

Journal 5 - In Shadow

In the morning the two of us had breakfast, then she transported us and our purchases back to the hotel apartment, still surrounded by it's grassy plains. Not long after I had discovered there really was nothing to do, Guin again took the two of away again, this time to a large pier; not one where ships docked but one with various small concert halls and open and covered walkways.

After a small snack made from some form of seafood and some simple conversation, she led me to the largest hall, the one at the end of the pier. A long building, about twice as long than it was wide, the inside was open, with small booths at one end facing along the length of the room. Connecting the booths to the far end were small ceiling rails that held human silhouettes made from what looked like thick paper. The silhouettes moved along the rails, controlled by a switch.

This, Guin told me, was a firing range; here one could practice with firearms, shooting at the targets (the silhouettes) to get familiar with how they felt when used. She proceeded to demonstrate the use of a variety of personal weapons, and had me try them after she did.

I practised with several automatic and revolver pistols, a couple of rifles of differing calibre, and even an energy weapon. The rifle had no recoil and 'fired' a beam of light at the target, burning a hole straight through it and setting fire to it at the same time. Fortunately there was no else there to watch. Clearly this was what the books I had been reading called a laser rifle.

Once I had picked out a projectile weapon I was comfortable with (a '10 millimetre semi-automatic pistol' apparently), Guin furnished me with about two hundred rounds of standard ammunition and another hundred silver-tipped rounds; Eric was known to use were creatures, so Guin said, and they are supposed to be vulnerable to silver.

After buying some perfume from a shop on the pier, Guin returned us to the apartment to find it was early morning; evidently we had been somewhere where the speed of the flow of time was different to here. Naturally I went to bed.

Fortunately my sleep was disturbed before I remembered more horrors than I cared to recollect. Just lucky I suppose. Nightmare dreams of pain were replaced by the real howl of a dog; Bernard. Then the smash of a window breaking prompted my sudden leap out of bed into hurriedly pulled-on clothing.

Grabbing my new pistol (so soon do I rely on it) I dashed out the door to see Joe firing a rifle of some sort out a window, Bernard in some sort of catatonic state with several large, bloody wounds, and Intruder setting up another rifle, this one twice the size of the other and set upon some form of stand, connected to what appeared to be some electronic device. Once he was done the rifle began to move by itself, directing itself out of the window, most likely in search of targets.

Upon Intruder's direction I fetched a large, metal box from a large cupboard in the kitchen. I followed the instructions he gave and found myself constructing a miniature repeating mortar, attaching to it similar autonomous aiming and control devices Intruder had attached to his giant rifle. However, this one required a greater amount of human control and so Tristan was directed to manage it.

Then Victor came crashing in through the remains of the open window carrying a wounded Morianna. Clearly it had been him bursting through it that had got me out of bed in the first place, probably warned by Bernard arriving in his wounded condition.

His stretcher bearing done, Victor led Joe, Intruder and I towards the enemy, who looked as if they were suffering some bombardment from the mortar. Shots from firearms of some description came out of the darkness toward us. Most missed, but I saw one ricochet off of Intruder's leathery armour out of the corner of my eye just before another shot found it's mark: me.

It seemed to be coming from another direction to the way we were running towards. Wherever it came from it bore straight through my left buttock like a white-hot poker, and just scored a line over my right. I was about ready to fall over and yelp in pain but I continued on, not allowing myself to be stopped by such a stupid and rather embarrassing wound. It hurt like merry hell, but I soldiered on, falling to the back of the line.

I was content to see that if the shots had come from the left, from a clump of trees, whoever fired it was surely killed as several mortar rounds in succession tore the clump apart.

By this time we had arrived in the trees ahead of us where our intended quarry lay waiting. Bursting through the undergrowth into a clearing we were confronted by a group of what I can only call wolfmen; hairy, animal like bodies with clawed hands/forepaws and the snarling head of a wolf. While Intruder and I stood back taking opportunistic shots at them, Joe and Victor went in close.

I could barely stand, and the rounds I was using were not seemingly very effective, but eventually, between us, we killed them all. Victor took the last two and was almost killed as well when a mortar bomb landed just behind them; it would have killed had them had Victor not stepped forward. He was thrown around a bit and singed but not permanently hurt. Joe was not as lucky, having taken several slices from the claws of the wolfmen.

