

# Surengiin's Journal #2

## Jewel Quest

Day 30686 (22 Dec 2003)

By the next morning at breakfast I have growing concerns. The court is abuzz, and this small affair is mushrooming into the event of the year, apparently. Merlin has not had a major event since his rise to the throne, some six months ago, I soon learn. As a relative unknown quantity, every House in Chaos seems to be sending representatives to try and feel out his views. And potentially put a knife in his back.

I am irrelevant to the affair, yet tied inexorably to it. As the presumptive reason for the gathering, I have a spotlight upon me shed by Merlin's favor. Is this why Flora sent me a funeral dress – all white? This is getting worse and worse. I only wonder if the other 'ambassadors' will be seated with me. Possibly not. All the better for them, they will only be lesser targets for potential manipulation. This becomes more and more like the winter courts I remember of old from Xangzhu, only much more... real.

I find Frederick, to speak with him for a while. Dermott and Bethany are nowhere to be found. They are probably in DermottWays, which I have no ability to find on my own. They have not really spoken to me since before the incident with Frakir resolved. I wonder now if they are avoiding me? Perhaps wise for them...

"Greetings Frederick."

"Surengiin.... How are you?"

"Fine."

"How's your neck?"

"Just fine."

"What happened to the plan?"

"It went as I anticipated..."

"I thought you would wait for us." His tone is slightly accusatory. Not unexpected.

"No. I thought it less likely to lead to trouble this way. I wanted you to be close, but out of harm's way."

"Julian told us what happened."

"I expected so."

Frederick excuses himself and leaves shortly thereafter. I don't blame him, I suppose. He seeks acquaintances he has made here in Chaos with Dermott during the time they spent here while I was resolving the Frakir issue. Apparently they spent quite a while here, or close to here. I find myself in a most disadvantageous position... I have manipulated them, only to find that they know more about this place than I do.

With no one I know who wishes to speak with me, and no real knowledge of what is going on, I set out to learn what I can. Without knowledge I am blind and in great danger. I have the favor of an untried king, and I find this does not suit me. Before I can discover much, however, I am instead found. A woman dressed in spare-looking armor, and with the easy manor and well-kept sword that speaks of soldiering, comes upon me, apparently purposefully.

She introduces herself as Gilva, of House Hendrake. She claims to have been sent by Merlin to keep me company, and

show me around. He sent her, she claims, because he feels we might get along, and share interests...

As we speak, she offers to duel with me, a bit, which at least seems like an honest offer. The one thing in her favor so far, in my eyes, is that she has the bearing of a warrior. She claims her House is of similar bearing, and they prefer the honest edge of a sword to the twisted words of Court. I can only politely nod. The Hendrake have a strange dueling ground indeed, I find as she leads me there.

The room is a great sphere, entered at the bottom. As I enter though, I find my stomach rising, and then my feet! Here in this round chamber there is no ground, no up or down, and one can fly like a bird! It is most disconcerting, but yet strangely challenging. We politely salute, she in her manner, more like that of Dermott and Frederick, and I in mine, and we begin.

She claims to support Merlin totally, but admits it must sound like a blatant attempt at manipulation to say so. But she points out, in the idiom of Chaos I have heard more than once "pick a side or pick a coffin." She offers to me the shield of House Hendrake, for the upcoming event, if I will cast my lot with them.

She tries to compliment me by offering that she can see I do not suffer fools and know the uses of a blade. She claims that my manner is compatible with those of her clan, and I might find common cause with them if I am willing to accept their friends and enemies...

"It is the way of things." I reply non-committally.

By the end I have had a hard fight, physically, much more so than I had expected. She had the edge on me certainly, but how much was the result of her skill, and how much due to my spinning stomach and unfamiliarity with such a strange arena I could not say. These of Chaos and Amber are much more challenging than I had imagined. We part, I think, with mutual respect. She is certainly the first I have met, ever that I can recall, that can hope to be a match for my skill. Are all of them this skillful with a blade? Surely not; Gilva has the bearing of a lifelong soldier, like myself. Surely she was well chosen as the one to approach me.

Mentally I have been attempting to dodge; I cannot make an intelligent decision regarding matters of politics without more information, but I acknowledge I must choose. As we part she invites me to join the members of her House for supper; ah here is the play. If I am to be polite, I must accept, as I have no other excuse not to. I agree, but ask for a few hours to clean up after our workout. She agrees to meet me later, at the foot of the green tower at the base of HendrakeWays.

It is now immediately imperative that I learn more about the situation here. Forces are seeking me out, but I cannot move without intelligence. I must try to settle the disagreements between myself and my 'cousins'. I try to Trump Dermott, and then Bethany, but find them out of reach. Probably in DermottWays. I then try to Trump Frederick, and at last reach him. I ask him to please help me contact Dermott; I have questions in need of quick answers. He agrees, and I bring him through to me in my quarters.

As he is about to lead me out to DermottWays, I find I am getting another Trump contact... It is Merlin. He calls because he wishes me to know he sent Gilva to me, basically

confirming her introduction. He is busy however, and cannot speak at length...

Frederick leads me to Dermott Ways with little difficulty (this place is truly strange), and we soon find Dermott and Bethany, apparently engaged in some strange combat using clubs against giant rodents. He claims it is a sport.

I get straight to the point. Things are becoming most dangerous for me, I fear, and I need information. I ask him his House affiliation, and he says Helgram. I ask him King Merlin's closest House affiliations, by blood. Dermott says Amber, which is originally descended from House Barimen of Chaos through Dworkin, on his father's side, as he descends from Corwin. Dara, who is of Helgram by blood and Sawall by marriage, is his mother...

And whom does House Hendrake support, I inquire? Where do they stand in regards to relations with Merlin? Dermott says that Hendrake is a military House, and they support whomever keeps the military strong. He claims no one has truly fallen out one way or another in terms of supporting Merlin because having only taken the throne six months ago, he is still an unknown quantity; a wild card.

So Hendrake is an unknown quantity. I cannot be certain yet if my supper tonight is a good idea or bad. I admit to them they have contacted me, or at least Gilva has, and apparently at Merlin's request. At least, I think it was Merlin. But I find it unlikely that anyone other than Merlin himself would have my Trump.

Dermott then brings up that there may be those that feel I am a political threat... That I may be seeking favors of Merlin... Sexual favors, perhaps even marriage! I am insulted beyond words. I have made no such advances, nor would I! When I turn upon Dermott, he stops me with his words. I am chilled by the realization that being single, any female in the favor of Merlin will be met with such accusations, true or not.

Frederick then drops a bombshell... There are those among House Sawall, apparently including Dara, who feel I am sleeping with, or trying to sleep with, Merlin! Dermott looks at me with horror. He feels that having Dara, Merlin's mother, look at the situation thusly could spell my death. Assassination? She has had many women killed before, that she felt were too close to her son. Thank goodness I would not wear the scandalous gown Flora sent! A proper kimono is much less... provocative.

How could this be? Perception is reality in the political arena. No one would believe the truth, though even Bethany can see it plainly; I am celibate. Dermott suggests I have two options. I must make it clear that I have no interest in Merlin, or... I must make an honest bid for him, and convince his mother I am worthy. This second suggestion offends me beyond words, but again Dermott stops me. Do I not find Merlin attractive? Would I not wed a king? I would wed no man, king or no! But, he points out, these will be areas where they will seek to attack me. I must be prepared for it.

He asks how we can make it plain then, that I have no designs on Merlin. Aha! Now I can keep up. I say to Dermott, you must be my consort for the evening, and he goes pale. I consider Frederick instead, then, but realize Dermott is wiser to the Courts of Chaos, and may be my best defense. He is not happy with the arrangement, but admits its utility. Only by the supposed attachment to another will I present a lack of

attachment to Merlin. I remind him though, that any hand which touches me, he will not get back.

Frederick then says, they are expected for supper with House Helgram, to speak with Dara. I am not invited. I am considered an upstart, and likely they will speak of me, and my fate, there this night...

I admit then, that I also have dinner arrangements, with House Hendrake. Dermott gives me a look that speaks of caution, but I assure him that I could not politely refuse at this point, and that the politics of my own upbringing were not so different, only here I am at the disadvantage for lack of information.

And so I continue my inquiries... Of which House is Mandor, of whom I once caught a glimpse? Sawall. Dara is married to the head of House Sawall, and therefore Mandor is Merlin's step-brother. The head of Sawall is bedridden, the joke, Dermott says, is they don't know whether from the sex or the poison. I do not show my offense at the lewdness of his words. I must inure myself to them; I shall certainly hear worse in the next few nights.

Various comments then arise that Bethany has figured out who her own parents through the line of Amber are, and I ask her of them. She, although surprised at my inquiry, does answer. Dermott has been helping the others with genealogical research, by analyzing their blood and flesh, as kin share blood. He explains it uses something called 'DNA', but I do not really understand it.

I learn that Bethany is daughter to Deirdre, and Corwin's niece, and King Merlin's first cousin. Frederick, I learn, cannot determine whom he is descended from, but only who he is not. The list of Amber candidates is narrowed by removing the lines of Bleys, Fiona, Florimel, Corwin, Eric, Deirdre, and Random from consideration.

Mindful of my appointment, I ask after the time differential between here and Chaos. I learn I can spend a good ten hours here, researching the politics of Chaos, without missing my dinner appointment.

I then inquire if anyone could have done the same figuring about my lines, and if anything could be determined by the results... If someone else could know, then I should know as well. Dermott says he could determine my lineage, at least as well as Frederick's... But no one else should be able to. Unless I was healed there, and they had a chance to touch my flesh and blood, points out Frederick. There is that, I admit, rubbing my neck.

I ask Dermott, has he done such for me? He says he would not without my consent, which I immediately give him, much to his surprise. Knowledge is my lifeline now, and I would have all I can. Even if he was lying, I no longer care.

While he sets out to find my bloodline, I sit down to a crash course, as Bethany puts it, on the politics of Chaos...

I get the first information long before I can make sense of the second. Like Frederick, my line is only narrowed down. I am descended from Gérard, Julian, or Benedict, unless there are others we do not know of. He can determine no closer than that. Eliminated for certain are lines of Deirdre, Corwin, Eric, Florimel, Brand, Fiona, Bleys, and Random.

Well, something is better than nothing, and such are the plans of mice and men shattered, and the gods laugh. I had thought to use the others to my goals, but instead find them my only lifeline in a sea of sharks. There is a saying of my

land that is most appropriate... 'hang together, or hang separately,' such is certainly the case in a literal sense here. It is well that I grew up among politics in my own Shadow, or I would swiftly find myself dead.

And all because of a cord.

## Day 30686 cont.(12 Jan 2004)

In the end I decide that I must be escorted to the court dinner by Frederick – going with Dermott would give the impression of an alliance with House Helgram, of which Dermott is technically a member. Frederick's only true alliance is to Amber, I hope, as he has stated no other.

I leave DermottWays with plenty of time to reach my destination by the beginning of green-sky. In front of a large fountain, I am met by Gilva. After brief greetings, she leads me through the paths to HendrakeWays. First we pass through a large manor house, then into an underwater tunnel seemingly surrounded by a black abyss of water tenanted by weird glowing fish. Finally we emerge onto a high plateau, from which a steep precipice drops to the cloud-tops below. Crowning this plateau is a great open-air temple. Among the marble columns is a banquet table, set for six.

Gilva and I are the first to arrive, and we are seated, as she indicates it is customary. She indicates the gathering will be small, just those who have seats. There are a variety of appetizers. She informs me her father and his sister, and her cousin, will be joining us.

"How are you enjoying your trip to Chaos?"

"Very enlightening."

"You have any questions about our local... culture?"

"Do you have any preferred method of address?"

"No, just the usual, Lord, Lady... But we're pretty straightforward and informal mostly."

With the tinkling of bells, others arrive, and I rise, in an attempt to be polite.

The first arrival is a man about 6' tall, rather thin, with long well-oiled ringlets of black hair, wearing a wide-brimmed hat with a feather. He is wearing well-made brocaded clothing in colors of orange, red and yellow. He has a goatee and long pointy waxed moustache and wears a monocle. He sports a rapier on his left hip, which has a unique flame-shaped hilt. He wears the sword with the confidence of one used to its use.

I am introduced to Gilva's cousin, Lord Archon Hendrake.

He bows, twirling the immense hat, "Charmed, may you leave as much happiness as you bring."

"Indeed."

"What brings you to this part of existence?"

"An errand."

"Oh, of what sort, unless you'd rather not say."

"Oh, politics, PR..."

"I understand... Say, you are from Amber. Are you a Pattern walker, by chance?"

"Not at present," I admit, as I can see no way to give a roundabout answer to such a direct question.

"Ah, well, I had hoped to compare notes. I'm interested in how the Pattern and Logrus compare. I've heard they can do similar things, but in different ways." he notices I travel armed, and asks "you are familiar with the blade?"

"Yes." Ah, finally, something I can talk about. I finally take a glass, and Archon pours wine.

Another tinkling announces the arrival of more attendees. Again I rise. This time two people enter. The first is a man of 6'8", with straight brown hair, a mustachio and goatee. His clothes are simple, especially compared to the flamboyant Archon. He wears a grey tunic and leggings, silver hawk's head buckle on a black belt, and over all a black fur coat trimmed in ermine.

Accompanying him is a woman with an olive-tan complexion, and curly black hair. She is dressed most immodestly, with a low-cut blouse, and brightly colored scarves and skirts. She has a gypsy look. All the immodesty around me... I fear I may be starting to get used to it.

These two are introduced to me as Lord Kov Hendrake and Lady Tessa Hendrake. I give a respectful bow.

"We hope this evening finds you well," begins Lord Kov.

"It does." I reply.

"If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to ask. We are happy to provide assistance."

