

## Journal 52 - in Amber

A few hours later I rode the final stretch of road towards the Knight estate. I had picked out some of the finer clothing I had purchased in Magdeburg, with the dark green topcoat, but I decided to forgo the stick on this particular occasion. The house looked much as I remembered from the glimpses I had seen of it in the dark night so long ago, except that it was perhaps in better condition. The huge crowd in the garden behind, the raging fires and the pillars of black smoke also significantly altered its appearance.

The majority of the partygoers appeared to be Rangers and a number of labourers, for lack of any other description. No doubt the ones who had been working on Victor's "dojo". There were also what appeared to be a number of the local nobility from their higher quality outfits, the noble houses of Amber like the Knight family and those of Joe's wife, Florence. Amongst them, of course, were members of The Family; I could see Gerard standing close to one of the barbecues, Random and Vialle were there somewhere surrounded by the nobility. Julian arrived accompanied by Morianna; she, perhaps surprisingly, wore a fine gown that looked good on her, naturally. She really should wear them more often.

Hidden amongst the crowds I also picked out Intruder and Guinevere; Florimel was accompanied by a young officer in the dress uniform of the Amber royal guard; Bleys, whose left arm was encased in some form of white sleeve intended to keep his arm still while it healed, sat close, as always to Fiona. Victor and Julie were acting the good host and hostess; Victor seemed content to help with the cooking while his fiancée entertained. It was Victor I sought out first, as it was really his party.

He looked well, as usual. But then, those who are actually unwell tend to be very unwell, so anyone who was present was not likely to be anything but healthy. Except for Bleys, perhaps.

I asked exactly what this "dojo" was, and was told it was a training hall. When I enquired as to whether it was for self-training or for training others he said it was for both; the kinds of training on offer were, apparently, for the strengthening of body and mind, involving a lot of hard work and dedication. It did not sound like my sort of thing, and I said so; he did not disagree with me.

The sound of laughter behind us caused us to turn, and we saw Fiona almost falling from her seat as she convulsed in mirth at the sight before her. One of Victor's hawks was doing something that can only just be described as dancing on the table she was sat at. It was holding its wings up in the manner of arms and moving in a way that suggested it was attempting to gyrate its hips. It did not quite work. It was also, amazingly, singing, in an accent that I could not quite penetrate over the sound of Fiona's laughter. By comparison, Bleys did not seem very impressed, and Victor just winced and shook his head in resignation.

When I asked him what exactly it was trying to do he explained that the hawks had been listening to "elvis records" in the castle. As to what who or what "elvis" was all he could say was that he was some kind of "rock musician"; presumably "rock" was some kind of style of music, as opposed to relating to stones.

Just then Julie came by trailing some of the dignitaries and introduced both Victor and myself to them; they were roughly evenly split between rich merchants, guild leaders and the nobility, the usual royal sycophants.

When I managed to break free of them I located Random and his wife in the crowds and made my way over to them. We exchanged pleasantries and, when told I looked well, commented that a sojourn into Shadow had done wonders. He looked quite glum and said that he had been unable to make such a trip for some time himself. He went on to say that perhaps he should "do an Oberon" for a few weeks; he had been known to take sudden surprise trips into Shadow, apparently, though he was typically gone for months at a time.

I asked if anything interesting had happened recently in Amber, and he just remarked that things had been fairly quiet with only a few events to spoil the past few months. When I asked him to elaborate, he said that such things were not for discussion in public, and pointedly looked around at the assembled gathering.

Apparently right on cue, another crowd of important people made an appearance. Another round of introductions and conversations intended to deduce the nature of one's opinions in (to them) important matters ensued. Meanwhile, other people were having fun.

Making contacts is all well and good, but sometimes you have to put up with very dull people to do it.

I was eventually saved by my father calling out to me. I looked around for him and spotted him in a little group a short distance away. Politely taking my leave of the nobles I went over to join him. He looked well, but, if the truth be told, I was more interested in the young woman who stood close by him. She was very attractive, with long black hair, clear eyes of green and wore a simple gown that matched those bright eyes. I smiled just at the sight of her.

Pulling my gaze from her I asked Benedict how he was, the usual small talk. He was, as anyone could guess, as hale and fighting fit as always; I commented that it had been a while since we last spoke (not really very long at all, actually) and he said that he had been in Shadow “strengthening” some of Amber’s trade routes for Random. He had heard that I had been out into Shadow as well, and asked if anything interesting had occurred on my travels. “Not beyond what you already know” I said, cagey in company. Tell me later, he told me.

To break the line of conversation I turned my attention to the rather nervous-looking woman who stood in his shadow as if seeking his protection from the crowd around us. She seemed to be a little over-awed, or perhaps just apprehensive of being surrounded by strangers. I smiled broadly and (hopefully) pleasantly and asked Benedict “and who is this lovely lady?”

Benedict named her as Pia and introduced me to her as his son, von Bek. Silently cursing the slight over-formality of the use of my surname, I insisted that she call me Ulrich. She nodded and said that she had been told all about things. I reassured her semi-seriously that not all of it was true, but she asserted that she had heard only good things about me. That was a good bit of luck at least.