Intruder returned us to the apartment using one of his portals, and there we gathered together our belongings and took another portal to somewhere slightly reminiscent of a medieval castle, only slightly better constructed. The wounded (Joe, Victor, Morianna and myself) were put to bed to be cared for.

It was not long before a nurse of some type came in to see to my wound, but fortunately Guin came in before she applied the leeches and maggots she had just finished preparing. I don't think I could cope with maggots again, not since the royal physician used them on the musket ball wound I received in Russia while trying to escape my 'captors'.

It turned out that I was to be subjected to something worse, something Guin referred to as 'disinfectant'. It stung only slightly less than the wound did to begin with, but she assured me it would prevent any infections I might otherwise have got. Though I wish she had not said it with such a look of pure innocence on her face. At least she was better to look at than my previous nurse. I complemented her to that effect; outwardly she seemed uninterested, but afterwards she was not quite as vicious with the disinfectant. Success.

Once she had cleaned it Guin proceeded to sew it up and fix a wad of bandage over the area, held down with some sticky material she called 'sticky tape'.

The next day I came down to breakfast to find Intruder and Joe already there, with Victor down soon after me. When our simple talk became more involved and complicated, Intruder fetched Morianna and Tristan.

Much of the discussion went over my head; there was talk of 'the Black Rose', some individual or group known to be active before Eric took Amber. Apparently he/she/they had attacked people, left cryptic messages and the like. Was the Black Rose a group of Eric's agents? I, of course, had nothing to offer.

There was mention of some creatures they had encountered while visiting the Courts of Chaos some time ago, creatures they called 'Xithians'; their descriptions bore some resemblance to the hairy creatures that had attacked Andreas and myself in (presumably) Switzerland.

As a way of distracting Eric from any real threats it was suggested that we attempt to raise an army or two in Shadow. I have no idea if this would be of any use, but it was taken seriously enough to suggest it might work. Also suggested was hiring one or more of the mercenary houses from Chaos to aid us, but it seemed unlikely they would accept any offer we gave them or be in any way trustworthy.

During the conversation Andreas, who clearly had been given his anti-venom at some point when I was not there, staggered down the stairs to join us, despite the fact that he was clearly in great pain; the Logrus wound was barely discernible under his dressing gown. He added his comments to the proceedings before he had to return upstairs, aided by Morianna; evidently he was not as recovered as he seemed.

The meeting broke up; Victor went out hunting, Tristan rejoined his wife upstairs and Intruder joined Morianna in caring for Andreas.

Joe told me a little about Tristan, saying how he had tried some dangerous experiment with the Pattern, the one to be found in the actual palace of Amber. He did not say what he had attempted, only that it failed, with Dworkin having to rescue him. Quite why he told me I'm not sure.

The rest of the day was spent eating and drinking, as Intruder had called upon me and Joe to donate blood to help replace what Andreas had lost. Surprisingly draining and tiring, or perhaps not.

The next morning I was awoken as if someone had emptied a bottle of brandy on an open wound. The feeling rushed through me like a wave, and getting dressed I went to investigate.

Downstairs I (and everyone else, similarly awoken) found an obviously recovered Morianna talking to a short, old man I soon recognised from the hospital we had to flee from with Tim. This, I was told, was the Dworkin I had heard so much about.

Evidently a figure of great respect amongst our family, I was surprised to find he seemed a trifle witless. But then again, considering how old he is supposed to be (several thousand years? Hundreds of thousands? More than a million?), how could he not have become a little odd or eccentric? His power, if it is as immense as it is suggested to be by his words and those of my companions, is well hidden.

He refused to be drawn out on any conclusions or his position, citing the 'balance between Amber and Chaos' as his reason.

Before long Andreas appeared at the top of the stairs asking to talk to me alone. Intruder looked surprised to see him out of bed, but I went up anyway.

I followed him into his room, at which point he promptly collapsed onto the bed into a pain-induced stupor. As I considered what to do, someone behind me locked the door. Looking round I saw it was Benedict, who had come to our aid before. He leant against the wall and calmly asked after my mother. I stuttered that she was well when I last saw her, and he proceeded to tell me that he was my father.

