

Journal 57 - in Amber

Eventually I surfaced from sleep. By the look of the day outside, glimpsed through squinting eyes, it was midmorning. I set some water boiling for coffee while I showered and dressed; as I pulled my boots on I spotted a small, white envelope on the floor by my door. It looked as if it had been pushed under it while I slept.

The brief letter, written by a careful, solid hand, was from Victor. Apparently he wanted me to contact him as soon as possible. Since I did not know when the letter had been "delivered" I got myself seated and Trumped him. He was somewhere in Shadow by the look of him, dressed in some sort of brightly coloured jumpsuit with a woollen hat on. I asked what it was that he wanted but he told me the matter had been attended to, which made my morning easier. I asked if he was feeling better, despite the fact that he obviously was if he was out in Shadow. He said he was still recovering slowly, and I expressed my relief at this. He then informed me that he had some things to do, and thus the contact was broken.

By this time I definitely had something to attend to: breakfast! I made my way to the breakfast room nearby and found that Benedict and Gerard were already there, being served by a handful of attractive serving maids whose primary purpose seemed to be working on keeping Gerard's plate constantly filled. Gerard was talking about a desert campaign he had just returned from, up against the "wogs"; the attitude of the officers serving under him had left a little to be desired. They were more than slightly racist and not very good either.

Benedict looked a little sick, so Gerard went on to say that he had heard similar tales about some people Benedict had served with once and he had been telling jokes at Benedict's expense for a while since he had returned. For his part, Benedict looked glad that I had rescued him, if only temporarily.

Benedict took the opportunity afforded by the respite to ask me about the Niruth mission. He asked about the strange rifle they had used, comparing it to a Logrus Gun; I said it was almost certainly related to all this Zero Reality business. He would, I said, almost certainly be receiving a report on the subject at some point. The next question was about the suit-wearing individuals; how many had been present? I guessed there had been about half a dozen of them, either using the rifles or firing the 'tachyon' things at the bomb to try and set it off.

Seeing I was confused by these tachyons, Benedict attempted to explain that they were incredibly small bits of matter that moved faster than light and possessed a great deal of energy, yet could pass through matter like it was not there. Gerard began to grin as Benedict tried to lower his explanation to a level I could follow, so he soon gave up.

I detailed what I knew about the final actions of the encounter, and Benedict nodded, saying partly to himself that would have to speak to Victor about his treatment of the guards.

When I was done, Gerard asked if I was busy in two days time. I admitted that I would be, since I would be attending to a "personal matter", nodding to Benedict as I said it. When Gerard wanted to know what I meant Benedict just looked at him without expression and said it was personal; Gerard gently dropped the subject. When my father inquired as to my plans involving that matter, I said I would be leaving soon, once I had reclaimed my horse from Victor's stables. He suggested I could get a page to fetch it for me, unless I really wanted to walk down there. I shrugged in reply, as I had not really decided yet.

There was a short pause before Benedict told me that he had spoken with Random on "the matter" and they had arranged things should such arrangements be required. Gerard looked a little interested but remained quiet, at least on that topic. "I don't know", he said, "not wanting to defend Amber's honour...." "Does it need defending?" I asked him, and he took it rather the wrong way, thinking I meant that it did not warrant such defence, whereas I meant the comment as a question. He was not entirely convinced, I think.

Benedict took it upon himself to enlighten me. He explained that Gerard had stolen ("bought!" Gerard insisted) some ships from some port or other again and that the authorities in that place had disagreed with the usual payment plan for such situations. Apparently the plan in such circumstances was for both sides to engage in a massive brawl; winning sides pays. Gerard added at this point that it was always helpful to have Family members handy to provide assistance.

I explained that such brawling was not really my thing; besides, I was busy as I had already told him. He looked a little glum, but no doubt he would have enough willing participants eager to help that he would not miss me.

Benedict stood and suggested that we go for a walk in the gardens. I accepted the invitation; clearly he wanted to speak with me privately. Gerard asked him to check on his orchids while we were there. Benedict said that we would look in on them and led the way out towards the gardens.

We passed through the tree-lined avenues and past the shimmering pond to the greenhouses. Perhaps twenty minutes of orchid inspecting later, my father revealed that he had acquired some gifts for "them". Did Ulrich (senior) still like the same cigars? I was sure that he did, I informed him. He nodded, saying he had some brandy for him too. He then asked if Manfred would prefer a foil, or rather a rapier, to a broadsword; I said that Manfred's preferences with swords tended towards the lighter end of the scale.

As we moved about of the colder sections (relatively anyway) of the massive greenhouse Benedict began to tell me how he had little in the way of real horticultural skill. Or, as he said it, he definitely did not have "green fingers". Gerard was the superior grower, he said, while he tended to simply kill things. Once, he continued, when he had been visiting Oberon's mansion, the same one I had been to only yesterday in fact, he had accidentally killed an entire flower bed. He had mistaken weed killer for some sort of plant supplement!

He would have to pay the place a visit soon, he mused, now that I was in charge of it....

Now things became clear. He had obviously raised the subject of the mansion in order to ask me questions about it.

He told me that there had been something of a local uprising in the vicinity of Corwin's exploded mansion, due to the strange black monolith that had consumed the grounds of the mansion up to a height of two hundred feet. I looked confused, so Benedict explained that it was the shields set in place to confine the effects of the atomic explosion. I said that I would have to see if it was possible to disguise the shield in some way, perhaps by projecting a more suitable image on it.

Benedict then asked if the miniatures of those of his generation were still there. I was a little evasive on the subject; I wanted to get a good look at them before someone else got to them. I went on to say that I had not really taken a good look at them.

We looked around the greenhouses some more, looking through a variety of vegetables and delicate looking flowers for perhaps another hour or so. We talked a little about the Niruth mission as well, but not exclusively. The tour was cut short when he announced that in all probability the page would have returned from Victor's estate with my horse by now. I wondered exactly when it was that he had made orders for that errand to be performed, but I did not ask. He had a meeting with Random to go to, Benedict told me; I was to pay a visit to my father's apartments when I was to leave so I could collect the gifts.

We quickly passed through the hottest area of the greenhouses quickly and went our separate ways afterwards. I went to the stables and, lo and behold, Charlemagne was there. He was looking well, groomed and well fed. I fed him an apple I got from a stable hand before returning to the castle proper.