

Thirty Years in Shadow

-or-

Cynicism Abroad...

Part One

The First Duty Fulfilled

“Well then let me ask you one question. Would *you* wish me to accept this offer?” I sat regarding Merlin curiously. He seemed strangely insistent on getting me to answer immediately. I wanted to know why.

“Ah, trick question, excellent.”

Trick question? I hadn't thought it such. But who could tell how the mind of a Lord of Chaos worked?

“Well, I'll do something we don't do much of around here, I'll be honest. I think it would be the best thing. It would give you a base of operations that would allow you to operate outside the Court of Amber but still interact with them, something your companions sorely lack. And on a personal note, I like you and think it would be nice to see you around here...”

Ah, there was the rub. Merlin had shown an alarming amount of attention to me ever since my first arrival in the Courts over a year ago. So much so that rumors had begun to circulate that we were lovers. Enough notice that his own mother had pursued a vendetta against me until very recently; yesterday in fact... I couldn't help but frown.

“Oh don't give me that look.” Merlin, for his part, seemed frustrated. “That's not what I meant. And besides, every time I even look sideways at a woman, the whole Court starts whispering ‘Queen’. It's quite tiring. I don't like the idea of being imprisoned in a political marriage, and I wouldn't inflict it on anyone else either. After all, that sort of thing is for *someone's* lifetime.”

I didn't say anything, just tried to maintain a neutral expression. He seemed rather talkative; perhaps a bit too much so. But I could accept that. At least he hadn't done anything as obnoxiously lecherous as my ‘uncle’ Bleys... And throughout this whole conversation I had been getting the impression that Merlin is, really, relatively young.

I had to bite my tongue to avoid saying something along the lines of ‘I could be your grandmother’. Time works in strange ways; and despite my impression to the contrary, exactly the opposite could have been true.

In the end I could only sigh, and wave off this strange turn of conversation. Why speak to me of marriage fears? I had certainly never hinted at any such desires. Perhaps that *was* why. He knew I was not pursuing him. And so I let him talk.

But he still pressed on me to accept the offer of alliance to Hendrake. I had contacted him about my leash to the Courts, and he said in one breath that I was free, and with the next urged me to accept an even more binding arrangement. Not just a period of enforced servitude, but an alliance; a bond of fealty.

On this day I was tired; the weight of my wounds still upon me. And if ever I did, I felt old. Having failed at my tasks, I could hardly even credit the offer of alliance; why did the Hendrakes even *want* to induct me among their number?

And then it occurred to me, that they *asked*. When I was first summoned to Amber, when all this began, no one asked me to join them. I was taken to Amber, and there, King Random simply commanded us to find Frakir, as if our obedience was assumed...

“Tell Lord Kov I will accept his offer.” I finally said it, with a sigh, before I could change my mind again.

Merlin smiled, although perhaps with the tiniest bit of surprise. “I will.” With a bow, he departed, once again leaving me with my thoughts.

Hours later it occurred to me that perhaps no one else could have convinced me to accept... And that if Hendrake did indeed set him up as their diplomat in this situation, that they were far more canny a bunch than I could have anticipated.

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The actual ceremony was not held for more than a week after our return from the destruction of DermottWays. Time enough for most of the scions of Hendrake to recover from their wounds. And for me to recover from mine. Without the aid of sorcery, I could see my Amberite heritage at work in that regard. The wounds I suffered might have killed an ordinary man; one from Shadow. My injuries knit in a day, and after a week I was still stiff, but no longer much pained. Only the worst one or two were still of any concern to me.

During that time, I was given quarters among the Ways of Hendrake. A quiet corner; with access to the practice fields. The room was not large, but it suited my needs. For despite Merlin's implications of a warm welcome, I had no real intention of taking up permanent residence in the Courts of Chaos. I had far too much to learn to allow myself to become complacent.

Tucked away in my private corner, the evening before the induction ceremony, I did something in privacy that I did not wish seen by others. Something I had not done for a year or more; since before my sojourn into Amber. I offered prayers to my ancestors in my native tongue, and asked their blessing.

Surrounded by the smoke of incense, I assured my uncle's spirit that I had not forgotten him, or my promise. I invited him to see what had become of his ancestral blade, now called Clairvidere. I told him I had found the Gold Chrysanthemum, and that he would be avenged, though I knew not how long the hunt would take.