An unexpected revelation by anyone's standards. One shock after another.

He went on to explain how he had come to know my mother over the course of a few years and the inevitable had occurred; he did not explain how this had come to pass in the presence, so to speak, of my father (or rather stepfather, now) and brother. Truth to tell, my wits were not in any shape to prompt me to ask such questions, as one would expect.

Neither did he explain how he came to leave Bek, leaving me to be raised as my stepfather's son. He had chosen not made himself known to me later as he had not wanted Eric to find out he had a son that could be used against him; so he sent Andreas instead to locate me and bring me to Amber.

At this point he told me some more direct truths. Firstly, he would not put my safety above that of Amber's; removing Eric from his stolen throne was his prime concern at the moment, especially since he (and presumably Eric) now considered the matter between them as personal.

This was mostly due to the attack on him that resulted in the loss of his hand, an apparently not as total a loss as one would expect, as he, and by extension I, was capable of regenerating from almost any non-fatal wound. All of our family, he said, shared that recuperative quality, though it was more potent in some than others.

Another thing he mentioned was that his attackers had seemed strangely incapable of killing him. He was, as I had been told, considered the finest warrior in a very capable family, so for the force sent against him to be unequal to their task suggested there was an alternative motive behind the attack.

Secondly, he had an army of *twenty five million troops* ready to aid any attack on Amber, and *another* twenty five million in reserve. What was more, they would come if I called them, using Trump to contact Benedict. Was I ready for that sort of responsibility? How would I know when to call him?

He then went on to tell me that Julian was recovering from whatever wounds he had received, and that others in the family were aware of us. He suggested our efforts should be concentrated on locating the other 'elders'.

Insisting that I keep his disposition and our relationship secret, he then departed, saying he would make himself known when needed.

Upon returning downstairs I found the others still deep in discussion. I deterred their questions about what Andreas had to say to me by asking how far they had got.

There was talk of others of the family, and it had been mentioned that Caine was missing, as was Benedict (less one hand, which I already knew but did not now reveal) and some others, and that attempts should be made to contact or locate them. Morianna said that

Julian had been wounded in some battle in Arden, the forest where I had first met her and Victor. Again, I did not reveal what I knew, however much I could see how distressed she was by this.

Gerard, who controlled the fleet of Amber, was also missing, apparently with some or all of his fleet. This came from Victor, who had seen him last.

It was decided that we should try to contact those who were in some unaccounted for; Corwin, being somewhat inaccessible, would be contacted by Dworkin.

Dworkin then proceeded to hand out Trump cards of me to everyone at the table, including myself (I do not know why he bothered). The image on the card appeared a trifle rough to me, as if the artist had had no time to be completely thorough. It depicted me wearing clothes similar to those I had purchased with Guin's help four days earlier; dark blue, trousers, short boots, shirt and jacket. My bearing came across as somewhat relaxed, with a glass in one hand and my head held high. Curiously appropriate, considering my now even nobler heritage (unfaithful mother, illegitimacy and fostering aside).

Asked again to intervene more directly Dworkin once more proclaimed he could not act outside of aiding the king, saying that any action on his part against Chaos would prompt his opposite in Chaos to act also. He could only stand behind the king. When asked who that was at the moment he said it was effectively whomever the family stood behind. Clearly not all (or apparently any) back Eric, but do they back the 'real' king, Random? We would have to find out before he could really help us.

Contacting Corwin, however, was a purely in-family affair, since obviously we were concerned about his welfare. Sophistry; my kind of double-talk.

As a response to this I suggested that we take a vote as to who backed whom. Joe claimed himself neutral; Morianna said she was neutral but would stand against whoever commanded those who shot her the other night; Tristan abstained, with no reason given; Victor, Intruder and Guin voted to back Random; and I effectively abstained, undecided as to my position, being the one with the least experience of Amber and its people.

Morianna went upstairs; Dworkin left by the intriguing manner of just walking through a wall; and I lost interest in the rest as Victor and I set to work emptying several bottles of very fine brandy and red wine. Fortunately I was too drunk to hear the complaints at our singing; but then, my mother always said I had a good singing voice.