I give a nod of acknowledgement. I've heard this line a number of times from those of this House already. It seems they truly are... impolitic. To be so obvious... But they are at least polite.

"We, of course have our own reasons and concerns, hence our invitation..." he continues.

"Of course."

"Have you heard of Lady Dara, of House Sawall?" he asks, as we all seat ourselves again.

Here we go... "I have heard her name mentioned."

"Ah, you've met my daughter, then?" says Lady Tessa.

"Not met, only heard of."

"Ah well, she hasn't been herself lately... Ever since that Pattern incident, and the war... Anyhow, she seems to have taken offense at you. She seems to think you've been sleeping with Merlin, my grandson..."

"Yes, it's come to our attention that she has been planning something against you," interjects Lord Kov.

"I am aware."

"Like your death."

"So I've heard."

"Unfortunately, with someone like her, there really isn't anything you can say that would change her mind. She would just assume you're lying. While it is obvious you can take care of yourself, you would be wise to surround yourself with strength. As a favor to the monarch, we've agreed that you may accompany us to the ball tomorrow, if you wish. We could offer you some buffer against any... obvious discourtesies by members of the House Sawall..." Kov continues... "Not that we're babysitting. We're well aware you can fend for yourself..."

"But, it is unknown at this point how many of the other houses are influenced by Dara, after all," says Tessa.

Another tinkling bell. Someone arriving after the head of House Hendrake? Everyone rises, and I am quick to do so as well...

In walks Merlin. Oh, great. The more time I spend in his presence the larger the target on my back gets...

"Ah, grandmother, how nice of you to have me for dinner, it's been too long..." he greets Lady Tessa with a show of

affection. “Surengiin, did they make you aware of the problems my mom is having with you...”

“Yes, I’ve been made aware by at least six people.”

“Yes, well, there are some folks who really enjoy such speculations.” Merlin throws a glance at the Hendrakes...

“I didn’t mean your family.”

“Ah... Well we all know it’s baseless, but such things spread quickly, not that it’s an unpleasant thought.”

I frown slightly at this, and Merlin quickly continues. “Not that I’m hitting on you.”

“The thought never crossed my mind,” I reply...

“Now I’m offended,” Merlin quips glibly...

Now this is at least a conversation I can deal with. My response is automatic... “I had thought myself below the consideration of one of your station.”

“Well, you *can* bullshit well.” Merlin seems rather amused and perhaps slightly surprised.

“I was raised in an Imperial Court, after all.”

“So was I. Anyhow, well, my mother... isn’t exactly sane, and she was damn meddlesome to start with. So who knows what she’s going to do next. Since this is a big occasion, many parties will be in attendance, every major House will be sending some representative or other.”

“To make a long story, well shorter, at Gilva’s recommendation I’ve asked House Hendrake to provide security at the ball. I wanted to tell you myself, since if you’re smart you are paranoid, and will want to know this news is reliable. One of the reasons I wanted you here is to inform you of this.”

I nod acknowledgement.

“By the way, I know your companions are having dinner with my mother tonight.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“There’s no telling what she’s trying to accomplish by that, but she’s certainly got something in mind. Regardless, you’ll be seated at the head table along with the other favored guests, but at the opposite end from me.”

My expression of relief at the arrangement is perhaps a bit too obvious.

“You’ll be seated with the House of Hendrake, so it is obvious that you are still in favor. But, this seating should help dissuade those who would... cause unpleasantness. There will be other important persons in attendance, some of which I am not at liberty to discuss. Have you any questions?”

“Should I bring an escort, or have you arranged that as well?” I try to keep my tone as polite as possible.

“Bring someone if you like, but I don’t think it necessary...”

“I thought it might make me seem... less single, given the circumstances.”

“As you will. I’m sure Archon would be happy to take you... to the ball anyhow.” The looks are filled with humor...

“I had been planning to arrive with Frederick, actually. No slight intended, Lord Archon,” I reply...

Merlin leaves shortly thereafter, and dinner proceeds with the remainder of the Hendrake family.

Gilva speaks “Ah, Surengiin, there are some hostilities between Hendrake and Helgram. That is probably why Helgram invited your friends.”

“I am aware.”

They ask about where my allegiances lie then, and I declare allegiance to Amber. They ask if this is a formal oath of fealty sworn to Random.

“There are Oath and oaths.” I reply. “I am happy to continue to have cordial relations with the House of Hendrake, as long as there is not a conflict of interest with Amber.”

They imply it is foolish to declare myself so, as they are aware of my newness to the courts of Amber and Chaos. They imply I should leave more options open. Of course, it is in their interests to do so.

Dinner winds down. Dessert and brandy are served. Talk drifts away from politics, thankfully. We speak of sword techniques, and other topics amiable to fellow warriors. A martial house, indeed. Archon shows me his blade, it appears to be forged of frozen flame, hilt to tip. I spar with Gilva again, in a friendly way, no real test of skill involved. Sparring here is commonly done with combat-ready blades, quite different than from where I grew up. But, easily adapted to. I don’t really fear it, after all. Among others of such skill, there is no real chance of unintended injury.

I eventually say my goodnights, and depart. I don’t trust them, but at least they have been upfront with me regarding the fact they are courting both my favor and that of Merlin.

I find the others in a parlor near our quarters, talking.

“Well, I see you survived your dinner.” Frederick quips.

“My dinner wasn’t the dangerous one.” I reply...

Well, at least they avoided making any firm commitments to House Sawall/Helgram explicitly, they inform me... I explain the seating arrangements as I understand them, along with the fact we will be with House Hendrake, or at least Frederick and I will be. And I also mention Dara and Merlin’s link to House Hendrake.

Bethany seems bothered by the tangled family tree, so I let her know that royal families and noble houses normally marry among themselves, or marry cousins, as a matter of course.

I also ask Dermott if there is a way to tell a shapeshifted imposter from a real person, though I don’t tell him why I wish to know. I am concerned regarding the number of times the King of Chaos has seen fit to speak to me. Would a real king really spare so much time for someone who is essentially only a messenger?

Basically, Dermott informs me that if they are an initiate, then time will force them to revert, but if they are advanced, there really isn’t a way short of intrusive psychic probes to tell if someone is who they claim to be. Unless you pull a Trump and contact them to see if they are really them... Well, that at least answers my question.

After a little more conversation, I retire for the night. Why is so much of the humor lately directed at my sex life, or lack thereof? At least I am becoming acclimated to it. Bethany seems a little suspicious. She apparently felt insulted by Mandor, but had the common sense to not show it.

I return to my quarters, and find myself overcome by paranoia... Besides the frequency of his conversations with me, the informality of it just makes me nervous. Talk with royalty isn’t supposed to be so casual... After some consideration, I attempt to briefly reach Merlin by Trump... He gave me the card himself, after all... He does answer, and seems distracted...

“Yes?”

“That really was you, at the dinner at HendrakeWays tonight, wasn’t it?” I ask, hopefully politely enough not to upset him...

“No, it was my good twin Skippy... Of course it was. Now what did you want?” I can’t tell if he is just tired, busy, or very annoyed at me...

“That was it, call me paranoid... Goodnight, Sire.” I break contact.

I sleep with my sword in my hand, my back to the wall. I expect an assassination attempt, or worse.

## Day 30687 (19 January 2004)

I receive a missive, three hours before dinner.

“I recently had an interesting discussion with my esteemed mother. She as a representative of House Helgram was quite put out that there was no representative of House Helgram at the head table. As a compromise I agreed that there would be a representative of the House at the table... Dermott. So please ask him to escort you instead of your friend Frederick. Thank you for your cooperation in this matter... -M.”

As soon as I finish reading the letter, it bursts into flame and disappears. Well, that saves me tossing it in the fireplace. Sorcerers. Sheesh. I Trump Dermott and tell him the news. He seems less than thrilled, and also concerned about the sudden disappearances of Bethany and Frederick. Come to think of it, I haven’t seen Mordred in days... And where is Leonardo?

He agrees to pick me up in two hours. I get dressed. The formal kimono I had asked for from Dermott arrived in time, and it all seems in order. I Trump Frederick, Leonardo and Bethany and inform them of the change of plans. At least I can reach them via Trump, so some of my worries are laid to rest.

I rendezvous with Dermott and we make our way to our appointed positions. Dermott shows up in demon form. Alien-like black reptilian chitinous armor with rams horns and a double set of feathered wings. Three-taloned claws and his knees bend backwards. “So this is what you really look like,” I quip. Dermott replies “Of course.”

He finds himself more attractive in this form although I am uncomfortable with the strangeness. It seems large numbers of attendees are non-human in appearance for this function.

After milling about we eventually reach a line leading to an archway. Two exquisitely dressed demons in the livery of Chaos are taking names... Heralds.

Half an hour later we near the front of the line. A vaguely reptilian brown and red demon is speaking. “And who might you be.”

“Lady Surengiin of Amber and Lord Dermott of the House of Helgram.”

“Excellent, I will announce you.”

We are announced with ear-splitting volume.

We walk into a banquet hall almost a quarter-mile long... no wonder the herald yelled so. It’s a large vaulted chamber. The ceiling is four or five hundred feet tall. Tables are everywhere. At one end is a more resplendent table than the others. Approximately thirty chairs surround it, on a large

dais. The noise level is like a large auditorium. Most attendees are non-human.

A page floats up to us, a kind of an amorphous ball covered with eyes. It leads us down the hall to our seats. Bethany and the others are seated about three-quarters the way up the hall. They are seated at House Helgram’s table. They have failed at maintaining neutrality. As for myself, I am cool, collected, and calm, in my best unruffled manner.

We are seated at the head table, about halfway down. Dermott pulls out my chair and I seat myself. A few minutes later, Lord Kov, Archon and Lady Tessa are also seated a little further up from us. I don’t recognize any of the other seated folks. I would guess they are Hendrake by their dress. Bodyguard demons are everywhere.

We make small talk, Dermott and I. Dermott informs me Chaos lost a war to Amber not too long ago. Bethany apparently also hates Random. She is so naïve.

Lord Suhuy is announced and sits at the head table. Dermott explains he is the Dworkin of Chaos, and I ask who is Dworkin, and he describes the man I saw in the shattered mirror. “Ah, him” I reply. Dermott gives me a slightly puzzled look, I think, it’s hard to read his expressions in this form.

Lady Dara and Mandor are seated at the foot of the head table. She seems upset and gives me a glare that I ignore. Dermott makes polite hellos to them, though they ignore me and imply I have no breeding in their greeting. I let it slide without comment. After a little while longer, the head table is filled except for the six headmost chairs.

Lady Jasra of Kashfa is next. She is wearing a low white dress with lots of diamonds. Dermott informs me she was once of Helgram.

Dalt is next. Aseric’s father, declares Dermott, look, look! He hates Amber, heraldry of a lion rending the unicorn. Green eyes, blond, and quite large. He wears green and black. Dermott implies he is rude and hated by all of Amber. Dermott says he should introduce Bethany to him.

Dalt asks who I am. We introduce ourselves. He says it is unusual to meet anyone not in demon form, but then he figures out I am a scion of Amber. I try to be cool and noncommittal.

King Rinaldo and Queen Coral of Kashfa. Where is Kashfa, asks Dermott. Dalt says next to Begma, near Amber, in the Golden Circle. Dermott and Dalt speak of past days when Dalt raided Amber. Now he isn’t raiding, though. He is helping Kashfa. We discover Jasra is the mother of Rinaldo.

Rinaldo is 6’0” with red hair, and a broken nose that adds character, not ugliness. He is charismatic and speaks to everyone. Coral is tall and well-built for a woman. She seems reserved, more so than Rinaldo. She’s wearing green and copper, of a masculine type cut, with a wide-brimmed hat. She also has an eye patch.

Rinaldo approaches. He begins a friendly conversation with Dalt. He introduces himself to me... It seems Merlin has been talking about me, everyone says “oh, I’m the one Merlin was talking about.” Why does this make me uncomfortable? Rinaldo introduces himself as Luke.

They talk a bit and then he leaves. Coral comes up behind Dermott while he is speaking of her. I smile slightly. She speaks pleasantly to us for a time. She invites us to join her for a meal sometime in the near future.

Finally, King Merlin of Chaos. Merlin shows up looking very uncomfortable in the royal robes of state. His ‘crown’, if

you could call it that, is made of a ring of floating gemstones. He is, surprisingly, in human form. Accompanying him is a female demon, Gilva, if I recognize the sword on her hip correctly. Gilva sits on Merlin's left, Luke on his right, Coral on Luke's right, etc. etc.

Merlin nods to me, I give a slight nod back. He hugs Luke, like an old friend, shakes Dalt's hand, kisses Coral on the cheek, and she gives him a funny look. He glances down for a second then looks up again. Hmm... note that. Gilva is constantly one step behind him... Bodyguard.

Dermott says "Ah old girlfriends, so protective."

"Ah, bodyguards, so attentive." I reply.

"Ah, if you believe that..."

Merlin steps up and addresses the hall, "Friends and honored guests, thank you for allowing me to hold this event for you this evening. Forgive me for not holding more such events, but thank you." Etc. "The reason that we are holding this is to do honor to the new ambassadors of Amber..." We are asked to stand, and he gives a lengthy speech with the awarding of honorifics..

In the middle of the speech, several forms appear in plumes of smoke and rush the dais. I immediately feel the urge to draw my sword, but give the Hendrake security a few seconds to react, but the smoky figures are unaffected as their swords pass clear through. One form reaches into a guards chest with insubstantial hands and the guard collapses. The crowd panics. I call forth Clairvidere, as Gilva and the rest of security grab Merlin and flee.

