

## Jurnal 56 - Niruth, in Shadow

Both Victor and I appeared to simultaneously decide that it would be a good idea to visit Oberon's mansion and see what was what. And so we paid a visit, after a long walk down one driveway and up the other. I nodded in greeting to the labourers we passed on they way in, but no one stopped us as we entered the main entrance hall.

It was a very grand affair, all high ceilings and pillars, with massively ornate fittings and chandeliers. It's appearance was only slightly marred by the lack of significant furnishings and the bustling renovators. I walked around a little, trailing Victor behind me and taking the opportunity to point out it's best architectural features to him.

Eventually my antics caught someone's attention; someone asked what we wanted. I replied that I was just looking around. He was of the opinion that we should not be there and so sent out a call for his superior, a certain Fred. The call went around and about the mansion for a good five minutes before the individual in question responded; the aforementioned Fred, a slightly heavysset man in his forties dressed in a slightly cleaner set of overalls that clearly told of his rank, arrived to see what all the fuss was about.

I told him that I just wanted to get a good look at the place; it was for sale, right? Fred looked perplexed; no, the mansion was not for sale, it was just undergoing renovation. How disappointing, I told him; I quite liked the look of the place. He said he could give us the name and address of the solicitors who dealt with looking after the place in the absence of the owner; he quickly wrote down the name (Barrister and Court) and the address of their main office.

I thanked him for his help and with one final overacted sigh of disappointment we took our leave.

By happy coincidence we met up with Morianna as we exited the iron-wrought gates of the estate. We greeted each other in a polite, reserved manner and she began to allude to "bad soil" and dangers in the cellar. It was soon decided that a stroll into town would do us good, as well as get us away from all the listening devices.

At a distance of perhaps a mile from Corwin's mansion we came to the conclusion that it was safe to talk. Morianna quickly revealed that there was a thermonuclear device in the cellar of Corwin's house, linked to sensors that kept track of the presence and location of the nurse and child. If they moved too far out from the mansion it would detonate. The house sensors could also detect the use of Trumps, apparently; attempting to Trump someone would also set off the bomb.

In another surprisingly show of quick thinking, Victor suggested we take a table in a bistro rather than standing around discussing things in the street. We retired to a suitable place and took a table, ordering some wine to be going on with. While Morianna set to contacting Corwin I examined the readings on Morianna's scanner. The sensor web covered the whole building and the gardens; doing anything in that area would trigger the bomb, which was, apparently, a barium device, whatever that was supposed to mean. According to the calculations of the onboard computer, it's yield was sufficient to destroy everything within two or three miles of the house; one had to be at least eight miles away to be even slightly safe from it's effects.

My musings were interrupted by Morianna acting rather out of character and reaching out to hold me hand. However, this had the effect of bringing me in on the conversation with Corwin. He asked what the builders were doing in Oberon's mansion. I told him they were renovating the place on the orders of a firm of solicitors, Barrister and Court. He did not seem surprised by this and so I took that to mean that this was normal behaviour, at least outwardly.

Morianna told us that Julie had said she always took a walk on Wednesdays with the child to the nearest park, accompanied by no more than two or three guards. Since Wednesday was the following day, this was quite an important piece of information. What we did not know, however, was how she did not set off the bomb when she left the grounds. Did the guards keep track of her, or were there sensors elsewhere?

Then Corwin filled us in on the latest developments elsewhere. Random had expressed a certain urgency regarding the retrieval of The Book; it was now more important than ever that we find it. We debated over exactly where a secret compartment could be hidden in the structure of the house as opposed to in the furniture. In all likelihood they would have discovered it already if it was hidden in a desk or whatever.

At this point or thereabouts Victor put his hand on my shoulder to put in his oar, asking about ways to block, fool or jam the sensors long enough to take some decisive action. Corwin said it would take him a few days to put something together to do that, whether it be to fool the sensors into thinking they were still on the grounds or just to block everything. He also asked if it was possible to alter his disguise belt to project the image of a nondescript local; Corwin said the manual explained how to adapt the projected image, but that it required a certain "artistic flair" to get it right.

Corwin signed off, saying he had some business to attend to.

On the way back to the house we decided that that night we would pay Oberon's mansion a surreptitious visit.