She smiled slightly and said that she was sure we would meet again; I assured her that we most certainly would.

Did Benedict give me slightly pointed glance as he led away to meet others of the family?

I moved through the crowd in search of Guin. I nodded to some people, gave brief comment to others and finished two glasses of red wine before I found her and Intruder sitting at a table almost on the periphery of the party. She looked absolutely stunning in a sheer white dress of finest satin, her hair and eyes complemented by the jewellery I had given her. As I approached she slowly stood and embraced me. She looked like some kind of goddess, and I told her so. The smile told me the compliment had hit the mark successfully.

Intruder, meanwhile, was holding a glass of wine in one hand while casting a cool eye over the proceedings. He looked deep in thought.

I leaned close to Guin and asked “how are—“ dramatic pause “-things?” She looked at me from the corner of her eyes and said that “things” were not to be discussed here. Especially, she said, since Intruder was sulking. Intruder, of course, turned at this comment and insisted he was not *sulking*, he was *contemplating*.

Guin pointed over to where a sizable group of people was beginning to form around a fellow standing on one of the tables; he appeared to be wearing some kind of patchwork garb of several bright and clashing colours. Droppa has started up, she said. When I asked who he was, she told me he was the court jester, which explained the clothing; he was wearing a jester’s motley, even down to the hat. His usual routine, I was told, involved making jokes at other peoples’ expense; in other words, the usual fare of the jester. He was apparently quite good, but with people who live for centuries it can not be hard to gather material on their doings. There was even a royal decree that said he could say what he liked without fear of retribution.

It was best, Guin told me, not to sit too close to the front; this made one too easy a target for his jokes. Despite the possible risk of public ridicule, we went to listen to him work.

He was quite funny, just not when he singled me out for a raking. A small comment regarding my choice of attire was followed by a well-aimed jibe regarding eggs. Fortunately, with little else to work with, he quickly moved on. Much of his performance appeared to be empowered if not improved by the quantity of alcohol he had imbibed. He touched on Benedict and Intruder and his “Deathsuit” before going on about how both Julian and Benedict shared the same taste in women.

Until that moment I had not really noticed the similarity between Morianna and Pia, but there was definitely a resemblance. Same hair, same eyes. But then, most of us (by

which I mean my generation of the family) all share the same black hair, so maybe it was nothing save coincidence at work.

Finally exhausting his supply of comic family incidents Droppa moved on to more normal fare: ribald stories and crude jokes.

It was only a few minutes later when I saw that first Intruder and then Fiona were both looking at the same point in space over Droppa's head. I could not see what they were looking at, either directly over his head or beyond in the night sky, so I looked around to see who else was looking and a couple of the others in the family were also straining to make out what it was they were gazing at. Amongst the crowd I just made out Sand, who had evidently arrived late and who I had only just noticed.

Then everyone's attention was caught by the arrival of a strange white square over the table Droppa stood on. It hung horizontal in the air over his head, like a glowing white doorway of some kind. It was not unlike the portals Intruder was known to produce, the ones that carried the cool sensation of a Trump and acted as a door to another place.

As of this was not odd enough, a small box, roughly the size of a head but rectangular, slowly came into view as it lowered through the portal, down and down until it came to rest on the ground just in front of the table occupied by Droppa. Then the portal vanished like morning mist.

Droppa broke the silence by announcing "how do I top THAT?" and climbing gingerly down from the table. A lot of people glanced at each other before Fiona broke the deadlock and stepped forward to examine the parcel. She nudged it with her foot first before bending down to look at it. She picked it up and turned back to her audience with a smile on her lips. "Nothing to see" she announced and promptly vanished by means of Trump.

Intruder was muttering curses to himself as he vanished immediately afterwards, presumably in "pursuit". Just as everyone had started murmuring to each other, formulating theories and suspicions Random was seen to disappear in much the same way, though I think he was actually holding a card at the time.

For my part I just turned a quizzical look on Guin, only to be told that Intruder would probably tell us later. I had to be satisfied with that.

With Droppa's part of the evening over with the dancing began. A few turns around the "dance floor" later I suddenly remembered a dance I had seen performed in a little town in northern Spain. Hot and full of passion, was the tango. What we really needed now, I told my ever-faithful dancing partner, was a tango.

Surprisingly, she seemed to know what I was talking about and went over to the musicians to make the request. The request appeared to faze them somewhat because Guin suddenly vanished and returned about a minute later (surprising a couple who were dancing right next to the band when she reappeared) bearing several books of sheet music. Furnished with the proper music the band set about playing a tango. It was not quite the same as the one I had encountered; it was slightly faster for one thing, which was definitely a bonus.

From where Guin and I cavorted in the centre of the dancing area I saw others had taken up the challenge. Julie had dragged Victor out for a turn, and Julian had apparently done the same with Morianna, as had Benedict with Pia. I did not see any others then, as my attention was caught and held by the smouldering eyes of Guinevere as she turned and twisted in my arms, spinning around and in and out of my grasp. She moved with a grace and abandon that took my breath away.

At the intense conclusion of the dance of dances the party and the garden around us was lost in a flash of light as Guin took us away.