

Journal 53- in Amber

The next morning found me at rest in Guin's room in Amber. With nothing to drag me away I took the opportunity to doze until midday, until my stomach called for my attention. Truth be told, though, my curiosity also had an equal interest in rousing me from my sloth.

And on top of that there was a serious question I had to put to Benedict. Since the notion I had in mind did affect him I thought it was a good idea to see what he thought of it. I also wanted to know if it was even slightly workable; it had the potential to cause no small amount of confusion, pain and all round awkwardness. But my head hurt with it too much already.

A brief shower later I pulled my clothing on and left Guin to her sleepy mumblings. I changed into more casual wear before seeking out a full if late breakfast in the nearest of the dining rooms. Then I sought out the king.

I found him at rest in Roth's office; both were nursing glasses of brandy as they (presumably) discussed Important Things. They raised their glasses at me when I entered; I nodded to Roth and greeted Random with a "my lord". I sat on the edge of the desk and asked after news of current events in Amber. Random related a brief catalogue of minor but strange events in Shadow; a few strange disturbances, some people unexpectedly gaining power, "that sort of thing". I enquired as to whether he meant political power rather than actual Power, and he nodded in reply.

I asked if it was thought that these actions were related in some way to the mysterious party who were trading in resources, and he was effectively noncommittal, not really giving an answer that could be taken either way. What, I asked, about the "Logrus Conduits"? Did they suggest some sort of affiliation with the Courts of Chaos? Not that I exactly know what they are, of course, but from what I have heard they appear to be "our" enemy, Amber's foe.

Our unknown players have been using them, Random told me, but now they were starting to use other methods. These new methods, and the Conduits, both, apparently, made use of the hearts of "freebloods".

When I looked confused (as usual) he went to tell me that Chaos, like any other place with a large number of noble families, had a large number of younger or minor sons and daughters and many other assorted varieties of relations who were relatively lowly placed but sought to better their status. These "freebloods" travelled into Shadow to seek their fortune, as it were, in an attempt to gain Power and status they could use on their eventual return to their homeland. Many never returned, either killed during their travels or never finding their way to boost their standing.

Someone, apparently, was finding these freebloods and using their bodies, specifically their hearts, to create ways of moving through Shadow. The power is in their blood and as the heart is the centre of the body it is there that most of the "chaotic energy" is stored.

I pondered this concept. It all sounded very alchemical; it smacked of some dark ritual to draw on the base nature of the murdered individual for Power. Necromancy, really. Not unlike the ingredients one might use to produce some other effect. Perhaps use of this technique would give ideas as to the identity of the perpetrator(s)?

Random went on to say that whatever they were doing it was in some way involved in the manipulation of a phenomenon he called "zero reality". This involved the creation of zones that possessed traces of neither Pattern nor Logrus, something that is supposed to be impossible, since all Shadow is the product of the interaction of these two Forces. Apparently, if we were to go to such a place we would quickly begin to feel very unwell, and would soon begin to "revert" if we stayed too long.

What did "revert" mean?

The creation of such a place took a great deal of effort, according to Random. I asked if they could be creating these zones in an attempt to distract us from their true goal, but he thought it unlikely; it simply took too much energy to make them that it would not be worth not making actual use of them afterwards.

I then moved the conversation on to the topic of the previous night's mystery delivery. Random shrugged and said that it contained some artefacts of some kind or other; Fiona was investigating them. Nothing more was to be got from him on that subject.

Random knocked back the last of his glass and informed me that the reason "everyone" was being so free with information was that "we" had a whole lot of clues but no

overall picture of events. By spreading around what was known as much as possible it became more likely that people would be able to recognise strange events or encounters as part of a larger puzzle and thus (hopefully) report back, making solving the puzzle easier for everyone.

And on that subject, Random said, here is something for you from Joe. Was there a slight smile as he passed me a large brown envelope? The envelope contained a bound sheaf of papers not much thicker than my thumb with the grand title "Analysis of Ammunition and Hypothesis Regarding Rifle Used". Unfortunately, the only thing visible on the pages was the title at the top and the page number at the bottom. All the rest was blanked out with black ink. It was, therefore, completely unreadable.

