

Journal 51 - in Shadow and Amber

I finally dragged myself out of bed early the next morning. Guin was preparing to assault the bathroom so I quickly performed my perfunctory ablutions before dressing. As I did so I asked Guin how she was, since I had not seen her for some time and had not had time for conversation up to that point. I asked if they had been keeping her occupied and she just said they had kept her flitting around as usual.

I asked if she thought the two of "them" were still here and she seemed to think it likely, so I decided to seek them out; I had a few questions to ask them. She offhandedly waved farewell as she entered the bathroom wrapped in towels, set, she said, on "a good soak". As the bath began to fill, she insisted in an irritated tone that I had used all the hot water. I chose not to argue with her.

I grabbed a bit of breakfast in the bar downstairs before seeking out the terrible twosome, but I only found Andreas chopping wood out the back. We exchanged the usual pleasantries regarding the state of our health before I asked straight out if he knew anything about strange men in cloaks. He shrugged and said that he had a few in his wardrobe somewhere. I told him I meant the ones that had been seen around Amber recently, including the illusory gunman. He nodded, giving the cloaked figure who delivered Caine during the ball welcoming the engineers as another example.

He inquired if anyone had discovered anything about the real gunman. I said that as far as I knew all that was known was where he had fired from and that he had used a high-powered rifle, as evinced by the shell case I had found. He nodded, mentioning that 'he' had been on one of the high balconies around the roof of the throne room (he obviously has a good and subtle source of information) before asking what had happened to the casing. I said I had given it to Dworkin, and he replied that anyone seeking more information on the gunman would have to reclaim it from him. I shrugged and wondered if that statement should be taken as a serious suggestion to do just that.

He finally answered my original question by saying that it was nothing to with him, or Intruder as far as he knew. Shrugging, I said that it was worth a try as sometimes a more direct approach can be successful. He smiled and said that he could still be lying like a bastard, whatever that involves.

Who else would cause Eric to cry out "you're dead! I killed you!", I asked Andreas as he split another couple of logs. He told me there were several possibilities; he was said to have been involved in one way or another with the death of several members of the family, though they could just have been stories told to put him in a bad light.

I enquired if he was considering returning to Amber soon, since his wife was rather concerned about him. There, I told him, my not-so-onerous duty was finally done. He split another log before answering that he might, once "they" let him. "Who?" I asked. He just looked at me for a moment before saying "you figure it out".

I presumed he meant Random at least, almost certainly Benedict too. Who else would suggest such a course of action?

I told him I would be leaving soon, to return to Amber myself. He suggested I use Trump rather than walk there; there were a number of strange "movements" in the nearby Shadows. It was possible they were "accidental" rather than "intentional", he said, but his tone suggested he did not think this likely. I stated my intention to make a quick sojourn into Shadow first, but that I would Trump to Amber when I was done. He nodded and said that he thought that would be alright.

"See you in Amber soon" I told him as I turned to leave. He smiled, buried the axe in the bottommost log and announced that he always liked "soon". He gave a perfunctory wave and declared his need for a shower. I left him to it.

I walked back up the road, taking in the sun and the delightful smell of all the food being prepared in the various restaurants and cafes along the way. I retrieved my sword from my freshly cleaned room at Mama's and signed out before returning to give my goodbyes. Guin was in the bar and I told her of my imminent return to Amber. She seemed a little glum at the news but brightened up when I told her there was a present awaiting her in Amber. She then became quite eager to join me, but suggested we have a drink first.

She called for some red wine and we had just finished the first glass when Intruder came in. He stopped when he saw me, an almost comic look of confusion on his face. He

thought I had Trumped out just a moment ago. With a puzzled look on his face he turned on his heel and headed back the way he came. Guin sighed and followed him.

I stayed where I was, leaning back in my chair and pouring myself another glass. A short while later the two of them returned. Intruder announced that "he" had gone, obviously referring to Andreas. When I asked what had happened he said that according to the "residues" someone had Trumped into his room and then the two (?) of them had Trumped out again about an hour or so later. He looked a little put out; he asserted that he had been "busy" and had not noticed. The fact that they had got out suggested that the mystery caller was "good", that is to say highly skilled at Intruder's art. I tried to salve his conscience (and perhaps also his pride) by agreeing with the "highly skilled" explanation.

He then asked me what I said to him. I just asked how he was, I told him, asked if he was returning to Amber anytime soon and that his wife missed him. He just looked more perplexed.

Shaking his head, he suggested that I leave before wondering aloud how Andreas could "stand all these places being so hot and sticky". Give me a good drizzle any day, he said. Guin responded to this comment in a way that suggested this was an old argument, and Intruder replied with a shrug before adding that he had heard that Victor was holding some kind of barbeque in Amber in a couple of days. Then he left with a distracted expression in his face.