They are apparently chasing Merlin, so I move to intervene. They look insubstantial, but I hope the magic will be effective. Dermott apparently is moving to protect the rest of our group, who are rushing forward as well. Bethany Leonardo and Frederick move forward with weapons drawn. They are trailed closely by several people wearing odd uniforms that look like humans. I ignore those in favor of the insubstantial ones.

Dalt is fighting ineffectively against one. Luke is wielding a magical sword against another, apparently holding them at bay. Some Hendrake retainers are rushing off Coral. The others stop short of the grand melee and pull odd items that they fire at Coral and her guards. Leonardo and Frederick leap forward dispatching Hendrake guards, while Bethany Coral and leaves, surrounded by grey uniformed guards. I am simply flabbergasted by the sight, but have no time to react to it.

I intercept one of the figures, I slash upward from behind as my blade is called forth. It parries! My sword is thrust wide but I barely parry its riposte. We both take a defensive stance.

He suddenly lunges forward so I drop and stab under him. I meet some small resistance. As the blade enters I hear a keening noise like a boiling kettle. It jumps back and disappears. It disperses.

I move on to the next one. Dalt isn't hurting his, only holding off. Suddenly something cold, cold as the grave, touches my back where my heart would be. I try to swing backwards into it, but I am knocked onto my knees. I solidly strike it, and turn to find it impaled on my blade. I try to pull upward and kill it in a rainbow flash.

I see my breath, as I struggle to stand. Luke kills one, Dalt still is holding his off. One of the two on Luke turns to me and shoots past me towards Dermott. I also see Leonardo and

Frederick cutting down Hendrake guards, etc... I try to use the flower-petal cut as it passes me, but it evades my thrust.

There is still one on Dalt, so I turn my attention to it. Dermott flips the table and rolls past away from the melee, dodging the insubstantial form saying "Gee, I wish I brought my sword." As he goes.

Dalt falls back, touched by one and thrashing ineffectively. As I move to intervene, he rallies and steps forward, killing it with a great sweep. Instead I move to intercept the one after Dermott.

Involee reacts before I can take a step. The ring forms a gauntlet, and lashes out tendrils and destroys the shadow being. These are thinner and darker, and more wire-like than Involee's normal tentacles. They seem to be of another power. Is this Broken Pattern, that Dermott has spoken of before?

The others are nowhere to be seen. Explosions come from down the hall, so I rush down the hallway to intercept them, as I still suspect there are two more after Merlin. I see Merlin with two of them transfixed in lightning, which collapses inward and destroys them.

"Well that was terribly unamusing. Thank you for the assistance." Dalt comes up behind me. He offers his hand, and I take it. Foolish, I.

In an instant, he grabs my throat and smashes me into the wall, and darkness enfolds me.

## Day 30688 (26 January 2004)

Consciousness returns slowly, and I cannot help but let out a string of curses. My head pounds, and I realize this is because the blood is rushing through it. Opening my eyes, I see nothing but a vast abyss. I realize I am hung over this abyss, apparently clamped to a chair or harness of some kind. My limbs are immobilized. I hear Dermott shouting, so apparently he is here as well.

After 10 minutes or so, one clamp, on one of my legs, releases. I tuck the freed foot up under the restrained leg, in order to not have to fight against the dangling so much. As it is, I feel my own weight pulling most heavily upon the clamps, in a most uncomfortable manner. Dermott has apparently been similarly handled, for his shouts and cries redouble.

Another 10 minutes, or so, as it is hard to judge when all one can see is darkness, and my other leg releases. Now the hanging is quite strenuous, most of my weight on a strap about my waist. I can no longer tuck my legs up, and have no purchase. Dermott as well, I gather, as his wailing reaches a crescendo, with cries of "I'll tell you anything!"

Upon his words, the chairs move upward, and swing around, such that we are raised into a small room, and brought to a seated position, at which point my legs are once again restrained. Ah, well. I am too bothered by the reception to worry about it.

Merlin, Mandor, Dara, Gilva, Dalt, Lord Kov, and a man completely shrouded in red robes face us. A pair of demons in Hendrake livery flank the chairs.

"Oh, god, I'm dead!" shouts Dermott.

I just say nothing. I will not blubber, and I am not so easily intimidated. If they really wanted us dead, we would already be dead. And nothing I say will really change what is

about to occur, I gather. With Dara in the room, certainly nothing I say will be taken as I mean it, anyway.

Dara approaches Dermott and he cringes, as she strokes his hair. "Dermott, dear Dermott, what happened, we trusted you?"

"It was that bitch, we were set up!"

"Which bitch would that be?"

"Bethany! It was cunning, I didn't think she had it in her!"

And then she turns upon me. "And you, you little strumpet, what do you have to say?"

I simply say nothing. There is nothing I could say to her that would actually make any difference. She is not one to listen to reason. Merlin himself only looks frustrated, and at the end of his rope. But he isn't the one questioning... Curious that. And who is the robed man?

"Now, Dara, no need to be rude... yet..." Mandor says, as he spins three metal globes loosely in one hand.

Dara continues, facing both of us, in an infuriatingly sweet tone. "Needless to say we need to know exactly how you two were involved in this scheme of your friends, or yours, or whomever. Otherwise people get put out, and start looking for scapegoats, and well, there you go."

"Did you know anything?" shouts Dermott to me, apparently desperate.

"Of course not. Though I can't honestly believe it was really them. I can't give them the credit to scheme their way out of a wet paper sack." I reply blithely, pointedly not looking at Dara, as far as that is possible.

"But the assassins from Frederick's Shadow, and the magic of Bethany's? It all fits!" Dermott's voice cracks as he exclaims it.

My answer is short. "Bethany is too naively simple to do such a thing."

"But you'd have us believe that you were dupes, or cat's-paws?" Mandor counters.

"In the wrong place at the wrong time. Ignorance is not the same as naivety, or as duplicity."

Mandor turns his questions then to Dermott, and discovers Bethany had some grudge against him. Apparently Dermott had previously led him to believe she favored him. He is most displeased with this apparent deception. Mandor releases his steel balls, which fly from his hand to orbit Dermott. "Let the doors of pain be opened."

Dermott screams, for about 10 seconds. Whatever Mandor did was either quite frightening, or painful, as was implied. I am unimpressed by Dermott's complete lack of fortitude. Then Mandor turns to me again... "Now Surengiin, tell us, what happened at the dinner, start right before the things showed up..." Dermott is isolated from me, by the descent of an opaque crystal dome, before I am to tell my tale.

I see no profit in holding back, although they probably will gain little enlightenment from my story. After all, they were all there as well, within feet of me. I tell an accurate, from my point of view, rendition. I spare no facts, except for the end where Dalt so rudely waylays me. I also make no speculations, and add nothing that was not directly observed by my own eyes. It seems that Dara, especially, is annoyed by the fact that I only state the baldest facts, and make no implications.

"So you mean, you are saying you had nothing to do with the attempted assassination of our king and the subsequent kidnapping?" asks Mandor once more...

"Yes, that is precisely what I am saying."

"Very well, now we will talking to your companion."

I am enclosed in a dome of opaque crystal, cutting me off from the sight and sound of others. I assume that now they will speak to Dermott, in order to see if our tales match. Unfortunately for me, I cannot foresee this going well. Dermott is a self-admitted liar, and demonstrably without fortitude or honor. I'm sure he will tell them whatever he thinks they want to hear, rather than what he actually saw.

But before my speculations can do more than begin, the dome is washed in strobing lights. I close my eyes but to no avail, they penetrate my eyelids by virtue of sheer brightness. The dome is filled with screeching, discordant dissonance. The chair to which I am bound begins to spin, and my own senses seem to assault me.

Well, it seems that they are still trying to break me. I attempt to find some corner of my own thoughts where I can achieve a state of meditative calm, but I cannot. This jarring discordance of the senses leaves me spinning in my own mind.

I quickly lose any sense of time and space I once had. If I could feel the rest of my body, I might even be ill. As it is, all I can do is bite my own cheek, and focus on the pain. I will not cry out.

Eventually, it slowly grinds to a stop. It's hard to tell, it seems that I felt I was spinning even as I came to be still again. The lights still echo behind my closed eyelids, and my ears ring. I feel sweat running down my back. I simply attempt to sit in stillness, and not give them the satisfaction of being ill.

The first thing I see, as my eyes clear is Dara, rubbing Dermott's head. She makes another rude comment in my direction.

The figure in red robes steps forward. "Be silent, Dara of Sawall. This is my jurisdiction." Ah, so this one is a judge... "Normally in situations like this the accused are cast into the Abyss, but in this case, others have come forward on their behalf. Since evidence is not clear enough to determine their guilt or innocence beyond doubt, they shall face a trial. Their guilt or innocence will be determined by trial of ordeal. The defendants will be fitted with the proper restraints and sent to hunt down their former compatriots and Queen Coral of Kashfa. Upon retrieving these into the Courts of Chaos, their debt to us will be considered cancelled, unless circumstances demand a new trial." The figure pauses.

"This verdict is to be carried out immediately. The defendants have one year to accomplish this task. If it is not accomplished in a year, they will be summarily executed. In the name of the Serpent that lies in the center of the universe, let it be done." With this final pronouncement, the red-robed figure, judge of Chaos as he seems, disappears in a puff of red smoke.

Hmm. So we have a year to hunt down the others. If it really is their doing, which I still can't credit, I will certainly kill them. But only a year... Well, that leaves Dermott out of the planning. He took 20 years, subjectively, and still couldn't find Frakir, whom I found in three weeks. It looks like it is up to me to solve this.

King Merlin steps forward. "We have heard the judgment of the court. It is to be done now. But, first I would speak to them *alone* to tell them the nature of their tasks, and what they need to know in order to carry them out. Sentence will be carried out in 15 minutes. Mandor remain, everyone else leave."

Dara kisses Merlin, and then Dermott on the cheek. "I know its all her fault. I'm glad you did the right thing and told us." She quips to Dermott. As a parting shot, she turns to me. "See, it's so much easier if you cooperate. We could have been friends, but no, you wouldn't have that... I'm so sorry for you." And then, haughtily, she departs.

My jaw is clenched so hard my teeth hurt, but I keep my tongue. I can taste the blood in my mouth. The wrong word now will not help me.

Everyone else leaves on Dara's heels, except Mandor, of course.

Merlin speaks. "I am horrified at what this has come to. I'm sorry for what you have endured, and what you will endure. But it was the best Luke and I could do in this case. Many are those that wished you summarily executed. But, this is more important than you can know. Before you go I must entrust to you a great secret, which I hope you are worthy to bear. If not, you will be executed. But there is nothing for it now."

During this time, it seems Dermott has found his tongue, for he seems bent on making conciliatory comments about our situation. Personally I just wish he would shut up.

Merlin just continues on. "We believe Queen Coral was the primary target last night. You noticed she wore an eye patch? Under that is a item, an artifact, the Jewel of Judgment..."

Merlin proceeds to tell a tale of this Jewel, of what it is, roughly, and the part it played in the last war between Chaos and Amber. Between Chaos and Order. The poles of the universe. It becomes apparent to me that our companions have been implicated by Dermott, and that it sounds like there was an implication that the Court of Amber was involved in the planning of this kidnapping. Not good.

"After this, war will be difficult to avoid, unless you can provide information, or take actions to prevent it. Your primary objective is the safe return of the Queen of Kashfa and the Jewel. Finding your companions is secondary. We must find them all. Above all we must ascertain the location of the Jewel."

"Who is to get the Jewel if we recover it?" asks Dermott, "Is this whole situation to remain a secret? What if Random finds out?"

"Random already knows about the Jewel and Coral. If you do find the Jewel, and Coral no longer possesses it, then we will have to rendezvous at a neutral location, and it will probably be returned to the King of Amber."

Mandor nods in agreement and adds, "The universe as we know it would come to an end if the Serpent were to actually get his eye back."

"For now, do you have any questions?" Merlin turns to us.

Dermott sums it up our goals succinctly. As I have nothing to add, and cannot think of anything at the moment, I remain silent. It is made plain to us, that if Chaos is left lacking a scapegoat, we will be the scapegoat.

"And now, comes the most unpleasant part..." Merlin looks away, "Mandor, do it."

Mandor approaches us... I wonder what sort of 'restraints' we are to be set with? Apparently painful ones, as Merlin does not seem to care to watch. Mandor produces two large, faceted domes of crystal. He places one next to each of our chairs, and lowers the opaque crystal domes over us again.

Then there is a hissing noise. The crystal seems to fold open into halves, and out of it comes a swarm of tiny crystalline... insects is all I could call them. They buzz about and then swarm me. I can feel them stabbing or stinging, or biting me all about. A multitude of small pains. As each one strikes, it falls off, apparently dead. A few moments after the last one falls, the dome rises again.

Mandor is waiting. "What you have just experienced is what I refer to as a shard swarm, something I have been working on for a couple years. They home in on heat, and inject their victims with something called monofilament devitalizer. To make a long story short, the MDV works its way through your body until it reaches your digestive tracts. There it attaches itself and feeds from your body. At this stage the only symptom you should see is an increase in appetite."

"It grows as it feeds from the proteins and energy it takes from you. It forms nerve bundles, and eventually, a full nervous system. The thing should reach full growth in a few weeks. After that you will act as transceivers, broadcasting all you see and hear back to the main control unit. After a time, you will also be subject to subconscious commands from the control unit. If, after a year, it has not been removed or neutralized, it will consume your entire nervous system and brain, rendering you a mindless automaton, hence the time limit on your mission. Any attempt to remove or neutralize the... sentence... will be known to me and activate the failsafe."

Hmm... Definitely up to me. Dermott will likely be of very little help at all.

"You will be taken care of this evening, and placed in the quarters of an... honored... guest. Tomorrow you will begin your search. Please let me know if you need anything, I am interested to see how this works out, I haven't had field trials yet."