Early in the morning, around maybe two hours past midnight, we got dressed in our darkest clothing and crept across the garden and over the wall into the next door estate. Our way was partly blocked by the presence of motion sensors spotted around under the lawn. So Morianna promptly and quickly shifted into what I can only describe as a giant bat, not even apparently needing to change or undress or anything first, and flitted up onto the roof and in through an open skylight.

I felt quite exposed under the bright moon, and I felt much better when Morianna opened the one of the rear doors from the inside for us. A quick look around where we were revealed the presence of some form of advanced security lock on some of the doors. Victor went off to begin looking in the kitchens (he was of the opinion that big kitchen shelves would make good cover for hidden places) and Morianna started to prowl around the corridors near the back door, so I decided I might as well start upstairs.

I started in the main bedroom, a big room with a massive four poster bed at one end and a big bookcase at the other. The bookcase stood from floor to ceiling and must have held close to a thousand volumes. I was especially interested in the bookcase because my scanner told me there was a safe behind it. It also told me which book operated the mechanism that gave me access to it and what the combination was.

No sooner had I got the safe open and begun to reach inside when a strange tracery of red light appeared on my arm, a reddish grid that slowly moved upwards from my hand to my shoulder. I quickly snatched my hand back in an attempt to avoid whatever attack appeared to be incoming, but nothing happened.

Then a voice spoke behind me. "Son of Amber" it said.

I spun around and was confronted with a startling sight: Oberon himself stood before me!

He continued, saying that whichever one I was I was clearly in his chambers uninvited (a forbidding frown settled across his features); however, if I was an invited guest I should get myself back downstairs and announce my presence to him. With a final glower he announced that he had been made aware of my intrusion and promptly flickered and vanished.

While after the fact it was obvious that it had been a projection all along, the sight of Amber's legendary king had stunned me into a kind of paralysis. Released, I quickly pushed the door of the safe shut, quickly taking a glance inside as I did so. I saw no sign of any kind of loose leaf book.

The cool sensation that heralded the onset of a Trump contact came upon me then; with no small amount of trepidation I accepted it. For all I knew it was Oberon himself seeking to take me to task for invading his sanctum. Instead it was Dworkin, which might have been only slightly better. He was holding up a ring and had a rather irritated expression on his wizened face. He asked me if I was in Oberon's mansion and I decided it was prudent to tell the truth, especially since he then enquired whether I was searching for The Book. He nodded and asked if I had been warned about all the booby traps. I said that we had guessed such things might be present.

He started to say that we should be alright but then stopped and asked if Morianna was with me. When I said that she was he said she could be in some danger as many of the security measures in the house were geared towards stopping overly curious denizens of Chaos. He nodded to himself again and said he would call again soon. The contact was then closed.

Now that my attention was turned more to the world around me I heard the sound of fast movement, maybe even running, downstairs in the vicinity of the kitchen. I quickly headed in that direction and was greeted by the sight of Victor watching Morianna immerse

her arms in an overflowing sink. Her arms seemed quite red, as if burned in a fire or against a hot pan. Large patches of her cheeks were similarly injured.

Another Trump contact came over me as I opened my mouth to ask what had happened; almost without thought I accepted it and Dworkin stepped through into the room before the link had barely even formed. He handed a small pot of something to Victor and instructed him to rub the salve within onto Morianna's arms and face. He explained briefly that she had been attacked by a virus engineered to attack those possessing the blood of Chaos, before gesturing to me to follow him.

He led the way upstairs back to the main bedroom. After looking quickly but carefully around the room to make sure nothing had been especially disturbed (more by the interlopers than by me) he asked where had we been looking. I said we had only just started when he had arrived. He said he would check with the house computer; it was in charge of security in the mansion and would know which rooms were out of bounds to the renovators and thus probably had yet to be checked by the suit-wearing intruders. He said he would go and interrogate it and try to get a map of the rooms from it.

He went off into the bowels of the house so I returned to my compatriots in the kitchen. We rested for a moment while Morianna rubbed her arms, massaging in the last of the salve. Already her arms looked much better. She had caught the from a door, apparently; mere contact with said door had been enough. Victor had had no success with the kitchen shelving, and I told them I had found nothing of consequence in the main bedroom beyond the security system.

Dworkin returned, saying he had deactivated the security system until six in the morning. Since this was only about four hours away this gave us little time to perform a full search of the building. Dworkin held up the map of the house he had acquired, though, which allowed us to narrow down our search significantly.

