wished I could stay longer; Manfred would want to see me, and she wanted to hear more about my escapades anyway.

In truth, I wanted to see my brother again too, but, unfortunately, I had other commitments.

I went around the back of her chair and stood behind her, to get a good look of what she was working on. It was a picture of a man astride a galloping horse, riding across a green meadow beneath a blue sky. It was just the sort of thing she liked.

Then, taking a deep breath, I 'suddenly remembered' a strange thing I had picked up on my travels and wondered if she would like to have a look at it. She said she would, asking if it was some kind of Swiss curio; I answered noncommittally and handed her my Trump of Benedict.

She reacted much as I had expected; she turned bright red and started to cough and splutter as if she was choking. She waved frantically with one hand and I passed over her wine glass. After a few minutes she got her breath back and some of her normal colour before asking me if I knew what it meant; what did I know?

I replied that I was going to ask her the very same question. She turned slightly more red again and began to mumble something on the order of 'he's your...you know... your —' before I interrupted by saying simple 'I know'. She turned a little more red and replied 'good'. She did, however, have a surprise for me when she said my father — 'well, stepfather' — knew the truth of the matter. I think my jaw must have frozen in the open position for a good ten minutes after that. Which kept me quiet long enough to hear the whole story...

My stepfather had first met Benjamin a year or so before their marriage, on one of his periodic journeys around Europe, partly for the benefit of Bek but mostly to see new places. They had become friends and taken long trips together for three, four months at a time. Then one year, nearly two years after Manfred was born, they had gone off 'to see the East'. Only they did not return for months, and after over a year Benjamin rode up the house alone. My stepfather had been lost in a shipwreck, he had said; not necessarily dead, just lost. He knew that Bek needed looking after a little, and he had promised himself that he would take care of my mother 'until her husband returned'.

Over a number of months they became close friends and finally the inevitable occurred. Manfred was very young and knew him only as 'Uncle Benjamin'. But then, almost two years after he had left and just a few months short of my imminent birth, my stepfather returned. I think they were all as surprised as each other to discover what had happened since they were last all together. Benjamin and my stepfather did part amicably, mostly because Benjamin had never really taken advantage of her or his position as *de facto* lord of the estate. He did say he would never return; he left an endowment for me with my father.

Her final words were that she remembered Benjamin fondly but had remained truly in love with her husband all the time and since; he had been her first love. Then she just cried softly for a while. I held her tightly and considered what she had told me.

At least the circumstances of my conception and birth had not been some sordid affair, followed by a marriage that was a lie. But then, I think I had already known that was not the case; I would have noticed the underlying tension years ago. But I suppose it did explain why there had been no younger siblings. Or was I reading in too much, or judging too harshly?

When she recovered once more she smiled at me through her tears as I pulled a chair up opposite her and took her hands in mine. She then asked the most ludicrous of questions: would I forgive her? I immediately answered that there was no need to ask, such things are given freely to those we love. She relaxed a little, as if she had feared some kind of angry rebuke or bitter criticism from me.

She then asked who should tell my stepfather that I know the truth? I just shook my head a little blankly. She came to the decision that she would, as it would definitely be better if it came from her. She stood to leave and I stood also, to give her a final hug before she left. She kissed me on the cheek before she made her exit.

I remained standing before the fire, staring down at the Trump on the table, the image upon it flickering in the firelight as if alive.