Mandor leaves with an elegant bow and a grin I can best describe as evil. Merlin then speaks one last time. "Sorry, but at least you're still alive." He leaves, and the chairs release. Hendrake guards escort us ungently to our quarters to where we are locked in and left...

Personally, I can only wonder if I will be able to sleep tonight at all. I no longer worry about an assassination attempt by Dara, at least not until this is over. But, every time I close my eyes, I can still see the spinning afterimages of strobe lights. Meditation seems nearly impossible, but I keep at it. I myself am of little use if I cannot regain my center; my balance both mental and physical. I must be sharp, to be on the hunt. But stillness is hard come by.

Whoever's plot this truly is, I swear death on them. I swear it with all my heart.

## Day 30689 (8 March 2004)

Before dawn I am awake and ready to leave, though as yet I have no idea as to where I will go or how I will get there. I

only know the sooner this task is done, the better. The door is still locked, so I meditate, and wait. No one comes, the door is not unlocked even after the dawn is well past.

How long are we to be held before we can begin? It is impossible to determine. I can feel hunger gnawing at me, so eventually I knock at the locked door. A guard opens it, and when I request breakfast, food is brought. At least I can make requests. A small blessing. Though I am famished, as Mandor warned, I force myself to eat only little. I am uncertain whether a fast will slow the growth of this parasitical thing Mandor has inflicted on us, but it certainly can't hurt to try, by my reckoning. The rest of breakfast I leave for lunch, and possibly supper. I will see how long I can draw this out.

A day to rest is perhaps not a bad thing. I convert Clairvidere into its book form and begin to add a Trump of Amber into its array, so that I can give my actual card to Dermott if he does not have one. I'm sure by now he's figured out I'm a Trump artist, as it seems everyone else has. Looking through, I could in theory give him several others as well, but we'll see first.

Trump work eats the day away, and distracts me from hunger pangs. My anger subsides a little as I work, and acceptance begins. Things are what they are, and all I can do is deal with this situation one day at a time. Eventually the sky purples and dims, and I retire again. If no one comes tomorrow, I shall attempt to leave by my own means.

## Day 30690 (8 March 2004)

Before dawn I am awake and ready to leave again, but again no one comes, even after dawn. It seems we are not to be allowed to wander the Chaos Court, but there seems to be no reason we couldn't leave Chaos by Trump, as my cards are cold.

I spend the morning finishing the Trump of Amber in Clairvidere and return it to the form of a tattoo. I prepare myself for travel, and once again have a very light meal. I then knock for the guards again, and request that they bring Dermott to me. I half expect them to refuse, but they do not.

Dermott enters some minutes later, coolly angry in aspect, and insulting the House of Hendrake while talking into his hand. I wonder what he is up to. Has what remains of his mind finally left him?

He is offended, and seems to think I'm stupid for wanting to speak to him. He insists I don't speak out loud. What madness is this? When I insult him back, he grabs me, and though I pull back from him, his form being malleable merely goes with me.

I feel him speaking to me directly, mind to mind. This confuses me greatly. He explains to me what a transceiver is, and I understand now why he wants such direct contact, though I still shrink from it. Mandor is listening in on us, but perhaps not on a mental level. He says he has protections, and he hopes I have mental protections as well. I do not understand how he accomplishes this. He tries to explain, but seems to think I am unintelligent and equate everything to black magic.

He then seems to enter a meditation where he examines the working of the transceiver, and then he ends telepathic contact. He says it extends to our thoughts as well, so there is

no point to such contact, and I am both relieved and disturbed. Mandor can now read our thoughts?

Well, whether he is reading our minds or not, we still have to get started somewhere. I list off those who to my knowledge are suspects – those who knew about Coral's significance. Included are: Merlin, Mandor, Dara, Random, Luke, Dalt, Dworkin, Coral herself, the Pattern, and possibly the Logrus. I also state that I believe she would be found in the least likely place; either here in Chaos or in her home realm of Begma. Dermott doesn't disagree, but suggests we start in Amber, as it seems we are not to be allowed free run here in Chaos, and Chaos being infinitely mutable would be virtually impossible to search anyhow. I can only shrug and acquiesce, as I don't know anything that would contradict his statements, or even narrow our search here.

Our conversation is in fact weird and quite disjointed. In the course of trying to figure out all these new concepts of Chaos and transceivers we have danced about many subjects including philosophy. Eventually I have to stop the conversation as it has gone too far from our starting point.

I bring up the more practical matter of method of travel. I tell Dermott that I have Trump, but I cannot walk Shadow. He says he can. That is a small relief to me. Trump is faster, though. I ask him if he has a Trump of Amber, as I have a spare. He says no, he only has Merlin, Martin, and Dara. I give him the Amber Trump. I ask if he wants Trump of the others; Bethany, Frederick, Aseric, or Kaliese... he declines these. He says he can contact them through Involee. He then hands me a black ring. I take it with a sigh, and immediately here a cultured voice in my mind! Involee speaks!

Dermott again seems frustrated at what he sees as my simplicity of thought. I am merely uneducated, not stupid! Involee explains to me it is intelligent, and seems to think we are related. I don't press the issue, but tuck the ring into my sash for safe keeping. I don't want to get side-tracked again.

I ask Dermott if there is anything he needs to retrieve from his quarters, and he says no. We decide, therefore, to leave immediately for Amber, as I am ready to go as well.

Before we depart, I attempt to Trump Bethany, Leonardo, and Frederick. I even try Aseric. I get no response, like my signal simply disappears into a void with no answer. Ah, well, I didn't expect to actually reach them, but it doesn't hurt to eliminate the simple solutions first before moving on to the more complex.

Dermott uses the card I gave him, and when he has departed, I summon Clairvidere as a mirror, and follow. I feel some slight resistance, like a barrier, that seems to dissipate before me. If something was preventing our Trump departure previously, it is no longer doing so. I assume that this would tell whomever our keepers are that we have gone.

We both arrive outside Castle Amber without incident. It seems to be around lunchtime here. We approach the castle and are immediately stopped by the guards, who are apparently watching for us. They ask us to follow, and begin escorting us towards the audience chambers on the first floor.

I can clearly hear yelling from within the throne room. Random is arguing with another man, who is yelling about his daughter and mutual protection pacts. I can only gather it is Coral's father.

We are led to a sitting room off the main throne room. Sitting at a sunny window, drinking tea, is a brown haired

woman. As she turns, I can see immediately that it is Queen Vialle.

“Who is this?” She politely inquires, and the guards introduce us. She invites us to sit and take tea with her, which we do. Before we begin to speak, though, she motions us to be silent. She explains that she is aware of much of our situation from Random, who apparently heard through a letter sent by Dermott earlier. She then says there are some things that need to be done before we can speak further. She has the guards bring Princess Fiona.

Fiona enters with greetings for us, and obvious curiosity, but Vialle tells her to wait until later. Fiona immediately settles into casting some sort of spell, and I politely turn away. A glow builds throughout the room for a few minutes, then explodes, and fills the chamber. The whole room seems to glow slightly. She then touches each of us on the forehead, and seems to assess our situation. She has set a ward against the transceiver, she informs us. It should last about an hour, she suspects.

She turns to leave, dismissed by Vialle, and invites us to visit her later. She wants to examine Mandor’s work. This bothers me somehow, but I can’t place why. I would rather not be interfered with any further than I already have, I suppose. Interference could be dangerous, as well.

Once she is gone, we settle to serious discussion. Queen Vialle explains what she knows, and Dermott adds a little to this, but not much. This is the first time Queen Vialle has actually spoken to us at length, and despite myself, I find I like her. She is intelligent, and seems genuinely concerned about the situation. Can I trust my own feelings on this matter?

Dermott asks her how to contact Dworkin. Vialle explains the red-heads, Brand, Fiona, and Bleys, were always the closest to Dworkin, and might know how to contact him. Vialle also tells us Random believes we weren’t involved in the whole plot because we were too ignorant of the relevant information. He is concerned about getting the King of Begma’s daughter, Coral, back and proving who was behind it. The Begman King is suggesting that this is an act of war from the Courts of Chaos and he might invoke the mutual protection pact... which we heard them yelling about.

It is the highest order imperative that the Jewel be retrieved and returned to Amber immediately. But we aren’t to remove the Jewel from Coral if it is still implanted in her eye. But if it has been removed, then we need to bring it to Amber.

The Court of Amber has been informed they have to cooperate with us, but not why. That must gall the elders, I think. Vialle gives me her signet ring as proof we work in the name of the Crown. She says we can dine with the court, or alone, but we should beware of our conversations with others, since they do not know they are being overheard. We must always remember this, and be vigilant.

She also makes a point of telling us not to use this license to pay off petty vendettas. As if we would? I could not comprehend of such a misuse of power. It would be so far beyond honorless I could not do so.

Dermott and I agree we wish to begin our investigation immediately, although Vialle assures us that our quarters are still waiting for us, undisturbed. She quips that her state prevents her taking part in much of the daily routine of the court, much to the envy of Random.

I can only respond that surely it must not be an impediment to her grace.

She responds that it truly is no impediment, but a convenient excuse to avoid boredom, which makes me smile just a bit.

Finally, she says that I should feel free to make a Trump of her, if I wish. She also asks to feel our faces, such that she can get an idea of our features and appearance. I agree and seat myself nearby easily, though again I cannot say why. I usually hate being touched, but I cannot bring myself to refuse her request. Her only comment is that I seem very tense, and she hopes that I can learn to relax. She then excuses herself, as she is sure we wish to make use of our remaining moments of free conversation.

We decide to start looking for Aseric. He also reportedly has encountered Dworkin, and might remember where to find him. He was last heard from when he went to search Brand’s room, weeks ago. I cannot believe he is still there, but we have nowhere else to begin. Perhaps we can find a clue to his whereabouts. We would both rather deal with Aseric than with Fiona. Less dangerous. And to get Bleys to help us Dermott thinks I would have to sleep with him! Inconceivable.

I state I would not want to try to draw a Trump of Dworkin myself yet, as I have only spoken to him for a moment or two. I fear it would not work correctly. Dermott seems highly surprised at this comment, but I am sure I have mentioned my encounter with Dworkin before. Perhaps it only just sunk in for him.

But, finally there is nothing to do but begin. As we leave the room the ward shatters. There is still yelling from the throne room. It seems Random has had enough. Dermott leads me quickly to Brand’s room. It seems he has served as a page here in Amber, and knows his way around the castle quite well.

He has never been into Brand’s room though. None of the pages have, he explains. Brand was known for setting traps, and fear keeps the servants away, even now, long after his death. The door is unlocked, and Dermott swings it open. There is dust everywhere.

I grab his shoulder before he enters. The rug before the door has a familiar pattern. It takes me a moment to remember, but then it clicks. The pattern in the rug. I saw it the last time I managed to make contact with Aseric. It was kaleidoscope-bright and I ended up in the mirror hall. I warn Dermott not to step on the rug. This is probably some sort of magical trap.

Other than around the rug itself, though, the room has obviously lain undisturbed for a long time. The remains of an uneaten meal rot on the table, the bed is unmade, everything is dusty and molding. The trappings of magical practices are everywhere, and Dermott collects some of the papers. I don’t agree with robbing the dead, but my opinion doesn’t seem to matter to him.

He summons forth Involee then, to test the rug. The black construct creates a cloned form, female, that resolves into the image of Kaliese. Hmm... So he can create duplicates. Oh well. I am still me, so I don’t care. It is up to the others to watch out for themselves. I may end up killing them anyhow, if they are truly responsible.

Involee’s extension steps onto the rug, and disappears in a kaleidoscopic flash. So what I experienced then was the rug.

At least I correctly interpreted that. Point in my favor. Invelee can no longer reach or communicate with that piece of itself, though it senses it is not destroyed. No help there. We cannot tell where the rug leads.

With nothing gained, we must now go to speak to Fiona. As we leave, Dermott tells Invelee to gather what samples it can find in the room for his genealogical research of Amberites, and to catch up to us later. It flows into the form of a snuffling animal and begins to consume any organic material it can find, other than furniture... Disgusting. We leave it to its task and move on.

Fiona herself was in her quarters waiting. Her chambers are not what I expected. Most magicians I have met seem very unkempt and messy. Fiona is the opposite. Her rooms are spartan and extremely clean. I am impressed despite myself. She sits upon a couch, reading.

Fiona welcomes us with a little too much courtesy. Both Dermott and I are nervous about speaking with her, but Vialle told us Fiona knows a little about what is going on, since she had to have some knowledge to set the wards earlier. So, I bring myself to speak, as silence will get us nowhere.

I ask her for help finding Dworkin. She explains that he does not live in Amber Castle itself, but in a dungeon on the plane of the Primal Pattern. Amber is only the first Shadow of this Primal Pattern. Fascinating, but again I dare not dally in philosophy. I ask for directions on how to reach Dworkin's dungeon, and Fiona tells us there is a way from the dungeons in this castle that connects, near to the chamber of the Pattern. I ask if there is another way, and she says yes, though upon questioning admits the other ways are not accessible to us at this time.

As we turn to go, she invites us to stay for lunch, but we decline. She also asks for samples of our blood, to study this infestation of ours set on us by Mandor. This request alarms me somewhat, but I am long practiced at concealing such feelings. Dermott hesitantly concedes to her wish, but manages to convince her one sample should suffice, and none is required of me. I am relieved, but I don't know why Dermott did this. It seems unlike him to be so openly helpful to me. Ah, well, move on. The price of his help will be made clear in time.

## Day 30690 cont.(3 May 2004)

We move on through the dungeon to the room indicated by Fiona's directions. We reach a cell door, Dark but for an oil lamp, and a smell of old organic decay permeates that indicates no one has been in here in a long time... Char marks, empty wine bottles, other trash... Pictures of some sort on the wall. I examine the pictures carefully, not wishing to disturb the chalky scratched images. They are both cold, faintly, and have the feel of Trump, which I inform Dermott of. I indicate that the person whom I saw before that I believed was Dworkin was in a library much like one that is depicted in one of the two images, so I suspect that is the correct image.