I spoke to my mother; that I now understood what had happened to her. I let her know when I finally discovered which Amberite had dishonored her, that she too would be avenged. I told her that I had already narrowed the field; though I thought any of them capable of it... They were all dogs of one kind or another.

Finally I spoke to all of them of my alliance to the Hendrake. I swore that I was not forsaking them. I assured them that I would still return home, and tend the family tomb. And I begged that they would understand my actions. With such allies, the quest to regain honor for them would go more smoothly.

My prayers, as always, went unanswered, though I hoped that even here, at the far end of the universe, they were heard. After the incense had gone out, I rose carefully and went to meet what would come.

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The ceremony itself, thankfully, proceeded without incident. Only the core members of House Hendrake itself were present; Dara and Merlin being technically of House Sawall, were not in attendance. In a way this was a relief to me; to finally be making ties in the Courts outside of the royal family itself. I resolved to keep a safer distance from both Dara and Merlin in future...

The affair was a solemn one, simple in aspect, and without fancy trappings. Though quite different than those similar rituals of my own people, I understood it well enough. Oaths were given and received, and in that familial setting I was formally adopted by Lord Kov. I was thus made a sister to Gilva and cousin to Archon.

They asked no token of me; I was to carry no mark of my adoption. It seemed accepted that I would return to Amber with their blessings at some point. I would be better able to serve their interests if my status was unmentioned outside the House.

That night saw me dining with my new kin, and introduced to the wider circle of the House of Hendrake. Though they seemed to accept me easily enough, and indeed seem to indicate that they were even honored by my adoption, I could not help but wonder. I tried my best to appear relaxed, but I was yet uneasy. Was it all part of a larger plot? How could they truly feel honored by my presence? Looking among the assembled, I felt like a hyena in a pride of lions. I stood out painfully.

Among the Hendrakes, I discovered I was the only one not a shapeshifter; and one of very, very few who have not assayed the Logrus. Some assumed I am a Patternwalker; they seemed to see this as an asset of equal utility to the Logrus, though alien to them. I could only carefully sidestep certain questions. I was hesitant to admit that I do not have such power, though I would not lie about it. Trump artistry, I discovered, is not uncommon in the Courts, though it is still respected. At least I was not alone in a lack of sorcerous ability. Warriors all, most there seemed to scorn magic's utility.

By the end of the evening I was mentally exhausted. Though no sparring took place, simply the number of introductions, of names, positions, information to remember, was taxing. At least I could console myself that nothing tragic happened tonight.

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The following week continued to be tiring, though in a different way. I had meant to leave the Courts rather swiftly, but things never seem to work out as I plan. I had managed to locate one of the libraries, and find a reference work on Trump. I wanted to study advanced techniques, and perhaps find a more efficient way of scribing images.

I meant only to make a few more Trump before leaving; one of my quarters here in HendrakeWays, and one an area at

the outer edge of Chaos. I had intended them to allow me to travel with more subtlety. Previously my only Trump had been of the main Court itself; what was my first view of Chaos. A bit too showy an entrance for regular use.

But I was frequently interrupted. All my new relations, as they found time, or inclination, wanted to test themselves against me. I should have expected it. As a newcomer, I had to earn my place. And so day after day, I found myself at the practice fields, in duels with the various younger scions of Hendrake. By the sixth day, word had spread and the duels were attracting a small audience of the elder students of the House...

Though I had bested enough of the younger members of the House with ease (some two at a time) to give them the idea they were unwise to continue to press me, it had begun to seem as though the entirety of the House meant to try me, one after another. At least the practice had made me much more comfortable with the weightless dueling ground the family favors...

When I finally finished the second card, I was more than happy to get out of Chaos for a while. I packed the book, and my travel supplies, and set out before I could be challenged again.

I intended to follow the Black Road out of Chaos. I knew that the Road reached through Shadow, the way the path through Forest Arden does near Amber. I had hope that even though I was not a Patternwalker, or Logrus initiate, I could manage to traverse through Shadow along this road, where the boundaries were thin.

Necessity had led me to leave Kaze in the Ruby City, just before my last unfortunate encounter with Bleys. I had not seen her since, and intended to find her. The 'yellow bricked road' that we had taken to the city reminded me of the Arden path and the Black Road. I had some idea they might connect at some point... But I had no way to be sure unless I tried.

I had set out with firm intentions, but the path I had chosen was difficult. I could not tread the Black Road directly; its effect on me was drastic. If I touched the strange darkness, it seemed to suck the life from me. And near Chaos itself, the landscape was unpredictable and changeable. What seemed a firm footing could turn in an instant; or disappear without warning. My progress was slow. A whole day had passed before I lost sight of the turrets of the Courts. It was many more before I was out from under the turning sky.