Finishing my wine I told Guin that he would be making a short trip into Shadow before we went to Amber. She inquired if we were still going to do that despite the strange "movements" in Shadow close by? I assured her we would be in little danger; for her part she was confident that she could transport us a short distance away if we got into trouble. If not, she said, her big protector would look after her.

At the same time I looked around calling for Victor she did much the same but calling for Andreas; she accused me of ruining her joke. We ruined each others, I told her.

We headed out and I shifted Shadow a little until I found just the place. A small but first-rate haberdashery that just happened to be situated opposite a maker of quality weaponry, a mix that I knew would provide what I required.

It was there amongst the other "special items". A simple black wood walking stick with a round, silver head that hid a secret. A press of a catch and a pull on the head and a blade was revealed, about three feet long and of diamond cross-section to give extra strength to the cutting edge. Perfect for subtle hidden defence in a variety circumstances. And not too expensive either, if a gauged the price correctly. Naturally, I had more than enough to purchase it.

On the way out Guin asked if we were going to Victor's party for his training house, or "dojo" as he called it. Some Oriental term for what was essentially a fencing hall but not for fencing, apparently. When I said we were her eyes lit up and she breathed the magic word, "shopping", as if contemplating some mystic journey. Perhaps she was.

As we left the shop I noticed Guin seemed to have acquired some full bags. She glanced down to see what I was looking at and she began to explain how some of the items in the shop had looked too good to pass up; then she stared across the street with a slightly puzzled expression. I thought we were supposed to be somewhere Elizabethan, she inquired. I told her it was a place something like that (more like my Europe really, more advanced than the time of simple England's supposed golden age). She just pointed at an alley opposite us, alongside the armourers.

Just as I turned to look I caught a glimpse of a fellow wearing one of those suits like we wore in Mexico City. Not thinly striped this time, the suit was of a more simpler cut and style. But the retreating interloper was almost certainly part of the same group; he shared their furtive and stealthy nature.

Determined not to let this one get away from me I left a rather surprised Guinevere behind as I sprinted over to the alley in pursuit. It turned left not long after in an L-shape behind the shop beside the armourers and I dashed (perhaps unthinkingly) around the corner to see the gentleman in question with his back to me holding what appeared to be a Trump card. It was, however, oval in shape. In all other respects it was certainly a Trump, however, as the fellow promptly vanished in much the usual manner.

I cursed in irritation at losing one of "Them" yet again. Guin interrupted my musings as she caught up by asking what had happened. I told her how the fellow had vanished and she appeared to stare at the place he had been standing for a moment before announcing

that “it” felt strange. I asked her if she meant the “residue”, as Intruder had described it, and she replied by saying it did not really feel like Trump.

I held my hand over the area and concentrated to try and get a feel of what she meant. While it certainly felt like Trump, it had a peculiarly lessened quality to it, as if it had somehow drained the energy from the environment to create an area where the local energy was diminished. It also felt, well, depressing. Not like the sensation of emptiness created by the Logrus conduits or that strange stone that had somehow become a heart.

When I had relayed this information to her, Guin looked around a little nervously and said that perhaps we could continue our conversation out of the alley. I agreed, commenting how many alleys contained nasty people with knives. She said that such places also produced boyfriends, but I was not really sure if she was joking or not.

Instead I pulled out my Trump depicting the courtyard in Amber and began concentrating on the image.

When we fully materialised I was reminded of something I wanted to check and asked if she could wait for a moment. She elected instead to go to her rooms, so as she left I made my way into the stables.

As I looked around for the most senior-looking person I spotted my horse in the stall I had last seen him in. Apparently no one had taken him out in the time I had been gone. Singling out a lad who appeared to be the oldest of those present I tried to explain to him that I wished to (for lack of any other word) “reserve” my horse for my use only. Adopt him as my own, in effect. The way he responded to this semi-request suggested that such behaviour was not normal. Maybe just arriving on a horse marked it forever as belonging to that person, whether it was initially drawn from what seemed to be a common pool of horses in the first place or not.

As I left I told him the name I had decided for the horse: Charlemagne, semi-legendary king of the Holy Roman Empire. He seemed unimpressed and indeed uninterested in whether the horse had a name or not. I suppose that when one works around as many horse as he did, one would quickly lose interest in which was which beyond who the owner was.

That simple task completed, I went to my rooms and unwrapped my sword before retrieving Guin’s present from on the desk where I had left it. Taking it to her room I knocked and was quickly admitted by Guin. Aha, she said, the infamous present. She opened the simple case and her eyes lit up at the sight of the contents. Holding the necklace up to the light she smiled in appreciation before she frowned in thought. “What will it go with” she mused to herself and promptly vanished.