After informing Dermott, I see no reason to dawdle. As he is still examining the cell, I tell him it is time to move on, and reach for the image. Contact comes easier than I expected from such a sketchy form, and I find myself transported..

The room smells smoky & musty, and is lit dimly with candles. Haphazard piles of books and plates of abandoned

meals and empty glass are littered everywhere among all the various piles magical equipment and other unidentifiable debris.

I quickly find that Dermott doesn't follow. So this is the price of his diversion of Fiona? I am to face this 'mad magician' Dworkin alone? Very well. I am not afraid to do so, and I can Trump Dermott if I need to make a quick escape. Calling out, I find no response, so he is perhaps not here, or perhaps cannot hear me, or perhaps even just chooses not to answer. In any case, it seems I must look for him.

Before setting out to find Dworkin, I carefully tuck Aseric and Dermott's Trumps in my sleeve – fast access if needed. In but a few moments I believe I have explored this small dungeon, and find no one in residence... odd... It is not large. I find a privy, and a kitchen area, both as unclean as the main room, or more so. I also soon find a tunnel that leads to daylight, the walls of rough-hewn stone.

With no other obvious course, I follow the tunnel. Outside it is a warm, bright spring day, clear and ideal in almost any way. The sky is perhaps the bluest I have ever seen. The air is purer than on a mountain peak, though I note I am indeed on a mountain. The top of the mountain seems perfectly smooth, as if shorn away by the gods. Upon this plateau is a Pattern, the Primal Pattern, if Fiona is to be believed, etched in silver flame. It hurts my head to look upon it too closely.

At the beginning of this Pattern, I then note is a large stake... And tethered to this stake by a metal collar and long chain is a strange beast! It is reptilian in aspect, 50' long from head to tail, if I judge correctly... It stands upon two long legs that end in talons, and has the tail of a scorpion. It launches itself into the air on huge bat-like wings as soon as it notes my presence...

My first thought is to gauge the length of that chain! It seems that if I stay here at the cave mouth, it might not be able to reach me, but I cannot be entirely certain. Its posture seems defensive, so I take no immediate action. The presence of a chain indicates a guardian beast, perhaps? If it sees I do not threaten, it may become calmer.

Looking around the plateau then, I try to see if anyone is around this outside area, but I can see no one besides me and the beast...I then realize, much to my own dismay, that someone has walked up behind me, and I turn. How did I not notice?

"Uh, may I help you? Have we met?" he says... He is an older fellow, quite tall, with tailored clothing of a sort I have not seen before. His clothes are grey, and quite neat and trim. He has lace at the end of his sleeves, crisp and white, along with white covers on shiny black leather shoes. He carries a black cane topped with a silver eagle's head. His eyes are violet, and his hair quite gray, cut in a short, neat hairstyle similar to others I've seen worn in Amber... This certainly isn't Dworkin. Who is it?

"I beg your pardon... I am Surengiin. I came here hoping to speak to Dworkin."

"Congratulations, you've found him."

"Excellent." I reply, though I find myself confused... How can this be Dworkin? But they do say he is mad... Best to tread carefully. If he is as ancient and powerful as others have hinted, perhaps he is a shape-changer as well, which would explain how my last encounter was so different.

“Would you care to accompany me on a walk? It’s a fine day today?”

“Certainly. It is indeed.” I say carefully. Best to humor him.

“After you,” he replies, indicating a path leading path the guard-beast... “Don’t mind Sammy, he’s mostly harmless...”

The beast, for its part, seems much calmer, as it hears the voice of its master. Or is Dworkin its master? I couldn’t say. But I take a few steps, careful to position myself to politely accompany this strange fellow without presenting myself as a vulnerable target...

He amiably explains he is feeling good today... Many other days he is not himself, and the beast prevents him from rash actions... I find it strange, he seems to admit he is touched by madness openly. But if he can manage this problem, then I suppose it is not all bad.

This was not what I expected Dworkin to be like. He’s so... Gentlemanly... Not the crazed old man I was led to expect.

He suddenly seems almost to prick up his ears... “Were you by chance accompanied?” he asks?

“Perhaps, I did have a companion but I thought he didn’t follow me here.”

“Ah, I can sense someone else about... Shall we return?”

Dworkin sets off to the cave again, and I follow a bit behind him. Inside is Dermott, who also seems surprised at Dworkin’s appearance and manner. Dermott promptly begins to flatter him extensively.

Dermott proceeds after a moment or two to ask if Dworkin knows the whereabouts of Aseric... It seems that at this point, I am not to be given a word edgewise in the conversation, so I simply listen carefully and keep my eye on the old gentleman.

He responds that yes, he rescued him from Brand’s carpet and tossed him elsewhere, but he can’t be sure where. Maybe in the castle. Unicorn only knows... Hmm. He seems less certain of himself than he did a few moments ago. Best to get this conversation over quickly...

I interrupt as politely as I can... “While we do wish to find Aseric, this isn’t what we came here to speak to you about.” As I speak Dworkin gestures, and pulls wine and cut crystal glasses out of thin air... “The matter is actually one of great importance, the Jewel of Judgment has been stolen...” I proceed to give him a brief explain of the assassination attempts and circumstances...

This news seems to anger and upset Dworkin. He seems quite disgusted as he begins gesturing and casting some spell, tracing a complicated pattern of silver fire in the air. This ephemeral mobile begins to spin, faster and faster... I cannot keep my eyes upon it... until it forms a silver sphere so flawless I cannot tell if it is still spinning or has gone still.

He gazes into this sphere for a few moments, apparently attempting to scry out the Jewel, or at least I hope so... But it is apparently to no avail. He dismisses the sphere with an impatient gesture.

“Nope can’t find it. It’s being hidden. Sorry, you’re on your own.” At prompting from Dermott and myself, he goes on to explain several ways it could be hidden by other powerful casters or artifacts. So it seems his help will not be all that is hoped.

He then gives us one good lead. He says the Hall of Mirrors is a place to go to find what needs to be seen, and found. When we ask how to get there, he says he gave one of us the key already.. What key? He gave Aseric a mirror Trump. Ah. Then our key is to find Aseric.

To our surprise, Dworkin then lashes out at thin air, cursing birds that follow him, though we see nothing... Within seconds his demeanor has changed, and I can see madness in him. Perhaps brought out by the upset of the news, I cannot say. But his mental acuity seems to have vanished in seconds, and our position becomes precarious just as fast. I am already pulling out Trumps, as is Dermott, as he snaps, and swings out to attack us.

I can hear Dermott shouting “Martin!”, over Dworkin’s screams, as he disappears. Dworkin, for his part, is indeed a shape-shifter, I note, as he morphs into a demonic creature more fearsome than those I saw in the Courts of Chaos... He has a wicked bladed device in his hands, as I too try to Trump away. But the first card in my sleeve is Aseric’s! And I can still get no response.

In a blind panic, I then grab the second card, which is Dermott’s. To my great relief, I can immediately contact him, and he pulls me through.

I find I have arrived in a bar, typical of those found by the docks of many places. It is a shabby place, but not too rough. The patrons, mostly sailors by their look, seem to notice our arrival, but not to care. We must be near Amber then, I gather.

Before me is a table with the fixings of a lobster dinner. At the table sits Martin.

“What in the name of Unicorn were you doing?” he asks?

“We were talking to Dworkin?” my only, and truthful reply.

Dermott immediately launches into the tale of our whole situation, and Martin invited us to join him somewhere quiet to discuss it, but I cut Dermott off quickly. I am mindful that this is still supposed to be kept somewhat secret, and that we are being listened to by Mandor’s ‘transceiver’.

“Let’s go Dermott.”

Martin confirms for us that we are in the town just outside Amber Castle, close to the docks. The restaurant is called ‘Bloody Bill’s’ and was recommended to Martin by Merlin. Martin explains that he has been disturbed himself lately, as his grandmother Queen Moiré of Rebma is apparently on her deathbed. We give him our condolences, but I remind Dermott again that time is of the essence.

Martin, in response to my obvious urging for speed, gives us the use of his carriage to get back to the castle. It is generally agreed that we owe him several nights on the town for all the help he’s given us... But that’s fine. A royal liveried carriage with 4-horses and livery and servants... It certainly provides us with a fast ride back to the castle.

Once we reach the castle, Dermott seems to think finding Aseric will be as simple as finding a Trump-dead room. I don’t think it will be so simple; Dworkin wasn’t in the fittest frame of mind, and I doubt anything he said could be much trusted. Dermott still, however, suggests I start searching for trump-dead areas.

Logic tells me that aside from private sanctuaries of the Elders, the most likely spot would be the dungeons. Dermott suggests splitting up, but I object; I don’t know my way around the castle, he does. He seems incredulous that I don’t

know my way, but I remind him that I've spent less than a full day here, all told, while he has spent much longer. Eventually I convince him to lead the way. As evening descends, we search the dungeons again, but find no trace that Aseric was ever there.

Dermott even queries the servants, who confirm that they haven't seen him in a long time, since before his fall into Brand's rug.

It is growing late in the day by now. I suggest he try to use Involee to track Aseric, as Aseric has one of the black rings... He concentrates silently for a long time as he speaks to his construct. Finally he speaks aloud, "How the fuck did he get out there?"

"Dworkin?" I reply, testily.

"He's out in shadow somewhere... out in the middle... I have a feeling. I hope you like Yeti... And don't bring matched luggage."

The middle? Ah, between Amber and Chaos. "I don't carry luggage but I have a fast horse.."

"Oh no, you don't want to do that. Bring lots of bug repellent..." and Dermott starts ranting about yeti and beatings and other random nightmarish catastrophes... Has Dworkin's madness rubbed off on him? No, he explains, it is the limit of Broken Pattern. We can travel, but the road will be long, rough and unpleasant.

As darkness falls I saddle Kaze and prepare to leave. Dermott seems annoyed I insist upon bringing her, but I will not relent. This is a long trip, and by horseback would be easier, at least for me, since I cannot shape-shift. He will not bring his horse, though. He seems not to care. I let the issue drop, as I have to follow Dermott on his vector, and don't want to make things any more unpleasant than they have to be.

Though we don't trust, or like each other, we have to work together. It chafes, but there is nothing for it. I only hope we find Aseric in time.

## Day 30728 (3 May 2004)

We have been on the road for almost a month, by my reckoning... Only eleven months left in our 'sentence' by the Courts of Chaos. And still no Aseric. To say this road has unpleasant is an understatement of epic proportions.

We began our trek in Forest Arden, as we have several times before, but it quickly veered darkly. The wood within a day or two became dark and menacing. The trees seemed alive and watchful. Finally, when Dermott began to sing of woodcutters and vegetarians, I felt I needed to shut him up, but too late... The trees heard, and uprooted themselves to pursue us. Dermott, though I pulled him into the saddle, launched himself to the air to fly away and escape. I suppose I should have expected that. The great trees tried to grab and crush us mercilessly. Kaze was swift enough to evade them, luckily. Even long after, I swear I could hear the moans of "Tree killer" on the wind.

The woods past, we then found ourselves on plains, and the grass became taller and taller. Days passed and we found ourselves among insects, ants as big as war-elephants! I had never before realized the predatory nature of some insects until that moment... For we were small and moving, and became prey to them. More fleeing.

Dermott again flies off, but this time seems determined to grab me from the saddle. I will not abandon Kaze to these things, however. Finally, he summons Involee, and despite my revulsion, I find I am encased in blackness. My only hope is that it took Kaze as well. That would be more merciful, I hope, than leaving her to the roaches and ants.

I feel almost immediately released then, confused and in disarray. All is blackness around me, nighttime, but yet I can see clearly. I find I am suspended in mid-air among the blackness. It is then I realize how wrong things are. I am engulfed by horror!

My body has been changed by that black creature of Dermott's! Cursed Involee!!! It has merged my form with that of Kaze in some unspeakable melding! My waist ends in the body of Kaze, and great bat-wings spring from her...our...back. My fingers are talons. I am covered in some thick dark substance like the chitin Dermott wears, like armor or barding. The wings are beating by some instinctive action, for I do not know how I do it. All I can do is scream in horror and frustration, but that too is wrong. The scream comes out a bird-like shriek, and I can feel fangs in my mouth.

There are other... misshapen things flying in the darkness around us, and running beneath us. Like great dragons, and giant cats. Dermott, again in a changed form, converses amiably with them, and they seem concerned by my displeasure. Dermott then, curse him forever, suggests that it is 'mating season for my species' and the misshapen things go about trying to find me a mate!

Finally in frustration I grab Dermott, and he is captured in my grasp. I seize his throat and demand we move elsewhere NOW. He cannot breathe, he gestures, but I do not care.

"If I can Trump while being strangled, you can shift shadow the same! Now do it!"

But he does not, and then that blasted construct is once again speaking to my mind... Would I please let go of master, before I kill him?

Despite my anger, I cannot but do as it asks... I cannot kill Dermott, for doing so will render me incapable of finding Aseric, and of changing back to my true self, I would gather. I doubt Involee would be kind enough to return my shape if I killed its master. It asks if I do not enjoy my 'improved' form? NO! I think at it, I prefer myself as I am! It replies it felt this form was necessary to survive these circumstances.

So I release my grip, just a little. And Dermott can breathe, and he tries to shift closer to Aseric.

Until we are blinded by a great flash of light. My eyes, 'improved' by Involee, quickly adjust, but Dermott's do not. He is blind, and can shift no more until they heal. Without another word he cocoons himself with Involee, and I am alone, flying in a storm the likes of none I have ever seen, twisted into something hideous and infernal.