Each day after that was a trial. Near the Courts, I was not harassed; I supposed that there was some level of control over the denizens of these near Shadows. Or perhaps they feared the travelers of the Black Road. In any case, as I trudged further away from Chaos, this control or fear diminished.

Every few days, sometimes every few hours it seemed, I found myself in the midst of some strange conflict. It began with ambush by some strange beast that defied description. Like some of the denizens of Chaos, it seemed to shift its form. All eyes and tentacles; it was like an octopus that had crawled onto land and learned to breath the air.

I could not tell how long the fight with it lasted. Probably longer than it had to, but I couldn't be too careful. Out alone, the creature of a type unknown to me, and potentially toxic. I danced around it, outside the range of its lashing appendages. I whittled at it, over and over, until I could finally kill the thing. I only was really sure it was dead when its corpse began to

ooze and melt... At least in the end, having only one opponent, and no one to defend other than myself, I could concentrate on making sure that I came through without a wound. So far, so good.

Each day brought its own challenges. Packs of bat-wolves. Raiders. Bandits. Areas like desert. Fens. Blasted plains. The days turned into weeks. And although I had to be on my guard, and the landscapes were unlike anything I had ever seen before, it was like unto the old days. I walked the roads alone, and free.

In the evenings I could read the book of Trump, and work on my drawings. I added a number of images into Clairvidere in that time, and began to work my mind around many theories. The idea of Trump gates fascinated me most of all. I would be happy to be able to travel without leaving Kaze behind. Assuming I ever found her.

But perhaps in the end resolve is rewarded; who can say? One day as I moved into a grassy open land, I felt a rumble. At first I thought it might be an earthquake. But it soon resolved itself into the rumble of hoofbeats. There was nowhere to hide, and so I stood my ground. I would rather see my enemies clearly than be blindly trampled.

But it was not enemies. Not this time. It was a herd of horses. Horses? Perhaps that isn't the right word. They were not quite horses. They moved faster than any horse I had ever seen, and the horns that ornamented them no horse had ever been born with. Their colors were as varied as a rainbow; they reminded me vaguely of the multi-colored steeds Julian's rangers had found for my companions.

They did not approach me; the herd ran by at a distance, but still I felt the pounding of their hooves shake the ground. It was an impressive sight. I almost missed the single brown figure that detached from the herd. It galloped toward me, and I almost drew my blade. But then I recognized it. Her. It was Kaze!

Her greeting was friendly and enthusiastic. She looked healthy and fit. But she bore no saddle and tack. Had she escaped the Ruby City and come here on her own? When she had been brought to Corwin's Shadow, her tack had been with her. No. How could it be? I could hardly credit it. How could she have made her way here? How could a beast move through Shadow without a guide? Ah, but then, Frakir did it as well... The trick is not unknown, even to me. She must have followed the road through Shadow somehow.

Her lack of saddle mattered not at all to me. I had ridden horses since I was a toddler. I could ride bareback, at least for a while. A saddle was only something I felt needful in combat.

Her return lifted my spirits inordinately. The more time that goes by, the more surprised I am at Kaze. She is an amazing beast. I wondered where Julian's rangers found her. I wondered even more if they truly knew the kind of potential she seemed to have. Or if they would have gifted her to me so flippantly if they did know...

With Kaze again at my side, the time seemed ripe to me to begin experimenting with the Trump gate technique I had read about. After my encounters of the past few weeks, I felt it a wonder that Kaze reached me unscathed. I did not wish to endanger her any further on this strange road.

So that evening I drew Clairvidere, and focused my attention in the way the book described. I summoned an image and... a blinding headache...

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It took me many days of practice before I finally mastered the technique well enough to open a gate stable enough I felt safe to enter it, and to not cripple myself in the attempt. The days leading up to this final victory were replete with frustrations. I blacked out at least once, only to find Kaze standing over me when I awoke. Several times I achieved only a faded image, which I did not trust. But at long last I managed a clear image. Of a misty valley high in the mountains. A breeze blowing through stands of bamboo. Of home.

My reasons for returning to Xangzhu were numerous. Kaze needed a new saddle. I needed more supplies to continue my Trump studies. And I needed time to deal with my ancestors.

