

Journal 46 - in Bek

An hour later I looked up from the fire to find my stepfather standing in the doorway. He looked as if he expected me to tell him to leave the room; he became more at ease when I gestured to him to enter. He poured himself a glass of the excellent white I had been consuming fairly copiously; he also filled my glass before taking the seat opposite.

For a long moment he said nothing. Then he softly asked if I hated him. I really could not have been more surprised by that question, and told him so before saying that as far as I was concerned he was more my father than Benedict was; he had raised me, taught me the values I lived by (most of them, anyway....). He was the father of my mind, where was Benedict was 'merely' the father of my flesh, and so much more important to me.

A weight seemed to rise from his shoulders when I finished my little speech. I was probably more surprised at what I had said than he was; the wine, probably.

In a peculiarly intent way he asked if he could see the card. Not really thinking about it (except on some strange, deep level....) I handed it to him. He nodded in recognition and announced that it was a long time since he had seen a Trump. It all really did make some sense, in the end. Then he asked how Benedict was, and it became even clearer. And all this despite the wine.

He said he had been wondering how long it would be until I came into my heritage. I just shrugged, and he proceeded to fill in the gaps in the story my mother had told me. The journeys the two of them had taken had mostly involved fighting in battles; Ulrich (senior) had, surprisingly, expressed an interest in warfare. He talked briefly of a few battles (including an interesting-sounding one involving beautiful naked women astride griffins), and explained how he had learnt swordplay from him. Both Manfred and I had been taught elements of the style he had developed. The last thing he mentioned was some 'final battle' that he was clearly unwilling to discuss.

He then said that he would like to see Benedict again and once more inquired after his health. I said he was well as far as I knew, having not spoken to him for a month or more. He then asked what Amber was like, as he had never been there. I told him that I had not really seen much of it myself, having not been there for longer than a couple of days so far, but it seemed a fine place, if a little archaic in some respects.

He had another question; how was Deirdre? I said that I knew her name, but had yet to meet her, so I was unable to say. He said that when he had first met her he thought she was a barmaid; there was obviously a fabulous story behind that simple comment just waiting to be told. He looked a little glum and rubbed one temple, saying she hit him for his, ah, over-familiarity. I laughed (knowing how the Family can be) and asked how deep the furrow was; he laughed too. He finished the abbreviated version of the story by saying that it had taken a week to get back on her good side.

I promised him I would find out about her.

He then sighed, and said that he had always hoped against good sense that I really was his son. I quietly said that there was, unfortunately, definite proof that I was not (as far as I knew anyway; the tale about non-Family dying on the Pattern could be a lie....).

We sat quietly and drank the wine for a couple of minutes before Ulrich told me that Manfred did not know; he and my mother had decided that it was now my decision whether or not he be told. I thought for a moment before saying that I did not think there was really any need to tell him. Ulrich nodded and agreed that was probably the case.

He downed his wine and said that it was time to eat; we could scrounge some food in the kitchen, and purloin some more wine from the cellar. Quite how one purloins wine from one's own cellar I am not sure.

Once the table was well stocked with victuals and some more bottles of wine my stepfather asked if I was planning on leaving soon. I shrugged and said I was intending to stay a few more days yet.

We sat and talked over old times for a couple of hours, slowly emptying the extra bottles of wine. Finally Ulrich said he had to go; he had some new maids to interview. I grinned and leered in an exaggerated fashion, rubbing my hands together in a gleeful manner. He laughed and went off to see to the business of the estate.

I have always been glad that Manfred was the oldest; I did not really have the temperament or patience for managing an estate.

Once I had polished off the last of the wine I took my horse (I was seriously considering giving him a name; 'the horse' seemed so characterless) for another wide ride around the valley and a ways beyond. Some of the surrounding villages, all of which were part of the family estate, had changed little since I had last seen them. Some of the women recognised me, surprisingly. They were roughly divided into those that knew me and waved; those that knew me and cursed me; and those who were sure they knew me not at all. A reputation can be a terrible thing.

The next few days slowly slipped by without major incident or more sudden revelations. It was a time of rest, of reading, and of remembering old times.

The only peculiar event occurred the night before my last full day there. I was awoken in the night by the sense that someone was in my room; over by the glowing embers of the fire stood a woman, almost entirely concealed within the shadows. She seemed to look a little like Guin, but I was only half-awake so I could not be sure. She seemed to become aware of me watching her; she turned to look at me and seemed to raise a finger to her lips in a shushing motion. I fell back into sleep almost immediately afterwards.