It is all I can do to keep flapping, crudely dodging lightning bolts that seem as if they are aimed to hit us. What cruel joke is this? What have I done in this life or any other to deserve this?

It seems I fly for hours, the storm pushing me lower and lower, and my wings eventually beginning to ache. I cannot do this much longer. I can see mountains below me. Eventually I find a large ledge, with a cave where I can try to land. I don't really know what I am doing, but I don't have much choice.

With an ungraceful and painful crash, I go to ground. At least Dermott didn't see that.

I limp into the cave, to wait out the storm. Will it ever end? Or is this a shadow of eternal storm? A puddle on the floor adds the last bit of horror. In the reflection of lightning-flashes, I see my face. It is twisted into the visage of an oni, like a memento I cannot remove after battle. I feel like I might sink down and weep. Or perhaps kill Dermott and destroy Involee, if I could figure out how to do so, and find Aseric...

Eventually, I realize, I can speak directly to Involee. Biting back both tears and anger, I politely ask it to change me back to my normal form. And to return Kaze as well, if it is possible. To my surprise, Involee agrees, and in a rush of blackness, I find myself returned to my true form, and Kaze stands beside me, confused, reproachful, and frightened by the lighting.

Involee collapses itself into Dermott's cocoon, and I can do nothing but wait, and calm Kaze as the thunder and lightning continues unabated outside. At least this cave I found is untenanted. No bears or other mountain beasts have claimed it. I move Kaze to the back so she is not so near the entrance.

After a half and hour, or so, by my reckoning, the cocoon collapses, revealing two forms; both appear to be Dermott.

"Why are there two of you, Dermott?"

"Why not, two is better than one, isn't it?"

One of the forms shifts into the shape of Merlin then,

"Is that better?"

I can only sigh... Here we go again.

It then assumes the shape of Kaliese. So, this must be Involee, I gather. Dermott nods assent.

"What form would you want me to assume?" Involee asks, to my surprise...

"Whatever form please you," I sigh, "I don't care."

It then shifts to a mirror of myself!

"Not that form! I forbid it!"

Involee then retakes the shape to Merlin. Argh. I really dislike seeing duplicates of people I know running about.

Dermott suggests that he thought I liked Merlin, with innuendo in his voice, and I just sigh and ignore him. Nothing I say will make a difference when he is like that. I see nothing more constructive to do than set up camp and wait out the storm.

Involee/Merlin then boldly walks out into the storm, disappearing from sight within seconds. I ask why, and Dermott replies that Involee will scout the way for us, and see how much further we have to go until we reach Aseric. Apparently Involee is not worried about being injured by the lightning.

It seems to take several hours, or maybe days, for the storm to pass, its hard to tell. Dermott produces a deck of cards, and insists on teaching me a game called poker. I quickly learn the rules, along with several variants, and Dermott claims I am good at the game, as my stoic expression gives no clues. I just go along with him, at least he isn't insulting me, and the time passes.

The darkness also gives me a chance to review my Trumps. On the long ride here, I had little time to work on Trumps, but did manage to complete two. One of Castle Amber, on a card, that I intend to give to Aseric when we find

him, and one in my sword; the Courts of Chaos, to facilitate my eventual return there.

Finally, Involee/Merlin returns, as the storm seems to be abating. I am shocked; though its physical form has seemingly gone undamaged, all the clothing has been torn away by lightning, wind and rain. I can only quickly avert my eyes, as I have no wish to see this nude form of a foreign king...

Involee states that we are quite close to Aseric, and that by morning we should be able to move about outside. It seems quite confused that I will not look upon its current form, it asks if do I not find the form pleasing? It thought that I favored this male... I am so embarrassed I can make no response. Finally Dermott chimes in that Involee has shamed me, and there is nothing to do except retreat to an inert form, which it does, to my relief. At least Dermott understands a little... Though I don't know why he explained it to Involee. I can only hope future incidents of this nature can be avoided.

## Day 30729 (3 May 2004)

Morning comes, and Dermott seems used to my routine, as he says nothing while I perform my katas and fix a meager meal of rice for us. At least I packed something, though our rations are scarce. I have lost some weight on this trek, and I feel constantly hungry. Is this the parasite within? I cannot be certain. I worry more for Kaze, she has not been able to graze in several days, eating only a small amount of grain.

The sun blazes outside, the sky is a clear blue. The rocky ground is a strange blue-grey. Involee directs Dermott down a rocky trail outside the cave, and I follow, leading Kaze behind me. As we travel, a mile or more, the ground becomes bluer, and is studded by sky-blue crystals. Finally the land seems to become entirely crystalline, and I fear for Kaze's footing on the slick surfaces.

We then reach a spot where a huge boulder of blue crystal lies up against the mountainside, apparently blocking a cave. Involee indicates that this is our destination.

After determining that we have to move the boulder to gain access into the cave, Dermott and I try to grab handholds on it and push it aside. Then we try to pull. Either way nets no good result. We cannot gain enough purchase upon it to apply our strength. It is too smooth and slick.

Dermott then asks Involee to form tentacles around the boulder. This seems an interesting idea. Is there anything this strange construct cannot do? And if so, why does Dermott need me at all? Oh, yes, he needs me to walk into danger for him. I forgot...

But Involee has formed a rope, woven of its own tentacles cunningly wrapped and wriggled around this great stone. And now, we have enough purchase to move the boulder, we hope. I wonder if I should wrap one end on Kaze's saddle horn to have her aid as well, but dismiss the idea as unnecessary.

"Serpent damn him, he would get stuck in some difficult place like this." Dermott grumbles as we begin to pull...

At last the stone is away. We open the cave, and it seems as if one last lightning bolt from the storm hits the mouth of the cave, blowing the boulder 100 feet away and stunning us all.

Eventually I return to my senses, to find myself lying on the ground, feeling as if I have been hit with a giant fist. My

ears ring, and I am covered in blue dust and bits of shattered crystal. Dermott lies beside me, in a similar state. In the cave mouth is the form of Aseric, seemingly more hurt than either of us... He is bleeding for many little wounds, and his ears are bleeding. But it is, at least, him...

We return to our camping cave, after Aseric gathers some things from the crystal cave, and we all recuperate for a bit. When we can all hear correctly again, Aseric tells us the story of how he got there, trapped in the cave when he tried to use the image of the lighthouse carved on the wall of the prison cell in Amber.

From the cave he has retrieved many small packages, which he reveals to be cunningly wrapped meals, which heat themselves when opened. I am amazed, and grateful for the hot food. He also retrieved a large round hunk of the blue crystal, which he gives to me. He says since it blocks Trump contacts, perhaps studying it would benefit me. I cannot argue, and store the stone away in my pack.

After eating and listening to Aseric's tale, we tell him a bit of our own. How we have to find the Jewel of Judgment. How our 'cousins' have been implicated in the theft of it. How we have only eleven months remaining to find it...

And then I come around to asking him, does he still have his Trumps? Yes, he replies...

Good. I let him know that Dworkin intimidated our path should take us through a mirrored trump he gave to Aseric, and Aseric produces just such a card. I look at it with apprehension... Something is not right about it, though neither Aseric nor Dermott can sense anything wrong.

At any rate, I tell them, for all of us to travel thusly, I will have to copy this improbable Trump. It will take me about 4 days, I guess, to complete two copies. Aseric eventually agrees, reluctantly, to loan me the card to copy. I give him my newest Trump of Amber, in order to recompense him somewhat for his trouble, as I understand his reluctance to give such a rare thing up even for a few days.

## Day 30736 (3 May 2004)

In the end, it takes me longer... A full week, to copy the strange card twice. In order to find the mirror-sheen I need, I have to hunt down mica in the mountains surrounding, and break it thin, and work it into the making of the card. Nothing else I try will render the card correctly. Even so, I wonder if any of the cards will work at all, or if this is just another facet of Dworkin's madness. They all seem to fluctuate, like the tide; cold, then warm, then frigid. I made both copies as individual cards, neither in Clairvidere. With such an unpredictable result, I would not jeopardize the blade.

Throughout all of this the others can detect nothing wrong with the cards; perhaps I can because of my abilities and attunement to them. They, for their part, just rest, and try to figure out what has happened to us. I don't blame them. At least for the moment, we seem to be able to tolerate each other. I know this moment of rest is fleeting. We are about to step once again off the edge of a cliff, into the unknown. And behind all of this, the plotting of elders. But which, and how many? Will we find the others? Will they be involved? Will I really have to kill them?

I find that I do not wish to kill them, at this moment. The righteous anger of a month ago has faded. I am simply tired. I dream now of the day I can rest. But now, at last, we are ready

to go, and rest will have to wait. Ten months and three weeks to go, one way or another.

## Day 30736 cont.(7 June 2004)

The thought has occurred to me, that the last time I entered the mirror realm, Clairvidere did not go with me... If this would happen again, I would be most put out. I won't leave, then, until I have a Trump of this place... Oh, wait, my cards didn't go with me in that case either. Damn. That won't work. Right. I guess I will just have to play it by ear, which irks me greatly.

I figure Dermott will not follow immediately, he never does, but I will go ahead anyway. "Sooner begun, sooner done." And I initiate contact.

I feel like a candle in a hurricane as contact is sudden and intense. It is too powerful to ignore, and I find myself instantly overwhelmed. All goes black.

## Day 30737? (7 June 2004)

Ten months and 20 days, is the first thought to my mind as I awaken... assuming I have only been unconscious briefly, anyhow. Dermott and Aseric are both here, with me, awakening as well. How, I don't know. I expected to be separated, though I'm not sure why.

I check myself over briefly. Clairvidere is still with me, as are my Trumps, though Kaze is not here, despite my having a hand on her bridle. And so I pick myself up and begin to look about. Mirrors upon mirrors.

Stay together, I warn Aseric & Dermott, as some mirrors are portals. Let's start looking for Queen Coral, or the others... I begin to look for a draconian mirror, thinking it might lead me to the "Eye of the Serpent", logically enough.

I find a mirror with a serpentine look to it after a while. I see a strange mist of changing colors and a large shifting maze. Dermott says no, that's the Logrus... It just goes on and on forever, constantly changing... It is hard to tear my eyes away.

Dermott suggest we look for a mirror of coral, which makes sense, but none is obvious. We eventually find one that looks like clockwork parts and is heavily ornamented. We see an ocean and a ship, and Frederick fighting, and diving into the ocean. A shark approaches, and Dermott cheers. He swims into the giant shark's maw and then cuts his way out. He quickly retreats through a portal-cave filled with glowing light. The shark miraculously heals, and follows as the mirror goes blank. Dermott tries to carry the mirror, but it seems awkward. He thinks he might be able to summon Frederick in it again, but I doubt this.

I see a large mirror made of green crystal, emeralds, and in it is red smoke, and it clears to reveal Bethany. She is slaughtering people. Killing and killing, with her bare hands, and then with guns. I don't believe that it can be her, really. I've seen false mirrors before. Or maybe it is a Shadow of her.

Mandor is wearing a strange suit, and talking to her, and then she shoots at him, before he runs into a door of light. She crushes the skull of a huge pig man, and leaves through another door of light. The pig-man heals miraculously as well, and follows her. Dermott looks at carrying this mirror too, but

it is very heavy. He leaves the clockwork mirror next to the emerald one.

I move on... Aseric suggests breaking the mirrors, but Dermott, he warns that the mirrors are trumps and doing so could be catastrophic. I just roll my eyes... He is finally figuring that out, I comment? I have felt weird fluctuations of trump wash over me constantly. It is most unsettling thing, and it is everywhere. Pure Trump energy; It is like standing on the ocean shore as the tide washes around. How can they not feel it?

Aseric finds a verdigris copper mirror. In it is a dimly lit cave/library. Looks familiar... Dworkin's library. Then it mists over and becomes a waterfall out of which comes Dworkin, naked, and then the mirror flips over, smacking Dermott. Apparently Dworkin doesn't like being spied on... I just turn away and leave.

Dermott talks about mimicking what he saw. I continue, not looking backwards... Dermott is shapeshifting again, and it reflects over and over in the mirrors. Disgusting.

Another plain oval mirror clears to reveal the throne room of Amber, with Random? I move on. I don't need to waste time spying on Random, as curious as I am...

As I round a bend, I see a bright light...coming from a large ornate 10' tall mirror, and the light turns red and starts to dim. The mirror looks like a great clock... Dermott goes forward as if to touch it, and taunts Aseric that he will touch it if Aseric rescues him. Inside we see Leonardo. A red gloved figure chokes him, crushing him and the mirror explodes, showering us with shrapnel. Not good. All the shrapnel bits are solid blood-red. Oddly, it isn't from the blood.

I move on, plucking bits of glass from myself, though Aseric thinks we should stay and put the mirror together to try and help Leonardo. I don't think it will work and urge them to move on.

I see a blue-grey organic mirror. Odd lumps cover it and the surface looks like still water. It swirls and clears to reveal a large bed, made of the same mirror stuff, and in it is a woman who is shriveled and green haired. Queen Moiré. She is dying. Martin comes in to her, and we stop looking and turn away. Such personal moments should not be intruded on.

I decide that since this place is filled with Trump energy, that I will try to use it directly. I find a plain floor length mirror, and step forward to face it. I try to summon the image of Coral, with my mind, out of raw energy. I try to shape the power around me. I focus with all my might, and an image begins to form of her. It is the hardest thing I've ever done, but it seems to slowly be working.

The outside world is lost to me as I focus totally, and it seems like trying to juggle too many balls, while standing in a hurricane. But it works and the image is forming. I am so focused I can do nothing except concentrate on maintaining and perfecting the image. I hope Aseric and Dermott are doing something to accomplish our goals while I focus. I can't move or think, except to maintain the image for as long as I can...