DermottWays had been destroyed. Leonardo's Shadow had been used as a source of mercenaries in the affair of Coral's abduction. I knew it was only a matter of time before someone tried to use my own home against me. And so I must say my final goodbye to the world of Xangzhu.

In the end, it was as well that I decided to finish my business here. When I reached the village at the base of the mountain where my family had always dwelled, I realized that a great deal of time had passed. My cousin, the last scion of my house, had died an old and childless man. His bones lay in a small shrine by the village temple. The new daimyo was of no blood relation to me.

Why were my cousin's bones in the village shrine, and not in the family crypt? I did not know. What I did know was that the villagers regarded me with a great deal of suspicion. They whispered about me as I passed. Kaze was too large to pass here unnoticed. I was too obvious. They stared at the katana on my hip with great trepidation. What had happened here?

Over the next few days, I managed to learn some of the answers. While I had been gone little over a year, subjectively, here decades had passed. Where a small mine had existed outside the village when I left was now a burgeoning forge. War still covered the land.

I managed to convince the suspicious villagers to sell me some supplies, and a saddle for Kaze. It took a while to find one with straps that suited her girth. I noticed that she had grown since I first was gifted with her. After that I left the village without a backward glance. No one there knew me. I had not visited that particular village for decades even before I left on my sojourn to Amber. They were leery of a stranger. I was unwelcome, in very village of my birth.

At first I wended my way up into the mountains. I was not certain which way I wanted to go. I could smell the forge-fires on the wind. In the end, I decided that the best course of action was to settle the matter of my ancestor's tomb foremost. If I had to leave this place, I wanted no reason to look back.

My first trip was meant to be one of surveillance. It turned out to be excavation. I found that the pass leading to the remote tomb had been buried in an avalanche. I suspected that the village didn't even remember the tomb was there, my cousin was the last of my line, and the pass led nowhere else. I spent weeks clearing enough of the pass for Kaze to safely

move through. It would have taken the folk of the village months, or years, if they ever found a reason to even try.

The work was difficult, but perhaps therapeutic. In the end I was tired, and dirty, and more than a bit bruised, but I was successful. When I finally reached the tomb, it was undisturbed.

I prayed at the shrine of my ancestors, and contemplated what must be done. I felt that the remains of my forebears were not safe here, even in this remote place. It was known by some as the Shadow of my birth. If I would continue to honor them, I would have to ensure their safety. And that meant taking them from the only world they ever knew. I prayed for their forgiveness; but I felt it would be the only way to safeguard their spirits.

And so I closed the tomb again, and set out to gather that which I would need.

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I wandered far across the land of Xangzhu before I once again returned to the tomb of my ancestors. I dared not gather more than a small bit of what I sought in any one village. I did not wish to leave behind any suspicions as to what I intended to do.

A fine porcelain urn, unglazed, and of some size, though still small enough to carry in a saddlebag, was my first acquisition. Inks and quills came later in another place. Incense in another. I took three days to inscribe the urn, all the while in respectful meditation. Upon it in the most formal characters I recorded the line of my ancestors. Each name. Each person in the tomb. I used the ancient form, few in this age could read it. It was rare seventy-five years ago, when I learned it as a girl. I used the smallest quill, and the characters were tiny. There were many names. My mother and uncle were last most; the most recent deaths.

The names covered one side of the urn. The other side, I decorated with the mon of my uncle's family; that of the imperial servants. The mon of the dogwood, held in the claws of the sun-crowned dragon. I had the urn fired in another village, and moved on.

I gathered more incense, here and there, and fragrant woods. And pure resin. In the course of my wandering, I learned many things. The land was still torn by wars. Shingtsao's dynasty had been overthrown, and every warlord with ambition still sought to cut out a piece of the land for their own. In the villages I passed, I also came to know that only the old remembered me, from my ronin days after the empire's fall, and only by the various names I used then; Wolf-bane, Dragon-fang, or Sword-goddess... No one remembered that there was ever a noble named Surengiin. This I gathered from records, and the occasional bandit I ended up killing as I went. I did not ask the villagers themselves; I did not want to awaken any old memories that I wished forgotten.

All this time I practiced my artistry, and added a number of images into Clairvidere and my cards. And I made one special card. I inked it onto the most delicate paper. I remembered the mountain above Amber, which I had learned was called Kolvir. I remembered that day riding with Julian, I got a glimpse of a beautiful vista there, a stunning cliffside,

high on the slope, far away. I could see it from the forest, but only barely. It would do.

