

Journal 49 - in Amber and Shadow

Feeling ready to tackle the outside world again, I decided to make some more of those social calls everyone found so off-putting. Victor was well, or so he said; he looked a little weary and distracted, and was quite curt. Once again he had the impression that I wanted something; when I told him I did not require anything from him, he bid me farewell and took himself back to whatever it was that was keeping him so tense. He had said he was doing some building; it looked more like he had been fighting with a house, not putting one up.

Both Joe and Morianna were really unfriendly by comparison, though this was only because they were not accepting contacts at that time.

Since it had been a while since I was last really in Amber I decided that it was past time that I found out how my engineers were doing. Since the best people to ask was (so I thought) the palace functionaries I made my way to the throne room, where I was sure I would find Random, Roth or someone of similar knowledge about the state of the kingdom. Naturally, the only people who were there were two of the pages that are almost certainly a fixture by the throne and two slightly older and better dressed lads who I took to be squires or some such. Since it was apparently the responsibility of the pages to know where everyone was, I asked the older looking one where I might find the engineers.

He asked me to wait a moment while he went to examine the books, so I stood on the balcony and looked out over the mountains and Arden for a time. It looked to be about midday; the castle sounded busy, as one would expect, and the weather was grey and generally uninviting. It was winter, after all, or something like it.

After a few minutes the page returned and told me that the main contingent could be found in the southern fields below Kolvir, between the foot of the mountain and the Vale. He advised me to take the southern route. I asked if they would be there for the rest of the day and was answered in the affirmative.

The page then asked how long I would be in Amber. Since I knew that this was so he could remain informed as to my whereabouts should anyone ask, I told him I would be present for two days at least. He thanked me, saying that it would make it easy for others to find me (as I had suspected), and went back to his post (or rather his dice game with the other page).

I made my way back up to the floor with my rooms on and found the nearest dining room, where I had been told I could find food almost any time of day. I ordered a light lunch from the cook and was soon sitting down to a meal of beef stew, potatoes and bread. Suitably filled I fetched my riding coat and reclaimed my horse from the stables.

I elected to think of a name for him at some point.

It took most of an hour to make my way down the southern slopes, though I did take it easy. Not long after I made out a group of people at work with poles and some devices in a nearby field and rode over to have a closer look.

I recognised several of the men and women who were directing a number of youths carefully through the search and disposal process. One, Steffan Patton, came over to see me as I rode up and climbed down off my horse. He greeted me and I asked how they were doing. He said they were going slow but sure, and training up local lads to help them locate the mines. It would be at least four years for the locals to become even semi-competent. He did not sound pleased that it would take so long. I asked Steffan how everyone was doing in their new home; he said that most of them were fitting in, though several had returned. He smiled and said they could not live without "TV".

I smiled slightly in response, though I did not really appreciate what was obviously a joke.

The 'health benefits' were a definite bonus in the deal, they all agreed on that. He then looked a little apologetic and said that he would have to get back to work. I said I understood and waved goodbye as I climbed back on my horse and rode off.

I decided to pay another visit to the city, to see if it had improved since I was last there. It took a couple of hours to make the trip as I went by the coastal route, passing below

the famous eastern face of Kolvir. It provided me with an opportunity to get a feel of the land on this side of Amber, get a look at the lay of the coast and the routes around the mountain.

The city itself was nearly completely recovered from the ravaging it suffered during Eric's reign. There were new buildings all over and many more had been renovated and probably improved along the way. Most of the public works that had been damaged during the occupation and the battle to retake Amber had been repaired, some with new facings depicting what looked to be scenes from the liberation.

I retraced my steps back around the coastal side of Kolvir and up the southern paths back to the castle; by the time I returned the sun was almost set. Back in my rooms I retrieved the ruby, amethyst and platinum ensemble I had purchased for Guin and my Trump of her while I was at it. However, she appeared to be busy as I was unable to get through to her.

Since it was past time, I pulled the drawing I had snatched from the top of the building opposite the office of the Distributors and examined it more closely. It was unchanged but had a quality about it I had not noticed before; a slight coolness not normally associated with simple paper. It was almost like a Trump, but somehow it felt weaker, somehow less permanent than normal. Perhaps it was like that temporary Trump of Bernard that Intruder created in the City?

So I decided to give it a try. It took more effort than usual but eventually the image animated and I could feel a hint of a warm breeze blow down the street over me. That street was now dark, like it was night, and there was no one walking down it and certainly no one playing in a band. I broke the contact and pulled my jacket on before wrapping my sword in a blanket and trying again. This time I achieved solidity slightly quicker, and stepped through onto the street.

I stood on the pavement beside the road and looked up and down the street. It was fairly quiet, being the middle of the night; most of the bars and music clubs in the vicinity looked to be winding down to closing. Earlier it had probably been quiet a fun place to be.

I pondered my options. Since the Trump had been left for (presumably) me to find, I had to figure out where it was telling me to go. As it was quite late (there at least, though I had been doing a lot of riding) I turned right around and went up the stairs of the boarding house I stood in front of. I knocked on the door when I found it was locked and was soon approached by a matronly African woman, no doubt the "Mama" who owned "Mama's Boarding House". I asked if it was still possible to get a room and she said it was, and I was let in.

I signed the guest book once I had rented a small room on the second floor. I took a quick glance at the other names as I did no; there were none that immediately jumped out at me. She said she had two girls she could call on if I would be wanting company but, quite against character, I turned them down (I did say 'maybe later', though). She remarked that it was cold outside and offered me a glass of rum to take the chill off. It most certainly did just that.