I shook my head and returned to my rooms, another duty to perform. As promised, I retrieved my Trump of Morianna and set about concentrating on it. Not too long after the contact stabilised and I beheld Morianna’s image before me.

We exchanged the usual pleasantries before I asked if it were possible for us to talk, either where I was (Amber) or with her if she preferred. She said she was in Arden and, since I had not walked through that great forest for quite a while I decided to join her there.

We were in a small glade somewhere deep in the forest, surrounded by the mighty trees with a small circle of sky above. Bernard was sniffing around the trees, catching the scent of small woodland animals no doubt. I leant back against a tree and told Morianna that I wanted to finish the conversation that we had begun a few days ago, regarding the baron. What had he actually been doing?

She told me that he had been buying, moving and selling large quantities of money, gold, jewellery and weapons, as well as something of unique interest to our family. When I raised an enquiring eyebrow and asked what she meant she said it was a “certain weapon”. I nodded and said that I assumed she meant the dagger she gave to Llewella. She nodded in reply. She baron, she said, had appeared in all ways to be a normal member of the nobility but had apparently shown some signs of living slightly beyond his means; she had been sent to determine the exact details of his dealings. It had transpired that he was being employed by an external group, namely from one outside the Shadow.

When I commented that it must have been quite dull being there for so long, she informed me that where she had been the time ran quicker, so she had not been there long subjectively.

Since I had heard what she had to tell me, I then proceeded to give her the condensed version of my encounter with the liquor merchants, how some group were moving

alcohol from one world into a less advanced one where it would be worth more. I did not tell her where they had been delivering it to. I suggested that perhaps the two groups were connected in some way; she was somewhat noncommittal on that theory. Then I enquired about the “magic circle” that had been found in the grounds of the baron’s house; she told me that she had not had the opportunity to examine it, and that Fiona had “blown it up”.

My story was then completed with the tale of my encounter with the so-called “Logrus Conduit” that “my” traders had used; perhaps it was the same kind of thing? And since it was supposed to be of Logrus, and Logrus was of Chaos, that could have some potentially dangerous ramifications. She said she knew nothing about it, and I admitted I knew little more than she. We both paused to ponder.

Morianna then interrupted my rather circular thinking by asking if I was going to Victor’s party tonight. When I said that she was, she told me that it appeared that quite a large number of people appeared to be going. I looked at her questioningly, and she told me that he had apparently invited everyone he could contact, and invited a contingent of Rangers as well for some reason. Not exactly an intimate little group then, I said.

An important point occurred to me then, so I asked Morianna if she knew exactly where the place was that the party was being held. She just shrugged and said she did not know. I said that if it was to be at Julie’s family’s estate I had been there before, but not overland. Victor, apparently, had just suggested riding out from Amber and following the smell of the cooking.

Morianna asked if I wanted to come to the lodge for a drink before I left; this sounded like a marvellous idea, so I walked with her a short way underneath the ancient boughs of Arden until we arrived at a simple but very sturdy wooden building, much like the one I had seen when sneaking into Amber so long ago. I had no wish to eat, so I just accepted a glass of wine. It was very fine, but then I would expect a prince to stock his cellars well (even if the place did not actually have a cellar).

We chatted a little on inconsequential things (mostly about the weather, the Rangers and the lodge) before Morianna smiled and asked how my father was. I smiled back and said he was well when I last saw him; she explained how she had heard only recently about the relationship. I smiled wider and asked after the health of her mother. She raised her eyes and shook her head slightly in a way that suggested some tension existed between them. She could be annoying at times, she told me.

Then, remembering I had still more to ask her, I enquired about whether she had come across people who changed into white, steaming goo when killed. She seemed to think I was mad, but I assured her such people existed and were involved in the movement of the liquor I had discovered. They were some variety of mercenary, I told her. Again, she did not know of them, and neither did she know of anyone wearing suits like the ones people had worn in Mexico City when we had been hiring the engineers, possibly with thin vertical stripes.

As I neared the bottom of my second glass I stated that I intended to ask both Joe and Ansalom about the same things; I had heard that they were investigating similar events and situations. It seemed likely, I said, that we would see them at the party, so I would ask them then.

Knocking back the last of my wine I announced that it was time for me to depart. I thanked Morianna for her time and the excellent wine, before bidding her farewell and saying “see you later”.

I returned to Amber by Trump and made my way to the library. There I located a map of the countryside around Amber and found the Knight estate clearly marked off one of the major trade roads away from Kolvir and into Shadow. It would take perhaps an hour, maybe two, to ride there.

I returned to my rooms to prepare.