Morianna appeared to be concentrating on her arms in a way I had seen before on a number of occasions; I guessed she was trying to shift away her injuries. Dworkin shook his head and told her she would be unable to shift away the damage for quite a while; he then offered to do it for her. He looked Victor up and down, measuring him in some way, before announcing that he "would do". Presumably he meant that he had enough body mass spare to donate some to Morianna.

He took Morianna's and Victor's hands and set about putting her to rights. Morianna looked relaxed (naturally) while Victor seemed slightly agitated, as if he had an itch he could not scratch. Oh, Dworkin then exclaimed to Victor, you are *HIS* son. This clearly mean more to Victor than it did to Morianna and myself, since as far as I was aware Victor's parentage had not been determined (or at least not publicly declaimed).

A short while later he was done, and while Victor looked no different Morianna appeared to have completely recovered from the virus that had attacked her. We discussed where to start looking now that the field of the search had been narrowed; Morianna asked where the original pages had been found; Dworkin told us they had been discovered behind a brick in the fireplace of the royal apartments in Amber, but warned us not to rely on the same trick being used twice.

Armed with better information we set to investigating the mansion once more. Again I found little of any great significance; Victor located some old scraps of paper and leather binding inside a secret panel in one of the upstairs rooms; and Morianna found a small, folded piece of paper hidden (of course) behind a brick in a fireplace. By the look of it the paper bore the key to some kind of esoteric cipher. Dworkin said it was something called a rolling cipher; it changed as each letter was coded according to an equation.

In the hope that Victor's paper scraps were once part of The Book we used the scanners to search for other pieces of similarly old paper from the same batch, in the even slighter hope of locating The Book that way. All we found was another fifty or more books that contained paper from the same source and of the same age, none of which was the one we sought.

While we looked we did discover two interesting things, however. The first was a collection of painted miniatures in the attic, depicting those of my father's generation in very young childhood. As with most such pictures they were sources of no small amusement. The second we learned from Dworkin; it was highly likely that The Book had not yet left the mansion, as the security computer was empowered to explode the Sun if such a thing occurred.

Needless to say, the second revelation preyed on my mind more than the first.

When it finally became clear we would not find The Book the way we were going, Dworkin convinced the house computer to talk to us using a combination of persuasion and threat. It revealed that it had perceived some “strangely dressed intruders” messing around with the book but that it had lost track of it somewhere; it was not really sure at what point it had lost it. However, several of them had been quite busy in one of the rooms nearby....

When we went to have a look we were able to locate an anomaly under the carpet in one corner of the room. Pulling up said carpet and the floorboards beneath we found a very solid metal box, about the size of a large book. When we got it open we discovered it contained (surprise surprise) a book. What was more, our scanners bleeped as we opened it, revealing it consisted at least partly of the sort of paper we were looking for.

We had found The Book at last.

Morianna handed it to Dworkin to verify its identity and was quite disturbed to discover that by the time she had begun to pull her hand back it was already turning painfully red. Victor handed her the pot of salve again and she all but buried her hand in it.

Dworkin, meanwhile, had begun to examine the book, holding it in such a way as to prevent us from getting a look at it. But while I thought the fact that it was supposed to be encoded would mean we would be unable to read it without decoding it first, this did not seem to stop Dworkin, as he quickly inspected every page.

As he read Dworkin muttered to himself, stopping after a time to ask the house computer if it knew how many pages had been taken from the book. It replied (rather petulantly, I thought) that it was not told to watch the pages, just the book. Dworkin sighed and returned to reading.

After a longer pause than before (with us all watching with bated breath) he slightly lowered the volume and announced that they knew how to destroy the Pattern, and how to create one. He flicked back and forth through the pages apparently at random for a moment before commenting that they also knew something of the fundamental laws underlying Amber; he the sniggered a little coarsely and said that such knowledge was not all that useful as things had changed a little in recent times.

I frowned in confusion at this comment (and probably the other two did too) so Dworkin briefly explained that the rules had changed a little when Oberon had redrawn the Pattern; it was not a perfect recreation. As usual, this explanation did not help matters very much. Why had it needed to be redrawn? How could it be redrawn differently? So many questions, not enough time. As ever.

Then Dworkin actually looked surprised! One of the pages looked as if it had been rewritten! But who by? Dworkin gave no clues, saying he was not sure who might have done it or even why. What information had been concealed? And who by?