The next morning while I was shaving I noticed some kind of mark on the right side of my neck. That was the same side as had been facing the fire when I had been awoken, as far as I could guess at least. It was slightly smaller than my thumb, and seemed lighter than the skin around it. Even more peculiarly, it felt slightly tacky, as if of some residue, but whatever it was soon rubbed off.

There was nothing I could really do about it, as I did not possess the ability to determine the truth of the matter, especially if some Power were at work. It certainly did not appear to be any sort of threat, so I decided to let the matter lie.

The dinner that evening was a near-formal affair, a three-course banquet of sorts, put on to make my last day at home (hopefully not the absolute last) a memorable one. The only person that was really missing was Manfred, which was a definite shame. My mother was, understandably, tearful. I was not untouched by emotion myself.

The final morning finally came. I was treated to the best bacon and sausages the household had to offer, along with some fine fresh bread, cheese and white wine. My mother prepared it herself, and packed me some more if it as provisions for 'the long journey ahead'. My mother wept openly to see me go so soon; I hugged her and whispered to her that I would be back before she knew it. My stepfather shook my hand (though he did sniff in a suspiciously emotional way) before surreptitiously handing me a folded letter, sealed with wax marked with the family seal. Above the seal was a simple 'B B'; he quietly said I knew who it was for, and waved at me to conceal it within my coat before my mother saw it.

A simple plan I had been considering over the previous few days came back to me and I asked if he was up to receiving strange messages. He looked a little confused and inquired as to what I meant. I said I was talking about birds carrying messages to Bek. He asked if I meant carrier pigeons, and I said that they could be something like that, but these would arrive when no pigeons raised in Bek had been sent anywhere. Something close to understanding dawned in Ulrich's eyes and he said he would not ask how I would achieve this, adding that he had seen Benedict do something similar on a number of occasions. I said I would try and time the arrival to coincide with Manfred returning home.

I smiled slightly at him before reassuring him I would be back. He smiled slightly in return, and I said I had better leave before he turned at sentimental on me. He just laughed and engulfed me in a bear hug, lifting me off my feet. When my feet again touched the ground I got my balance back and did the same for him. He did not look too surprised, as he did know the Family.

I made sure my horse was properly saddled and my saddlebags were well positioned before climbing up into the saddle. I waved at my parents (irrespective of who was a direct blood relation) and convinced my noble steed to rear in a most dramatic fashion before riding at not quite full speed out the open gates and into the village. Everyone probably watched me as I rode through Bek, probably until I was out of sight beyond the west woods and the hills began, the road taking me out of the valley.

Once I was out of the valley I began a little shifting of Shadow, mostly to improve the weather, which really was turning rather grim and wet. Just a normal autumn. Once it was sunny and warm, having moved all the way into summer, I found a good spot with some long grass for the horse and a little roadside marker for me to sit on. I pulled out my Trump of my father and set to establishing a contact.

When it solidified he greeted me and I replied with a jaunty 'hello Benjamin'. He appeared momentarily flustered by being greeted with that name, but he soon recovered with a slight narrowing of the eyes and a nod that signified understanding. I handed him the note from my stepfather and he carefully tore it open and quickly read it.

He asked how the two of them were; I told him they were well, and would probably like to see him again sometime. He seemed to consider it and said he might consider doing so; the note had been an invitation from Ulrich. He paused a moment before asking how my mother was; I told him she was very well and remembered him fondly. He nodded absent-mindedly, his thoughts on the past.

Shaking himself out of his reverie he asked if I had been told about the last battle. I said that my stepfather had only mentioned it but not gone into any detail beyond mentioning it. He nodded and affirmed my supposition by saying it was the time that he and Ulrich had become separated; he did not say how it had occurred.

He was quiet for a time before repeating Ulrich's concern; did I now hate him? Strangely, I had half-expected the question; I told him I did not, saying I was still stunned by it all and had not had the time to really let it all sink in. In fact, I had purposely not given myself the time to think through the situation fully, in an attempt to soften the blow. It was sometimes better to rely on feelings than on thought.

Then I asked who Deirdre was. Benedict looked momentarily puzzled before he realised who the question was really coming from. He told me she was dead; when Brand had been killed he had dragged her with him into the Abyss. By the way he said it that fate sounded pretty final, even if I did not know what the Abyss was, where it was or why Brand had been killed. In fact, until that moment I had not known Brand was dead either. Both he and Deirdre had been but faces on cards till then.