With a bland expression he handed me his copy, which Roth fetched from the waste basket. It too was completely blacked out. I would obviously have to ask Joe what it was about.

I said my farewells and left them to their obviously high level discussion.

Since apparently only Fiona knew about the contents of the parcel I shuffled out her card and concentrated on it. She smiled slightly when she saw it was me, or I might have just imagined it. She asked if I could go to where she was, as she had just made some popcorn. I did not know what popcorn was, but I was not especially attached to being where I was at the time so I joined her.

It was an apartment somewhere in a place that was more advanced than the world I called home, high up in one of those skyscraper things overlooking a big city. She handed me a glass of red wine and gestured towards a large bowl that contained some kind of small, pale yellow balls of, presumably, the aforementioned popcorn. Each ball looked to be at least partly smeared in some brown substance.

I must have looked slightly apprehensive because Fiona explained that it was just, literally, popped corn covered in melted toffee. I tried some of it, and it was quite nice, but I imagined it would be quite tasteless without the toffee. I was not really sure that the wine complemented it, either.

I asked her about the artefacts she was investigating and she told me that she had not really taken a look at them yet. Were they related to the "zero reality" trick? She seemed unsure about it, and was unable to offer any real suggestion as to what "they" were up to when I asked what she thought. It had to be of some use, either as a distraction or for some actual useful purpose. It was too expensive an undertaking to waste on a distraction, she said, and using them as some sort of stronghold seemed pointless as it was easier and in some ways better to create one using more "traditional" means. It all needed a lot more investigation.

I thanked her and returned to the courtyard in the castle by Trump.

Next on my list of contacts was Joe. Since I had not seen him at the party the previous night I elected to Trump him for an information exchange instead. He was, however, in an uncommunicative mood, as far as I could tell. I tried several times to establish contact, but was unsuccessful on every occasion.

Bleys, however, was seeing visitors. We talked at first about the party, whether we enjoyed it or not, that kind of thing. Apparently, the fact that other people were there (in other words people not "of The Family") was why I had been able to remember everything, unlike previous events where vast quantities of alcohol had stolen the last hours from my mind.

Then I asked him about the dissolving mercenaries. That was how he got injured, he said, though not exactly. He had penetrated one of their centres of operations but was noticed while he made his exit. His stealthy retreat had become a running battle, leading to the attainment of a number of "minor discomforts" on his part.

I asked about their mercenary nature and he said that such activities were mostly limited to use as a way to train their troops, especially the new ones. So, I suggested, the leadership could be fully behind whatever cause it was that they were following, rather than being hired? He agreed that it was possible.

My next question regarded whether or not any of them wore "modern" suits on a regular basis. Their leaders were based in a Shadow where such clothing was the rule for successful businessmen, he informed me. I told him I had encountered quite a few individuals dressed that way recently; it was now possible that the people I had seen were connected to that organisation.

The group was, Bleys told me, working mostly on creating unrest and dissent in Shadow.

I thanked him and wished him well, saying I hoped he would fully recover soon.

My next port of call was Morianna. Unfortunately I interrupted her cooking her lunch; she was dressed as if she had only just got out of bed, though she looked great, of course. The advantage of being a shapeshifter?

I briefly sketched out the whole freeblood and zero reality story to her, but I do not think it all settled in her head till later; her mind was clearly on her bacon. She asked if I wanted her to keep an eye open for anything and I nodded. Then I asked if she had seen Joe at the party, as I had not. She said she had not, but went on to say that it was unlikely that he had been invited anyway. When I asked what she meant she told me that he and Victor had had a disagreement of some kind not too long ago and had not spoken to each other since.

This was news to me, but I would obviously have to ask the two of them about it. Not to be nosy; to see if the situation could be resolved. Their possible resistance to working together in the future could prove not just irritating but hazardous, if the circumstances were dire. So much for a peaceful life.

I left Morianna to have her lunch then, as it was making me hungry again.

Next up was Intruder. He looked to be a little busy in some dark place somewhere, but had time for a brief conversation. He had found no sign of Andreas as yet, he told me when I asked after him. He left behind some notes for his wife; I asked if he had gone to see her but he did not know if this was the case or not. Whoever it was that came through, however, used a Trump “gate”, which limited the options of the Unknown Visitor to being someone as proficient in The Art. Naturally, I took this mean Trump.