It's like trying to sail through a storm, pitching and tossing. I can't maintain it long. It begins to fall apart around me, like juggling too many balls, and I feel something or someone watching me... Maybe several somethings... Ancient and terrible and alien.

I open my eyes as I feel it unravel, and see the mirror, coral's image almost perfect, but the mirror is cracking and

coming apart. Gold light radiates in the cracks, and begins to suck in the mirror. Dermott is in a heap. He then leaps into the vortex of light, and Aseric follows.

The whole hall begins to get sucked into this maelstrom. Dear god, I've destroyed the Hall of Mirrors. I hang on to a large mirror with all my might. The mirror next to me made of odd metal, large and riveted and polished steel, goes flat white and glows. Out of the mirror steps a form, a short 5'6" figure wearing a robe of beige brown tan and he stands untouched by wind and storm. He touches the floor, and raises his arms above his head. He has golden bracers. He strikes them together, chiming loudly, above his head, and spreads his fingers. When the fingers open the wind dies down a bit and the cowl turns to me, I see only a flat beige screen, no face, and a modulated voice speaks.

"Little fool, you know not in what you meddle, be gone from here."

The threads of power emanating from the vortex, jumps from the mirror to him, and I feel like a reverse trump – a dispelling power, and he reweaves the forces, throwing me away... I spin into where?

Reality resolves around me and I hope I only blacked out briefly. I see myself reflected endlessly. A flat surface, before me a wall, and another some distance behind me, though it feels curved. No corners, no seams, everything reflecting. Nothing seems to make sense, and I can find no features.

I check my Trumps, and the cards are hot... Is this some place where Trump is negative? Have I been imprisoned, or exiled? Or is my power simply broken from the things I tried to do? Clairvidere is hot on my back, like a sunburn, and does not respond to my call. I am alone, and I can find nothing but my own image. I wander for a time, but space and time itself seem unknowable when I have no marker to judge them against except the beating of my own heart.

My ring finger grows hot, and I look, only to find Invelee's ring upon it, though I never placed it there. Am I simply mad?

"Invelee?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where I am?"

"You are in a lot of trouble. I know that much. Let's say we make a deal. I help you get out of here, and you help me with something I want."

"What do you want?"

"I want you to go to the room of the Pattern, in Amber. Take me there."

"Why?"

"I want to study it."

"You can't get there yourself?"

"I'm not quite as... flexible... as I used to be. So does that sound like a fair deal?"

"How exactly are you going help me get out of here?"

"I'll show you if you agree to help me."

I sigh, deeply. "Well, if the choice is to help you, or be stuck in limbo functionally forever, I'll help you."

"Excellent. Well bargained and done. Now let's see if we can't get out of this unpleasant situation..."

"It seems like an anti-trump zone," I state.

"Or an inverse trump zone," Invelee responds. "If trump won't work, we'll have to try something else..."

"You have Dermott's Broken Pattern, right?" I recall it was able to manipulate that from the fight in the Chaos Court.

"Not really. I used to."

"You don't anymore?"

"I have it, but it isn't broken, it is whole, infinity turned upon itself..." Involee's voice seems to drift away, and in a fashion that makes we wonder what sort of mental state Involee is in.

"You have the whole Pattern, then?"

"Hmm, Perhaps."

"Well, can you use it to bring me to where Dermott and Aseric are? Or better yet, where Coral is?" I hear a cracking noise from all around me.

"Ah, it's beginning to give..."

"What's beginning to give?!" I shout in alarm. The walls and ceiling have black cracks appearing all over them like spider webs. "Where exactly am I that you're breaking?!"

"That's a good question, we'll find out. I'm going to continue twisting and you should get your trump access back in a second. Visualize a destination, but be quick. You don't have much time."

"Coral!"

"No a person won't work, a place..."

"Amber!"

## Day 30738? (7 June 2004)

The world shatters and twists away. After a dizzying unknowable lurch, I regain consciousness again... How often am I to lose it like this? How much time is gone from my life? Ten months and 19 days, I silently resolve. If I have been unconscious less time than a day, I'll figure it out later. Best to be cautious.

I open my eyes slowly and the world resolves into a natural cavern, dimly lit. The floor is like black glass, and everything glows softly silver. I stand up slowly. A silver line stretches away from my feet in perfect geometric harmony. I get a strange feeling. There is a large iron-bound door in the far side of the room... This seems oddly familiar... It's the Pattern room of Amber, I realize. I step away from the silver line and slowly back away.

"Do you want to be left here?" I ask Involee.

"Yes, thank you."

I take off the ring and drop it to the floor. I am glad to be rid of him. Leaving, I shut the door behind me. Time to take stock of myself again. Clairvidere no longer burns, but I am hesitant to call upon it. My Trumps seem mixed. Dermott's card is fluxing hot and cold. I'm not sure I dare contact him yet. Have I lost my Trump ability? Are my cards damaged?

Who was that golden beige man? Have I gone insane? What devil's bargain have I made with Involee? I don't know anymore. How many universal forces have I offended without trying?

Aseric's card is cold, when I check that next, though Bethany and Frederick and Leonardo's flux like Dermott's. Martin's is cold, as is Merlin's, though more faintly so. Perhaps it isn't that the cards are damaged, but that Dermott and Bethany and the others are somewhere too distant.

I decide to contact Aseric. His card is cold, and perhaps I can gain some insight into what happened to us. I make contact with little effort. At least so far that is a good sign.

But then I feel sick. He is in the hall of the Logrus, and wants to walk it. He says something about a Font of Power, and he seems to think he is invincible. By the tone of his voice, I gather that Involee made with him the same Devil's bargain it did with me, but to go to the Logrus. Damn.

Aseric breaks contact despite my warnings. His fate is beyond my influence... But in a few moments he re-establishes it! How? He doesn't have my Trump!?!?!?

"Can you bring me through?" he asks, but then he appears! It is like reality bending, as a flat glowing line expands into a giant card, that turns and grows into a three-dimensional Aseric.

"AH!" I cannot hold back from exclaiming... "How did you do that?!?!?"

"What?"

"You just ...appeared!"

"No, you pulled me here."

"No, I didn't!"

"Really? Cool. Where's Dermott and them?"

"I don't know, I can't reach them..."

"Lemme try..." he seems to look into space for a moment. "Nah. What's this gem we're looking for?"

"We're looking for Coral."

"Coral? The woman you were drawing?"

"Yes."

He stares again. "Mmm. Nope. Where are we, and how did you get here?"

I give him an abbreviated telling, leaving out my deal with Involee and the whole thing with the beige man...

"I can't picture Coral, can you reach her?"

"Not without drawing a card the old-fashioned way. That'll take a couple days."

"That's fine. You're the one on the time schedule."

"I'm trying to decide what to do right now..." I head to my room, with Aseric in tow. It seems he never found his room, so I try to show him. I don't know what to do, but I definitely need to do something... I just don't know what, but I don't want to tell Aseric that.

And then Aseric disappears as suddenly as he appeared. Damn it! What by the Celestial Bureaucracy is going on? I must be going insane, that's it...

And the Aseric reappears, grabs me before I can react, and I feel... stretched thin... like Trump travel, but more so. And I am no longer in Amber Castle. In a purely reflexive reaction, I break Aseric's jaw as I throw him to the ground. "Never touch me!"

A huge tree, like the world-tree of myth, stands before me on a plain, mountains in the distance. It is pristine and too-perfect. A Pattern lies carved into the rock before me, but it isn't Dworkin's Pattern, nor it's first reflection in Amber, it is another. How many of these blasted things are there?

I suddenly notice Bethany is about to step on it.

"NO!" I shout.

And then I see Frederick is there as well, and he draws his blade.

"Put that thing away boy, before I kill you. Bethany, that thing will kill you, don't!" And her foot touches down on the Pattern.

## Day 30738 cont (14 Jun 2004)

I watch as Bethany steps onto this strange other-Pattern. It looks too primal here to be only a Shadow of Amber's Pattern. The energy here feels raw, and different somehow. Sparks leap up and surround her growing higher with every step. I hope she lives through this, though I'm not sure I want her to live because I like her, or I want to kill her. Perhaps because *she* might have some inkling of what is going on... though I doubt it.

Aseric simply folds away into nothing again, he seems to be beyond reason or care. What happened to him? Is it really him? I don't know, perhaps I never did. I don't know what is going on anymore, and I feel nothing but anger and frustration. No one will explain anything to me!

Dermott and the others stand by with me, watching out of some curiosity. At least, other than Aseric, they aren't fighting or wandering away. Dermott says this Pattern was created by Corwin during the Patternfall War. This tells me nothing. How did everyone get here? Why are we here? How are we supposed to find Coral? Maybe I should just take a couple days and make a Trump card of her. It might be quicker and more practical in the long run.

"And how did you get here, what was your little adventure?" Frederick asks.

"Adventure? I've spent the past 2 months traipsing across the universe looking for you and her and him, and Coral!"

Bethany is almost completely subsumed by the sparking energy rising from the Pattern. Will it kill her? No. She makes it to the center, and falls to her knees... She seems exhausted beyond all reason, and crying. At least she survived. Now what?

And then Kaliese appears with her in the center of the Pattern...?!?!?

Frederick asks, "What's the matter?"

"What's Kaliese doing in the center with Bethany?" I point, and they seem to notice for the first time...but then to ignore it.

"Well I ended up in a Sargasso sea," Frederick continues, "and had to learn to swim! And he," he points to Leonardo "Ended up in a strange court of some kind where he caught some weird disease, before Bethany cured him..."

I am only half paying attention to them at this point, trying to watch Bethany, but then she suddenly winks away from the center of the Pattern, appearing at the beginning next to us...

Bethany informs us that to find Coral we have to go to an "undershadow" What's that? And how would she know? How much time have they spent dawdling together this time while I search? Years? Decades? I don't say anything, since my comments wouldn't help the situation.

Dermott starts to froth and complain, urging her to lead us, to get going, we don't have much time! I can only silently agree. At least he understands this dire situation.

Dermott then shapeshifts into a vision of Coral. He seems to think it will help Bethany track her through Shadow... But Frederick already took Amber's Pattern... Couldn't he find her just as well? Apparently not, but I don't understand why. Perhaps it would take too long, though I don't know why her Pattern would be faster.

"Is this Coral?" Bethany asks me, indicating Dermott's new form...

"More or less," I respond. Dermott doesn't change back.

*Surengiin's Journal #2 – Jewel Quest*

Someone suggests hellriding, but I say no. We have no horses, and I lost Kaze back on the shadow with the blue crystal cave...

Dermott suggests we all join hands. I ask why, since it wasn't necessary on Frederick's jaunts. But they contradict this. Bethany is unsure of her new power, and no one wants to get separated now that we are all gathered again, more or less.

I just go along with it. I don't know what is happening anymore. I wish I had time to figure it out, but I don't. How laughable! A supposed immortal, with only a year; correction, 10 months and 19 days; to live.

I grab Leonardo by the shoulder because no one else seems willing to touch him, and in an awkward chain, we prepare to depart.

"Oh so you found my cave?" A voice calls down from up the world-tree suddenly. We all stop, and look upward. Mistake that, I realize, it could have been a distraction, a trap for enemies on the ground. But for once it doesn't seem to be.

Red haired sits above us. Luke, if I recall, Coral's husband. Oh no, I think...

"Oh no," says Dermott.

We then see Jurt in the tree as well, and an older man I don't recognize. They all jump out of the tree to join us on the ground. The older man has black hair and fair skin, and wears clothes of black and silver.

"Are you my uncle?" asks Bethany from nowhere... Why would she ask that?

"In a manner of speaking..." says the man.

"Are you my mother Deirdre's brother?" she asks again, more specifically.

"Sort of. I suppose you could say I am a projection of him. In some ways him, in others not." Oh no. More debate. Are these oni here to harry and distract us? If so it seems to be working. We'll never find the Jewel and Coral at this rate.

"Are you here to help us?" Bethany asks. I can only roll my eyes. How simple-minded IS she?

"I guess you could say that." Says the older man, "There are 2 ways to go about this, the easy way and the hard way. Oh, why don't you tell them..." he waves to Luke.

Luke pulls out a flask. "My friends, it's really quite simple, you can all take a draft of this and wake up where you need to be, or..." We all look at them incredulously. Right.

"Where we need to be? Not where we want to be?" asks Bethany...

"Paranoia is a successful survival trait but unfortunately it is counterproductive in this case," says the man in black...

"Who sent you," Bethany asks. They point to the Pattern, but she doesn't seem to understand.

I exclaim testily, "That Pattern, Amber's Pattern, the Logrus, the Trump Mirrors, all the major forces of the universe are sentient, and seem to love to meddle with people." No enlightenment comes to her face. Lovely. At least I tried to explain a little bit of something, which seems to be more than anyone is willing to do for me.

"Right in one, give the girl a cookie," says the man in black. Now what was that supposed to mean?

They restate the choice. To get to where 'we need to be' we can drink their bespelled wine, and sleep, or they will make certain we are unconscious. I certainly don't trust them, not an iota. Especially after the way I was treated the last time I encountered Luke, and his friend Dalt.

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Leonardo seems willing to take the bottle and drink, and immediately collapses into the ground. Dermott just shrugs and enters a stasis-state, as good as sleep. Bethany just says she will fall asleep on her own, thank you. How stupid are these people? They're going to trust these? At least Frederick is with me. We refuse the drink, and the three square off against us.

The older man, Pattern-ghost as I have come to understand him, says "You two take him, I'll handle her." He obviously underestimates me, if he thinks a woman an easy match! He draws a silvery saber, etched with strange faint runes. A magical blade? I answer by calling forth Clairvidere, quicksilver-bright in the primal sun. I don't trust these and won't go without a fight.