We finally came back to the subject of how to rescue Corwin's daughter. The first step was to set the house computer to scan the house and grounds to get an accurate picture of the nature and disposition of the sensor network.

While we waited for it to deliver its report the three of us found ourselves being questioned by Dworkin regarding our various partners, for lack of a better term. He seemed to constantly forget that Victor was not actually married yet; he commented that Julian had softened in 'recent years'; then he enquired how 'the mechanoid' was. Clearly he meant Guinevere.

He went on to say that he was surprised when he saw that she had survived the destruction of her 'original form'; when he had seen the construct was attempting to 'download' itself into the body he had let it continue the attempt mostly out of curiosity, though he had intervened slightly to reduce its powers. Another comment regarding how she was always nervous around him (especially when he was in possession of explosives) was said with a wide devilish grin on his face.

I had never known that Dworkin was responsible (to blame?) for Guinevere's fall from grace, as it were. How did I feel about it? I was not sure. What was the point of being angry with him when it had probably all happened centuries ago? Even if it had been only a few years ago there still would not have been any real point.

I imagine Intruder was not pleased though.

The computer reported back. The biosensors were all over the mansion and also stretched out along a route that took it to the nearest large park and around it a little. The various forms of surveillance equipment really were all over the house and grounds; it was

quite hard to find anywhere that was not in the scope of numerous listening devices. With regards to the biosensors, the computer was not equipped to safely fool or jam them in any way; however, it could generate a disruptive electromagnetic pulse (it called it an EMP field, but I looked up the meaning later) that would slow the response time of the atomic bomb long enough for us to snatch the girl (and nurse) and Trump away before it could catch us in the blast.

I then pointed out a small problem with this plan: since it meant that the bomb would go off, did we really want to annihilate the city at the same time?

Dworkin shrugged and asked the computer if it had any shielding at it's disposal. It had a number of satellites configured for shielding, it replied. Could it direct this shielding, Dworkin asked it, to contain the thermonuclear explosion from next door? It quickly answered that it could, given a short time to prepare; not more than a few minutes. However, use of the shields in that way would produce a sizeable crater; at least two miles deep! It would also be lethally radioactive for a very long time (millions of years), something which I presumed was not good.

Trying to get mind away from the idea of a two mile deep hole I asked if it was possible to simply direct the blast upwards instead. Dworkin and the computer mused over the idea for a time, talking about 'damage to the ionosphere' and 'great big fireworks' and 'auroras on steroids' before concluding that not only was it possible it was actually a good idea! I was commended by Dworkin in the way an adult congratulates a child for managing some minor deed for the first time.

The computer was instructed to begin charging up for it's EMP burst; it would take just over twenty four hours to be ready.

Dworkin reached into a pocket in his coat and drew forth a small metal bracelet. It was, he said, a link to the computer. With it we could be warned when the time was right. Morianna took it and clipped it around her left wrist. He bid us farewell till later and vanished two-dimensionally, patting The Book like it was an old pet. For a moment I had a sudden flash of abject terror when I thought that perhaps the computer might now detonate the Sun as The Book had been removed from it's home, but obviously the computer thought it was alright that Dworkin had taken it as we were not consumed in a massive fireball anytime that night.

After breakfast the next day the morning slowly and sluggishly progressed on through the hours. We would have to wait until after six the following morning before we could safely act; by then the EMP burst would have reached full readiness. Perhaps it was fortunate then that not long after eleven I spotted a familiar looking figure walking up the driveway of Oberon's mansion. It was not that I had seen the fellow in question before, but that his choice of wardrobe was well-known to me.

It was a narrow-striped suit. Our interlopers had finally put in an appearance.

I quickly located first Victor and then Morianna and appraised them of the potential sabot in the loom. Victor was (as to be expected) ready for a fight; Morianna, who was walking in the garden with Julie and the child, was, as ever, unruffled. Julie seemed a little confused.

Her confusion was increased when the bracelet flashed in a rather unsubtle way. Morianna touched the flashing section and asked what the problem was. The computer (through the bracelet) asked if it was safe to talk. Morianna said it was and the computer informed us that a strange man had arrived in the house. He had entered the house a short time ago and quickly headed upstairs with four labourers following him. He was almost certainly headed in the direction of the room where we had found The Book in the metal box.

By this time Julie was looking a little wild about the eyes, and Victor joined us following his brief circuit of the grounds.