He suggested I tell my stepfather that she was well and remembered him. Then he said farewell and closed the contact.

I got back on the road and began working the stuff of Shadow to find a bird of my desire. I had been told a little of them by Andreas, though a little of the knowledge passed onto me by Dworkin covered them too. It took a few hours to find what I was looking for; a sturdy creature not unlike a pigeon, only faster with better endurance. It stared at me from the branches of a tree as I sat beneath it and wrote three small missives. The first, for my stepfather, said that Benedict had received his invitation and ended saying that he might visit at some point; the second, for my mother, assured her that I would visit again soon, that I was missing her already, and that Benjamin still remembered her fondly. The last was for Manfred, and expressed my regret at not having seen him again, but ended saying I would see him next time.

They were, unfortunately, rather brief, limited by the size of packet the bird could carry. Once I had finished I tied the small, leather pouch to one of its legs and sent it one its way. I knew it would arrive in Bek in about three and a half weeks, for the place I was in was Shadow.

I sat back and watched as the bird slowly vanished over the horizon before taking out my Trumps again and dealing out Morianna's card. I concentrated on the image but was met with only the cold iciness of an unresponsive contact.

I had more success with Victor; he was in a simple room somewhere that could best be described as a cell, though not of the imprisoning kind. He told me he had been out of Amber for a time, pursuing a regime of 'self-improvement'. I told him that I had not been in Amber for some time either, but did not go into any detail beyond that. It was a private matter.

He seemed to think that I was in need of some form of assistance, or that I required something of him. I assured him that it was merely a social call, and he appeared puzzled that such a thing could be possible. Obviously people in Amber did not talk to each other for purely social reasons.

I got through to Joe as well. He told me that he was just about to go on a well-deserved holiday. I asked if he was in Amber; he said he was, so I asked him how things

stood there. He said that nothing really significant was occurring there; just rebuilding and recovery. Other than that, the only news was that Amber was going to have an early winter; it was snowing already, a good month or so early. This was part of a plan to have a longer spring and summer to ensure a greater than usual harvest made up for the deficiencies of the previous two years.

Again, like Victor, he seemed to think I wanted something of him, so I assured him as well that I was merely inquiring after his health and situation. He seemed to become suspicious by my probably far too quick reply.

I then broached a sensitive question; how was Caine? He said he was all right, slowly recovering, but why had I asked him about it? Why had I not asked one of the elders, who would know more about it than he? I just said that since I had planned to talk to him (ie Joe) anyway I thought I should ask. I think his suspicions deepened further when I said that.

It did not help when I casually asked how his investigations were going. I was not interested in getting an in-depth report, though I was a little curious about anything involving cloaked men. All I did get was a noncommittal 'okay' to which I answered with a neutral 'that's good'; the conversation went quiet at that point until I said goodbye and passed my hand over the card.

I leant back against the tree and tried to think if there was anyone else I felt inclined to talk to. I decided not to bother Fiona again yet, and I decided to leave Bleys until I had dealt with the matter of the vodka suppliers. Then I remembered Tim; good, old unlucky Tim who had helped me solve a problem regarding an angry, sorcerous husband not too long ago.

I fished out his card and soon his image animated to show him at his rest in a restaurant somewhere. Surprisingly, for Tim, he was well and uninjured! Apparently he was not busy at that moment, taking the opportunity to get in some well-deserved relaxation. He smiled before telling me the egg was a dud; quite surprisingly, it took me a whole second to understand what he was talking about.

Then he asked me how things were in Amber; I told him I had not been there for a month or so, but that I had heard there were early snows. He asked after the family and I told him that everyone was well except those who were not. He looked puzzled and I reminded him of Caine's predicament; he nodded.

On a finishing sort of note I said that he was well so things could not be that bad; he smiled a little at the comment. He suggested I try his wine; apparently it was very good. He handed me his glass through the haze of the contact and I tried a mouthful; it was quite good, crisp and cool. I handed him back his glass and he handed me one of the two bottles on the table, telling me to make the most of it. Then he said he had to go, as business was raising its ugly head. I waved farewell with the wine bottle as the contact closed.

Properly rested and up to date with my closest relatives and friends I decided that I would now seek the source of the vodka bottle in my saddlebags, in an attempt to determine the purpose and objectives of the cross-shadow merchants who had sold it to Magdeburg citizens. Maybe I could help to foil some plot against Amber while I was at it. Did I have that much luck?