When I finally returned to the tomb, a good six months had passed at least; I numbered the days, but with time so relative, I wasn't sure it mattered. When I reached the tomb, I made offerings to the ancestors, and carefully dismantled the tomb, one niche at a time. The most ancient of my ancestor's remains had gone to dust long ago. Their remains I carefully swept into the urn. The more recent remains I ceremonially burned, in order that they could join the elder ones. One by one, I burned the bones, and swept the dust into the urn. It took me many days, and I was covered in ash myself by the end, and nearly smothered in the fragrant smoke.

I left the tomb a barren and empty ruin. Nothing but scattered charcoal remained. I sealed the urn in resin, so that it would be air-tight. I wrapped it in silk, and nestled it in Kaze's saddlebag for the trip down the mountain. I bathed in a mountain stream, and purified myself after my extended foray into the matters of the dead.

Finally, I told Kaze to stay where she was, and arranged a tiny parcel. Some incense, an offering, some prayer scrolls, a few simple tools, and a dogwood sapling. I tucked that into my sash. The urn I retrieved from her saddlebag, and tied its silk wrapping into a sling. And then I retrieved my Trumps. The special Trump I held in my hands, the image sheltered against the breeze.

The cliff on Kolvir, far above Arden. Away from Amber Castle. I could think of no better place to lay my ancestors to rest. The one place in the universe that was *real*. That was constant. An unchanging bastion, a perfect place for eternal memory.

I traveled there alone. When I arrived, it was bitterly cold, and the wind whipped across the cliffside sharply. I looked about with concern. The cliff looked less formidable from the safe distance of Arden. Remembering how the view appeared from below, I tried to calculate distances. I knew where I was in relation to Castle Amber, and resolved to move away from it at best speed. I had to get off this exposed face, and find a sheltered area.

It took more than an hour of careful climbing to reach an area where I could more easily traverse. A narrow game trail led down into the treeline. But that is not where I wanted to go. I did not want my memorial in any place where Julian could happen upon it. Or anyone for that matter...

I concealed myself among the scrub, and traveling with all possible stealth, surveyed the mountainside. I finally settled on a modest cleft, in a rock face where I could see some bushes sheltered. It seemed away from the wind, and above anywhere anyone could simply walk up to.

I waited until I could be as certain as possible that I would not be seen. I then carefully scaled the rock, until I could enter the crevasse high above. I went slowly, careful not to bump the delicate urn I carried tied to my back in a sling. When I finally reached my destination, I was exhausted. I spent the night there, fasting in the cold night, and sleeping on the rocks.

At dawn, I assessed the area closely. I satisfied myself that no one but a climber would find this remote spot. A few plants grew here, sheltered from the wind, so I had some small hope that the memorial I brought, the dogwood tree, might live. It would be many years before it would even be seen

above the level of the rocks. Many more before it might bloom. But the dead and I have something in common; we have nothing if not time.

I spent the next several days preparing my new shrine to my ancestors. I cleared a small niche into the rock face, and nestled the urn into it, swaddled in silk. I sealed the rock face carefully, in a way that made it look as natural as I could. And then I planted that tiny dogwood in the soil before the niche.

I lastly made sure the area was cleared of anything that would mar the simple peace of the place. The few weeds I burned with an offering of incense. Into the small fire I also cast the delicate card I had made of the cliffside that started my journey here. I would leave no trace of my passage behind. The little bit of smoke was unavoidable, but it would be my only clue. I had to leave the proper offering. In future I could make my offerings at a safer distance. I said my last prayers and goodbyes. They would be as safe now as I could make them.

When I was certain I had left no trace behind, and saw no sign of anyone upon the mountain, I took my leave. I did so without fuss; simply Trumpling back to Xangzhu, and to Kaze.

Though it had taken me roughly a year, the first of my duties had been fulfilled. I would tell no one. But one small part of my soul could lie easy for a time.

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Xangzhu Eulogy

A poem by Surengiin

Lay down your burden, lay it all down,
Pass the glass between you, drink it up.

Place the light before you,
Fiery paths in darkness made,
Endless shadow, mist and shade,
Away shall fade.

Lay down your burden, lay it all down,
Days of glory all must fade, fade away.

Gather all together,
Time will pass, of blood & blade,
It must pass, for every thane,
To stillness fade.

Lay down your burden, lay it all down,
Pass the glass between you, drink it up.

Enter the long hall,
Come through the door,
The dragon doesn't
Live here anymore.

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