The computer reported that it was scanning the interloper very closely. It was very strange physiologically and also seemed to contain no trace of the energies associated with Pattern or Chaos. I told it the entity was without doubt a Zero Reality creature; it responded with a sound that I can only describe as an vocal shrug. Then it announced that the creature had somehow seen or otherwise perceived that it was being scanned. Then it went quiet for a bit, probably watching the interloper at work, before reporting that it appeared to be quite upset. The computer sounded somehow smug about it.

The computer then told us how it could call on a higher authority in situations like this, if it were told to do so; we quickly told it to summon Dworkin. It took several tries before

Dworkin answered, the last two calls being very 'loud'. Then with a slightly irritated sounding "pop" Dworkin appeared, looking quite annoyed in slippers and wrapped up in a big dressing gown. We quickly filled him in on the situation; he nodded slightly impatiently as we explained about the arrival of the Zero Reality entity and only really calmed down when we said where he was and what he was doing.

Then he told the computer to give then a "level one warning". It refused, asking for a security code. Dworkin promptly replied with a short sentence of letters and numbers. After a brief pause the computer reported that it had had no effect beyond scaring the labourers. Dworkin told it to give the "level two warning" which was apparently a holographic gargoyle-like beast combined with a louder warning. This time the labourers ran, but the interloper remained.

Apparently with no other options left Dworkin authorised the final warning. This was clearly some sort of attack, as we clearly saw a bright of light flash from the windows in the vicinity of the room. Those labourers that had remained when their compatriots had fled now followed them as fast as their legs would carry them; some ran right down the driveway and out into the city, while other made for the nearest wall of fence and tried to climb out. Those that came our way were kept back by the guards.

Dworkin decided that it was time for him to leave, so, once told how far away he would have to be to avoid setting off the bomb, he walked off down the drive. He ended up at the gates, presumably being questioned by the guards as to who he was as they had not seen him enter. Victor went to talk with them, and after a brief discussion Dworkin gestured at them and Victor promptly laid into them. They were quickly dispatched (I could not tell if he killed them or just incapacitated them) and Dworkin continued on his way.

The house computer next door then communicated to us through the bracelet that it had detected a build-up of energy from an advanced power source close by, possibly from a "phaser" (a form of directed energy weapon). The time was clearly past for subtlety: action, direct and no doubt quick and violent was required.

With this in mind the three of us activated our shields; we were suddenly surrounded by boxy, light-distorting protective fields that would protect us from most attacks. Victor, somehow warned of the presence of the phaser (possibly by his scanner), set off after it's wielder; Morianna headed that way also, though from a different angle. I meanwhile elected to defend Julie and the child on our retreat back to the mansion. Since we were about halfway down the side of the house at the time, and most of the activity at the house and next door was concentrated around the front, I decided to go in through one of the rear entrances, possibly the double doors in the dining room.

As we crept around the side of the house I looked around as much as I could safely do so and thus was afforded the view on several occasions the sight of Victor descending on what I can only describe as his victims, quickly slaying them before moving on to another group. I saw no sign, however, of Morianna; no change there.

I neared the rear of the house. As the three of us came close to the rear corner of the mansion I caught sight of a flash of light in the corner of my eye. This flash quickly proven to be a bolt of energy of some sort. It hit the wall near to me, just above my head, and 'splashed' against the brickwork. It had no effect on the masonry but had a most grievous effect on me.

I can only describe the sensation as much what I would expect having one's soul wrenched out of one's body by large rusty hooks. And having one's innards and perhaps brains removed at the same time. While being boiled. I collapsed, screaming in pain, and writhed on the floor for a time, until I recovered. This took a few minutes, during which time Julie must have been about ready to go completely out of her mind in terror. Fortunately she held herself together despite all the madness around her with commendable courage.

We finally got into the house without further incident; my steps were somewhat unsteady but I did not require assistance. I got Julie to hide with the girl in a cupboard under the main staircase while I stood outside ready to protect them against attack or kidnapping.

After several minutes of guarding without incident I saw Morianna passing by a window in a nearby room, apparently dragging something large and heavy behind her. This turned out to be Victor, who was looking extremely unwell; his skin had turned greyish in colour and he barely seemed to be breathing. A number of his hawks were sitting on his chest, somehow looking concerned at the state of their master (how I could tell they actually looked concerned I have no idea), while the others walked or flew in behind Morianna. The

ones on his chest were pecking at his breastplate; since that piece of armour was one of the hawks, transformed, it was clear that it had shared whatever fate Victor had suffered.

