

Journal 59 - in Bek, December 1795

Winter had Bek in it's grip when I finally arrived, the snow deep and white. I could see workers from the village doing whatever it was they do in the fields in winter; probably fixing fences and the like, I imagined.

A stable lad took my horse when I finally arrived at the house. By the look of his attentiveness, Charlemagne was in good hands. A maid met me at the door and took my coat, which heavy with snow and water as it was almost seemed too much for her. At my request, she sent another maid to inform my mother of my arrival.

I had just shaken the last of the snow off my boots when my mother appeared. Her disapproving expression soon melted like the snow as she hugged me. I asked how things were in Bek these days, and she reported that some "small dictator" in Paris was reaching out his influence far and wide to increase taxes for a war he wanted to fight in Egypt. Clearly things had changed in the world since I had last visited.

Word of a sort had arrived about Manfred. I had sent my brother a message through Shadow after my last visit home, by express pigeon delivery, and another later telling him to return home; it was this message that had produced a reply. Unfortunately, the reply was in the form of the body of the messenger, returned in a small box. A warning of some kind, no doubt. I wondered who my oft wayward brother had annoyed this time.

My mother explained that my stepfather was out hunting winter fowl, and inquired how long my stay would be. Since I was uncertain how they would take my offer, and how long they would take to decide yay or nay, I told her I did not know. Besides, I had to consider how to best protect Bek if the family was not there to do so.

My stepfather arrived then, a surprised look on his face. He complained about me showing up to eat him out of house and home again, but I could tell he was pleased to see me. He held up two fine looking birds and announced we would eat well that night, but first, he was to bathe. My mother suggested I do the same; after several weeks on the road, even with the inns I stopped at, I agreed I could definitely do with a good bath.

I considered the offer of using one of the guest rooms over my old room and decided to accept it. Why not indulge in something approaching luxury? So the maid prepared a bath in the largest of the rooms and I settled down to a good, long soak.

What would be the best way to secure the future of Bek, if the family were to leave it? That was my main line of thought as I lay in the bath. Could we, could I, trust anyone not of the family to do it? The bond with Bek is strong, almost a legend unto itself. Even I, with all my travelling before and Amber after, felt it. It would need someone who felt the same way. Perhaps... there was someone in Shadow I could find, or create, or whatever that would do the job. Yes... I could find just the right person, with a family of their own, with ease.

A few hours and a good doze later, I went down to the dining room for dinner. It was a grand affair, with a suckling pig as it's centrepiece. I distributed Benedict's gifts: cigars and brandy for my stepfather; a crystal sculpture of the fountain in the courtyard of Amber for my mother; and a fine rapier for Manfred, whenever he appeared.

My stepfather was full of questions about Amber; how things stood there, how the people he knew were faring, and so on. He wanted to know if his old squire was still around somewhere, and whether or not he could visit the castle sometime. Given that "in", I carefully broached the subject I had made the visit for.

I began by explaining that in all conscience I could not *not* make the offer I was proposing: that they move to Amber and take up residence there, taking advantage of whatever it was about the place that extended the lifespan of those that dwell there. Land and a house was ready for them, if they so desired to make the transition. The offer extended to Manfred and his family also, naturally, though they would of course make their own decisions.

The two of them considered the proposal for a time, sharing looks and the occasional quiet sentence or two, while I concentrated on eating. After a while my stepfather said that in principal it sounded a good idea, but he was not fully decided; he would leave it to my mother to decide, and that they would talk about it later that night. He then raised the same concern I had to myself: who would care for Bek if they were gone? He proposed that Schmidt, the

family solicitor in Magdeburg who was an old friend of my father, could deal with it, but that he would prefer if it remained in the family.

My mother then spoke for them both and thanked me; they understood that I had felt compelled to make the offer, that was the sort of boy I was. One of these says my mother will realise I've grown up.

Talk turned to Manfred again, and they told me they had heard tales, rumours and stories from his friends, about where he was and what he was doing. Some of them were inflated in the telling, no doubt, but we all agreed, with a smile, that trouble always seems to find him whether or not he is looking for it. His marriage and children are a brake on his, shall we say, enthusiasm, but it seemed he had not fully given up on his wild ways.

Dinner ended with cigars and brandy and talk of events at home and abroad. It was all a very pleasant change from the trials and special missions brought my way since my introduction to Amber.

The next morning I spoke with my stepfather after breakfast. We pondered over whether or not Manfred's wife, Agnetha, could manage Bek for a time. She had a good head on her shoulders; her father owned a bank and she had inherited his administrative skills. We agreed to compose a letter to her, asking her to make her way to Bek, and we would send it as soon as the weather improved. Perhaps she would have more recent news of her husband also.

I asked if Bek would be safe from the territorial interests of the "small dictator" that had been mentioned the day before, and my stepfather seemed to think his reach would not stretch so far as to threaten the sovereignty of Saxony and Bek in particular.

My stepfather's squire, or "batman" as he called him, came up again. I promised I would look him up; his name was Albert Linden.

With nothing special planned for the rest of the day, he and my mother were going to concentrate on accounting matters for the family holdings, as well as discuss the matter of possibly relocating to Amber. That left me with nothing to do but relax and make the most of having no demands placed on me, for as long as it lasted.