I signed off by saying I would leave him to it; he said that he had company, and before I could say something he looked around and calmly asked aloud “where are my pliers?” before the contact closed.

Did I hear a slight whimper before the connection was cut?

I had put it off for long enough. It was time to see Benedict.

I passed through the Trump connection to join him as he sat in one of the dining rooms somewhere eating his lunch. The sight of all these people eating had made me hungry again, so I pilfered a couple of the rolls in the basket on the table.

I smiled in a leering way and asked him if there was anything he wanted to tell me; he just calmly told me that “she isn’t” in answer to my question. I asked what he meant and he said that she was not “one of his”. I told him that I just was curious as to who she was and where she had come from.

Apparently, he had got the (not unjustified) opinion that I was asking after her origins in order to determine if it was legally and morally safe to bed her.

He related a short tale as to how he had been in a Shadow sorting out the details of a wine shipment back to Amber when a page had delivered a message to him. Something about him caught his eye and he soon determined that he was, in fact, a she. I presumed that she must have been disguised as a youth; how else could anyone mistake her for anything but a woman?

He talked with her for a time and got a good look at her (not in an indecent sense, I assume) and was able to determine that she was of The Family, in much the same way that Morianna and I had uncovered Zatharuss’ true origins. Something about the face, the stance, the eyes, the attitude; all really quite imperceptible unless someone is somehow attuned to it, as we seem to be. This fact was eventually corroborated by an expert; he told me it was Dworkin when I enquired as to who.

He has ways of knowing, apparently, something to do with the Pattern. It was better, he said, than putting people on the Pattern and seeing if they exploded.

I was totally thrown by that statement, and when I asked exactly what “explode” meant he explained that of some not of The Family attempted to walk the Pattern they would die, sucked up by a red vortex rather than actually exploding. I was stunned; I did not know about this! But then again, if I had known I might have reconsidered walking the damn thing. Which was the point, I suppose.

Benedict continued, saying that he had investigated the possibility of a close relationship between Pia and Morianna, since they looked so alike. Florimel asserted that Pia was not her daughter or granddaughter or anything like that, but it was possible that she could be lying for some reason. Some people in The Family, said Benedict, did not care about the existence or health of their offspring until they get attacked, like the way Random reacted towards Martin when he was attacked by Brand. I asked what he meant, and he described how Brand had tried to kill Martin as part of an attempt to destroy the Pattern.

I expressed the opinion that this was not a very good nor sensible plan; Brand was not stable, he said, and had wanted to remake the universe in his own image. Definitely not a sane fellow then.

Then I finally voiced the idea that had been sitting heavily at the bottom of my mind like a lead weight on and off ever since I had visited my family back in Bek.

I knew that people that come to live in Amber receive benefits: longevity, improved health, that kind of thing. Should I bring my family to Amber? Or leave them in Bek to grow old and ill and die, knowing I could prevent it? And who do I bring? Just my mother and stepfather? Manfred too? With or without his wife and children? What about their children? When do I stop?

Benedict informed me that he had made his peace with my stepfather and was on good terms with him once again; also that both my mother and Benedict were adults and both knew that what happened only happened because of the circumstances. It could never happen again; there as no chance that Benedict could separate them, even unintentionally.

There were still problems with the idea, I told my father. I did not want to uproot the whole family; that would leave Bek without them to watch over it, a notion that appalled me. I was still a true son of Bek, whoever my father was. And if I was to take them away, when would I do it? Leave it a few weeks only to discover one of them had died because I had not taken them immediately? Would they even want to go? When I started the transplanting, where would I stop: would I bring every descendant of the family to Amber? Or only those I knew? Would I take them when they got old and their children could inherit? How would everyone be if they could not keep in touch with their relatives?

It was so very hard, so difficult to make any kind of decision.

Benedict broke into my observations on the subject by saying that he would make some preliminary investigations into finding somewhere for them to live, of they chose to come. There were, for example, a number of outlying farmhouses that were currently untenanted because of the war. I pointed out that I still had to approach them on the subject, but thanked him for his assistance. I said I would go and see them very soon.

I thanked him again and took my leave.