It was highly likely that he had in fact been hit by whatever it was that had just missed me. If that was so, then I could not imagine what he had gone through.

Morianna unbuckled the breastplate and put it to one side. Underneath a discoloured if not actually green patch of flesh was revealed in the region of his left shoulder. This was almost certainly where he had been hit by whatever had hit him.

Dworkin then appeared in the doorway. I do not know how he arrived or if he was called, but there he was. He set to examining Victor; he passed me the ring that was a link to the computer in Oberon's mansion and told me to use it to scan Victor. I put it on and waved it over him but was soon told by the computer to take the ring off and do it again; the fact that I was wearing it was confusing the sensors in the ring. This I did, and it soon reported back; Victor was in an extremely bad way and would almost certainly die if he did not get prompt medical attention.

Dworkin finished his analysis of Victor's condition and said he would take him to somewhere he could look after him and give him the sort of attention he needed. However, he would need help moving him as our Victor is a very large lad. After a brief moment of indecision by Morianna I told her to take him while I remained at the house. She nodded and hefted Victor halfway into her arms; she would probably not have been able to actually lift him. It was not a matter of mass but bulk. Dworkin left me the ring after telling the computer that I had 'full clearance' for 'everything', before suggesting that they get a horse to transport him on and so the two of them made their way as quickly as they could to the stables.

As they made their exit the computer took the opportunity to warn me of the arrival of a number of the suit-wearing interlopers on the grounds of the mansion next door. I suggested that it take steps to deal with them; it suggested a number of ways it could strike at them but I suggested it attempt to either use or emulate firearms in an attempt to conceal the nature of what was attacking them. It did so, although I did not know exactly what means it was employing to do so.

After a few minutes interspersed with the sounds of the mansion next door taking pot-shots at intruders it spoke to me again, warning me that it had detected two intruders entering the grounds of Corwin's mansion, at opposite ends of the gardens. One was apparently bearing another of the weapons that had been fired at me and had hit Victor. It was unable to hit that one with its real or fake firearms and thus I was forced to allow the computer to use its 'particle beam', a very large kind of energy weapon. I was given only a short warning to don my protective goggles before it fired; I had only just enough time to clamp my hands over my eyes before there was a bright flash (seen even through my hands!) and a loud clap of thunder.

Once it was all over I glanced out the window to try and see where the beam had hit and saw that one corner of the garden was smoking; I could just make out that there was a burnt ring of grass and trees around what looked like a small crater. Impressive, if a little worrying.

No sooner had this threat been dealt with than another appeared. A number of bolts from those mysterious guns began to splash against the walls and windows of the house where I was. I asked the computer to track the origin of the bolts and was told that one was just over a mile away, sitting in the steeple of a church, while the other was over two miles away lying in the crow's nest of a ship in the harbour. I asked for options regarding taking them out and it said that they were out of the range of its conventional weapons; the particle beam would cause too much collateral damage, as would the naval gun(!).

I debated what to do for a moment before telling the computer to target the one on the ship; it would (hopefully) do the least damage to the surroundings. One strike eliminated him but caused the ship to sink. It was only then that I realised the particle beam was not sited in Oberon's mansion somewhere but based in one of the satellites in orbit over the house! A phenomenally dangerous weapon indeed.

The other sniper vanished through one of their special 'Trumps'.

Some time passed in silence. I took the opportunity to check out the drinks cabinet in the dining room nearby, keeping one eye on my scanner for trouble while I did so. My all too brief rest was eventually disturbed by a warning from the house computer that the house was being bombarded by powerful tachyon pulses. These pulses of 'faster than light particles' were intended to cause the bomb in the basement to go off. Needless to say this caused me

some small concern. I instructed the computer to destroy the operators immediately with the particle beam and to Hell with concerns for collateral damage; if the bomb was set off there would be far more damage inflicted on the city.

The computer's reply was slightly slurred and erratic; I could just make out that much of its processing power was being dedicated to blocking the tachyon pulses and its conversational ability was suffering as a result. I told it again to target the operators with the orbital beam; it set about doing that, though it reported that its strikes were somewhat inaccurate due to the pressures on its resources while it blocked the pulses.

Fortunately, the more attackers it removed the easier and quicker it took out those of the others that did not flee.