I drank it and a few of it's friends as I listened to the piano player in the lounge for an hour or so before taking myself upstairs. I was not that sleepy, though, so I rested in the armchair for a while before taking a couple of naps till breakfast came.

The next morning my half-doze was interrupted by a knocking on the door. I opened it to reveal a pretty, dark-skinned maid waiting outside; it was already quite warm outside, as confirmed by the light summer dress she wore. She thanked me for doing the bed already (I had not really used it, napping in the armchair instead) and filled the water jug beside the bed.

I splashed some water of my face to wake myself up before having a quick drink; then I went downstairs in search of the fine breakfast I could smell from two floors up. I left my sword wrapped up on the bed, but kept a sheathed belt knife hidden in the small of my back, under my jacket.

The breakfast was heavy, it was hearty and it was very filling; some variety of spicy meat stew. Mama delicately brought up the subject of money and I paid her with some cash that I knew could be found in an inner pocket of my jacket. It was enough that I would receive change, so Mama went to fetch it.

I sat back and considered my options. The first thing to try was messages; maybe a message had been left for me under one name or another in Mama's, or someplace over the

road or nearby. These were the most obvious options; it was possible, if not likely, to be much more complicated than that. I decided to try the first and possibly most obvious route first.

I waved Mama over and asked if there were any messages for me, as I was expecting to be meeting some people in a day or so. I gave my name as Michaels, since it had been my latest pseudonym, though it was possible that those who had arranged this meeting (if that was what it was) did not know the name. She said she did not think there was one for me, so I subtly suggested that perhaps I might look at all the messages, just in case.

She returned with a glass of whiskey and a couple of slips of paper. I thanked her and paid her almost five times the cost of the drink; then I examined the notes. The first was a love note; I did not read it too closely but it was clearly not meant for me. The other described details of an order of some kind for a travelling salesman. I shrugged and said that perhaps I had come to the wrong place; my directions had not been very good, as shown by my late arrival.

I thanked Mama again and went to the hotel directly opposite. I asked for messages under the names of Michaels and von Bek (my partner, I explained) but met with no success. The fellow behind the counter commented on my having come over the road from Mama's; he was engaged to her daughter, apparently, and was in a slight conflict of interest between the place he worked and her place. We lamented (briefly) over the trials caused by women and I left to try the surrounding area.

I tried a few bars, some hotels and boarding houses, using first Michaels and von Bek before dragging out Montsorbier and even Barimen. All to no avail. I went two blocks in each direction and came up with nothing. I was beginning to become a little frustrated.

I dug out the carefully folded picture again and examined it closely for clues. I walked around a little to orientate myself on the route the band appeared to be taking and followed that course for ten blocks, trying the same thing with the same degree of success: none.

Back at Mama's I asked her about brass bands such as the one in the picture. Judging by the description I gave her, Mama said, they were a funeral band; they start playing sombre tunes and then turn joyful about halfway through. Other than that the only brass bands she knew of were military bands and jazz bands.

I went back outside into the hot sun, exasperated. I was still no nearer to finding whatever or whoever I was there to find.

Something in the back of my head must have jiggled into place as a result of the sun baking my head. *Andreas...*

Andreas liked jazz. The image depicted a band playing jazz instruments. And they were heading in a specific direction. I rushed back inside and asked a bemused Mama where the jazz clubs were. She told me they were about a mile and a half east of this district, and pointed down the road in the direction I had to take.

The band was headed in the direction.....

I walked as fast as the heat permitted until I found myself surrounded by clubs of the jazz variety. One stood out as it had a peculiar name, compared to the rest at least. It was called "Gawain's Executioner"; one of the many, many Arthurian legends. And Arthur's wife was *Guinevere*....

Inside it was cooler. A long bar on the right ended at the far end of the room at a small stage. The rest of the floor was covered in tables and chairs. It was quiet at that time; a few other patrons were eating lunch. A pair of large double doors in the middle of the left wall was 'guarded' by a pair of bruisers in light but smart clothing; it was too hot for suits or tuxedos.

I approached the girl behind the bar and enquired after food. She handed me a menu and I quickly selected a gammon sandwich and prawn 'gumbo' combination. A tall glass of light beer completed the meal, which was filling and not too hot.

I sat at the bar to eat and nodded towards the men standing beside the double doors, asking if that part of the club was exclusive in some way. I was told that area was for members only; in there the best new talent played before the top people in the city. Since it was just the sort of "private" place to hold a rendezvous I asked about gaining membership; the serving girl said she would have to get the manager.

I finished my meal while she went in the back and before long a tall, dark man in very light (and probably very expensive) suit came around the bar to speak with me. I asked about

obtaining membership of their fine club and he told me that the owner liked to keep the membership small, limiting it to the mayor, local dignitaries and 'the generous', namely those wealthy enough to afford the entry fee. He also commented that weapons of any sort were not permitted, as the club (and the owner) did not like violence to disturb an evening's entertainment. The blood made a mess, too.

The membership fee was a flat one thousand dollars; food and drink were then free in the outer bar and cheap in the member's area. I told him I would be able to have the money ready for him in about an hour; I could probably do it there and then, but I decided not to.

The manager asked the serving girl to get me another bowl of gumbo and glass of lager before heading back to wherever his office was.

The second round was as nice as the first, and very filling.