It got nice and quiet again for a few minutes, but, of course, it did not last. It was suggested that perhaps I should consider taking a look in the basement of the house; there were several locations that had 'zero energy signatures' like the suited invader that the computer had scanned in the house. I did as the computer suggested and promptly discovered a small and growing nest of invading suit-wearing gentlemen. Exactly where they were coming from I did not get the opportunity to investigate; instead I had to leap into the fray a fight them off.

They were employing personal shields as I was, and so the combat came down to sword versus sword. I did not have one on me so it was fortunate that I had decided to take one down off the wall in the dining room earlier. It was not in perfect condition but it was better than nothing, which would certainly have meant the end for me.

An indeterminate time of furious melee later I found myself fighting alongside Morianna, who had obviously returned while I was busy. The two of us together easily kept the invaders at bay, but were unable to truly block their point of entry as it was probably in one of the Zero Reality zones.

During a lull in which no fresh foes appeared Morianna announced that it was time to depart, so we turned and dashed to the stairs. Or at least Morianna did; I was halted by the sight of something that I knew was going to be very important: a small stack of the oval cards that I knew the invaders employed like we used Trumps. I quickly pocketed them and followed Morianna upstairs.

Back in the hallway I asked Dworkin if we were leaving; he said we were, so I set my pistol to overload and threw it back down the stairs. The explosion would hopefully slow them down, even take a few of them out. Dworkin pointed out that there really was not much point doing it, since the whole mansion would be turned into vapour quite soon. I just shrugged and said that it made me feel better.

Moving to stand in the centre of the group (including Julie and the girl, who had been fetched from under the stairs) Dworkin told us all to close our eyes and 'ready ourselves', whatever that meant. I did so and waited. Nothing happened.

After a few long moments Dworkin told us we could open our eyes. I found myself confronted with the surprising sight of rolling hills covered in green grass, with occasional small patches of woodland. Dworkin warned us not to attempt to use any of our powers; they would be 'unpredictable' wherever it was that we were. He closed his eyes in some sort of meditative trance for a minute or so; the rest of us just milled around a bit, taking in the view. Julie looked particularly numb just at that moment; she was no doubt leaving until later to try to understand what was going on.

Dworkin asked us to close our eyes again and after a short moment we could open them again. We were in Dworkin's apartments this time.

He asked for the bracelet back from Morianna and she returned it to him. He called up the house computer back in Oberon's house and asked it for a 'printout' report of all of its scanner data we had asked for over the last few days. He held up the bracelet horizontally and a large number of pages of paper fell through and, amazingly, landed in a pile beneath it. When it was done (which took almost half a minute) Dworkin put the bracelet in his pocket and shuffled the report into some semblance of order before handing it to me. He told me to take the report to Random and say that I had got it for him.

I made ready to leave (which amounted to getting a good hold on the report and my swordstick) and then said, as if I had almost forgotten, that I had a present for him. I took all but one of the oval Trumps out of my pocket and handed them to him; I had decided to retain one for myself for my personal entertainment and so my own Trump experts could have a look at it (namely Intruder and Guin). Dworkin looked very pleased and congratulated me,

again in the manner one flatters a young child. However, he did hold out a box of cigars towards me as a reward. I took three.

I nodded my farewell to Morianna, Julie and Dworkin before taking my leave. I walked out the door and up the passageway to the open area where the strangely intense Pattern burned under the unnaturally blue sky. Victor was curled up beside it, deeply asleep. A strange sort of medical care, but no doubt Dworkin knew what he was doing. Hopefully.

I dug out my Trump of Random and concentrated on his image; I soon achieved a solid contact with him and he suggested I come through to him where he was (the royal chambers in Amber). I bowed slightly and handed him the report. He began to glance through it, skipping by pages and sections, stopping occasionally to read a bit of it. He looked at me over the top and asked if I understood it all; I replied that I did not. He nodded and said he would ask Dworkin what I all meant later. He then told me that I had gone up in his estimation, whatever that meant.

Then he frowned as he read the last page before handing it to me; it was addressed to me, apparently. When I read through it I was astonished to discover it was the deeds to Oberon's mansion; I was the new owner! Well, if I signed and accepted the document I would be. Random said I might as well have it as he would just have to decide who to give it to otherwise. I said that I would consider it; I would probably take it just to annoy everyone else. He smiled and said that I was learning; I had gone up in his estimation again.

He gave me leave to go so I headed back to my rooms for a good, long sleep.