He salutes in an open style, with a grin. He thinks much of himself, I can tell. I gauge carefully, in a practiced iajutsu stance. I begin with focus, in the stare that leads to strike, but he focuses not, simply taunting me. I can already tell he's an honorless one. I'll have to watch for underhanded tricks.

Eventually he loses patience, as I thought he would, and makes a full-out attack. His speed is amazing! Even against Gilva of the Hendrakes I've never seen such speed. I sidestep the first blow, and parry his riposte.

I begin with a defensive stance, hoping to see his abilities more fully before attacking, but soon discover defense is all I can manage. Blade a-blur, he forces me back, and back. I can't let him get too close, I can already tell he is the stronger of us by the power of his swings. Perhaps he will tire, and I will find an opening. But through all of this, he is still smirking! What cheek!

Finally Bethany rises, apparently disturbed by the noise, and apparently tries to sneak up on the man in black. She has a rock, and intends to strike him with it. I try to give no indication that would betray her. But she has apparently betrayed herself. As she prepares to swing, I step in and strike, hoping to give her a distraction, but to no avail. He blocks my blow with ease and *throws* me backward, perhaps ten feet!

In one motion he disarms her as well, taking the rock, and knocking her unconscious with one punch. I was right, he's too strong, I can't let him touch me, I must be quicker.

But it is not to be. He hurls the rock at me, and I automatically deflect it, a reflexive maneuver, and exactly the opening he wanted. I curse myself silently as he is upon me in an instant. I bring my blade forward with all the speed I can muster, but he bats it aside.

I try to tumble with it, and take myself away from him, but he grasps my sword arm with his left hand, and smashes my jaw with the hilt in his right. All the while grinning – he was playing the whole time... How can any man be that good? All goes black. It only took about a minute.

## Day 30739 (14 Jun 2004)

10 months and 18 days. I open my eyes on an inversed world. The sun radiates darkness, and shadows glow with light. Everything is black and white. I awaken because I am nudged, and reflexively roll and grab up my blade from the ground next to me... At least they didn't take it. Where am I? Who are they?

4 others are with me, skin dark, hair light... Wait, it is Bethany, Dermott, and Frederick. Leonardo woke me... I can

hear Frederick swearing profusely, as he also apparently took a beating. They look so strange. Do I look so strange as well? It seems so. What manner of place is this? It almost makes me ill.

"Well, we seem to arrived," comments Leonardo, and I just shrug.

Through a swollen jaw I say, "Have Bethany lead on, I think I'm just along for the ride..." Nothing I've done so far has had any positive effect on things yet, I think to myself with disgust.

"Let me see that jaw." Says Frederick.

"Don't touch me, it's not broken." I respond.

"I'm a doctor." He answers.

"Physician heal thyself, you don't look any better than I do."

The others regroup, and begin moving off slowly, in their typically disorganized fashion. They talk about anything that comes to their minds as they do so. Yes, this does really seem like them. Aside from my own disorientation, things seem real enough...

I am more than a bit upset and short-tempered at these turns of events. I just say nothing and stalk along. Bethany explains our bruises to Dermott, and he is unsurprised.

"I don't think that was my real uncle..." she says.

"It wasn't," I confirm. "It was a ghost, a spirit of someone who walked the Pattern. Like a clone, like Involee makes."

Dermott then insinuates he might be a clone, and I comment we perhaps have never met the real Dermott, but that I don't care, move on.

I make a snow-blind against the weird anti-light that is so hard to see in, and we all follow Bethany, as she has a 'feeling' this is the way we need to go.

Along the way we inform Dermott of what has befallen Involee. We know it imprinted on Corwin's Pattern, and Amber's Pattern, and the Logrus. It may not be his anymore... It may be sentient and free-willed now.

I also learn that the man in black was an image of Corwin. If the real Corwin is anything like his ghost, I shall have to stay far away from him. If he is alive, anyhow. Can you have a ghost when you are still alive? Jurt and Luke were alive last I heard, but they had ghosts in that Pattern-realm... I suppose the Pattern can create ghosts of the living as easily as the dead, though are they really ghosts? Clones? Projections? I'm not sure I understand what 'projection' means in this sense.

We eventually reach an area where the path diverges. There is a light path, a shadowed darker path, and a cave that is as dark as night.

"What are you doing here?" a blazing white-haired black-skinned woman steps out of nothing to confront us.

"Who are you?" Bethany asks

"My, you've grown." she comments, looking over Bethany.

"Deirdre?"

They make some strange conversation. It doesn't much make sense. Apparently this is some strange anti-version of Bethany's mother. But not really her. Another ghost? Spirits and Oni. Metaphysics and philosophy.

Bethany asks this anti-Deirdre blatantly which way to go to find Coral and the Jewel. Is she so dense and stupid? I would strike her, but that wouldn't help matters. What is said is said. Is the whole universe to know this secret? Dermott

even mentions Corwin's Pattern to anti-Deirdre... I can only sigh. So much for discretion. The banter is just infuriating to me. All I can do is stand there, I don't know what to do.

Then Clairvidere speaks! I quickly glance around, but no one else seems to have heard anything. Is this mind-speech?

I think back to it.

"Clairvidere?"

It is... It explains to me it gained extra power here, because this place is a metaphysical place where ideas are stronger than matter and thoughts are the source of power. A strange concept, but I suppose one no stranger than some others.

A path is a choice, it tell me, and you have to figure out what the path represents to get where you want to go. This is both liberating and enlightening, as well as confusing. How do I figure out what something means? Philosophers debate endlessly on the meaning of things, and I don't have eternity.

I try to express this thought to the others, to wait, that thoughts are truth here, and we have to look for meaning, but they don't seem to understand. In truth I don't understand myself. Anti-Deirdre seems to have drifted away. Dermott has gone into the cave. He thinks the paths outside are Logrus and pattern, and wants to choose neither.

I don't agree, but I follow, as *my* choice is to stay with the group, and not abandon them.

Bethany then asks if we can destroy the jewel, once we find it, and end the strife surrounding it.

"That wouldn't be wise." A light comes on revealing a tall man in a crown...

"Oberon!?!?!" shouts Dermott.

"Do you not bow before your liege?"

"Grandfather!" says Bethany.

Dermott and Bethany bow, but I see this is another anti-image. Another ghost? Oberon is dead. Anti-Oberon confirms that paths are choices, and that by entering the cave we have made ours. Dermott begins talking about the philosophy of choice.

"And what IS your choice, he asks us?"

Bethany states her wish for a happy retired life. The rest of us prefer to continue onward with Amberite life, we answer variously, in that we can't ignore what happens around us.

"Odd choices you've made, not all unwise, but odd."

"I don't even understand what I chose," says Bethany.

"Do any of you understand?" he asks.

"Truly no, partially yes..." says Leonardo.

I am confused beyond all understanding. Who is this Anti-Oberon, and where is he leading us to? What choice *have* we made. What is the meaning of this?

He leads us into a blinding white hall, filled with jet black suits of armor. Each one is tailored, obviously intended for one of us. Oberon expects us to don his armor... But I will not, for I still do not understand. Are we to fight something? The room is empty, and the entrance we came through has vanished. Trapped.

I check, and Clairvidere is still cold, so Trump is apparently not cut off... though it no longer speaks to me.

Oberon simply says that the cave is the "Darkest Path of All". I hang back and watch carefully. Apparently Dermott's choice was poor for us, but we don't have a choice to leave. We have to deal with it...

The others apparently are examining their own abilities as I have mine, as they seem quite disturbed by this place, and this situation. Dermott and Bethany confirm that the armor represents Chaos... So by donning it we accept Chaos.

"If this place means Chaos, why is Oberon here? Wasn't he King of Amber?" I query... I am so confused

"We aren't going into history now," replies Dermott.

But Oberon speaks again, all silver-tongued, mixing compliments, temptations and threats. All becomes clear to me. This being of Oberon is of the Logrus, a Logrus ghost, as Corwin, Luke, and Jurt were before. Now I know I will not touch the armor, though I fear what the ghost of legendary Oberon will do if crossed...

Bethany seems to want to try and talk her way out of it. The Logrus-ghost just turns her words against her. A mismatched battle of wits on an epic scale.

"This is just a Logrus-ghost trying to twist your words and make a devil's bargain. I don't make devil's bargains with oni." I state loud enough for all to hear.

Frederick tries to focus his power and bring up the Pattern, but can't seem to succeed alone. The Logrus-ghost mocks his attempt, but seems disturbed by it nonetheless. If Pattern can drive off a Logrus-ghost, I will help him if I can.

I take Frederick's arm, and try to give him a boost of mental energy. I've never really tried this before, but don't see why it wouldn't work. Pain shoots through my head, an excruciating headache. A white crack appears in the blackness, and Leonardo joins in, and the crack widens.

"Stop you fools, you know not what you do here!" Oberon's ghost seems quite alarmed.

Suddenly the ghost of Oberon is much more accommodating. The Logrus-ghost agrees not to force us to accept it. It offers to tell us where Coral is. We keep pushing while Dermott negotiates. I can't quite pay attention to everything said, but at least get the basics. Try looking in the place that Rebma should be, it says to Dermott.

The others pass out, then, and I barely hang to consciousness by the skin of my teeth. The effort was exhausting, but does not dissipate when the effort is ceased! This alarms me greatly. The Pattern-crack is widening and attempting to take over.

The ghost of Oberon opens an exit. We need to leave now, I realize, and I drag the unconscious men while Dermott carries Bethany. The light chases us, swift as lightning, a bright crack in reality. I am falling behind, burdened by the weight of two men.

A choice is needed, again. I cannot carry both and escape. Both are only unconscious. But I know Frederick has already accepted the power of the Pattern, so I feel it unlikely it will harm him. The choice is made. I drop Frederick, hoist Leonardo over my shoulder, and break into a run. Such is the necessity of the moment.

The light swallows Frederick, and still surges after us. It splits in two, like lightning branching, and overshoots us. Surrounded by an ocean of light, we find ourselves on an island of darkness. And the darkness becomes a void. And we are falling.

How long we fall, seconds or minutes, seems impossible to know. It seems we would fall for eternity. I do the only thing I can. Clairvidere is with me, and I call upon it. A

Trump, to Rebma. Clear connection! I disappear with Leonardo.

And appear a moment later in the glowing-clean water. Not anti-Rebma, but real Rebma. I am relieved. Freedom! But I cannot reach the other three when I try to retrieve them. No connection from Frederick at all, and no answer from Bethany and Dermott. I am shouting into the void.

But I won't give up easily. After several tries, I finally reach Bethany. She confirms Dermott is with her, but not Frederick, which is what I expected, though not what I hoped. I bring her through. Dermott refuses to answer Trump contact from me. I cannot bring him here if he won't allow it. I can just shake my head. Why does he behave this way? I try to contact him again and again, with no response.

Finally he appears from a disk of silver-shot darkness. Involuntarily? If so, a new form, but it has much more power now.

We cannot reach Frederick, and when I tell them I lost him in the light, Dermott seems to think he's dead. So we are in Rebma now, and that is at least somewhere, instead of nowhere. But is it progress? That is yet to be seen.

## Day 30739 cont.(12 July 2004)

10 months and 18 days still... and back in Rebma, again. And they want to know what happened to Frederick. I state that he was lost to the light, and that hopefully since he already took the Pattern before, that he would not be harmed by this. Dermott then demands to know where the "real" Surengiin is, as I am not normally naïve... His pressing finally leads me to admit that I dropped him intentionally – a choice had to be made, otherwise all three of us, Leonardo, Frederick, and I, would all have been lost. Dermott seems satisfied by this, but the outburst coming from Bethany is different than what I imagined.

Instead of railing against me for dropping Frederick, she insists on an explanation of the entire situation so far, and how all this came about. Finally we have to recap our journey for her, along with explaining to her how we only have 10 months to find Coral or we will die.

The possibility of cross-universe war is looming, Dermott explains, and we are caught in the middle. They both get frustrated and lose it, starting to babble, and I lose all track of what they are saying, it makes no sense. Finally we tell her about Mandor's transceiver and how he spies on all we are saying and doing. This greatly alarms Bethany, as apparently in her mutual tirade with Dermott, she said what she really thinks of him.

We eventually begin to swim down towards Castle Rebma proper, and I suggest we not actually go to the castle. We know Moiré is on her deathbed, and it would be rude, as well as poor timing, to visit now. Besides, our mission is technically a state secret, and I don't want to explain the situation. Suddenly, a long somber note echoes through the deeps. A funeral note; Moiré has died. Dermott says I have the bard's tongue, and shouldn't speak anymore.

Dermott is quite agitated and starts to rant again. Bethany will go pay her respects, but I don't want to go. I hear a voice, Mandor's, in my head, saying "My he needs to relax," obviously aimed at Dermott. Oh, now Mandor can speak back to me? This is worse than Trump. I don't like it at all. Perhaps it is my imagination, and I am just going mad. But no, it

probably is real, given all else I've seen lately. But I don't say anything, or even think a response. It wouldn't accomplish anything.

Then the Rebman palace guard swim up and intercept us. They recognize us from our previous visit, and assume we have arrived for the funeral. At this point, we can't really contradict them without raising questions, so we agree, and they escort us to our quarters in Rebma Castle. Leonardo is still unconscious, so they also summon healers to tend to him. The castle is abuzz with funeral plans. People are arriving from all over Amber and the Golden Circle...

We retire first to a sitting room, where we discuss some matters briefly before going to separate quarters to clean up and change. Dermott points out that Llewella and Martin are the only heirs we know of. One or the other will likely be named sovereign of Rebma. One can only hope that at a royal funeral, politicking will be at a minimum. The guards inform us that there will be an official dinner tonight, and that we are expected, as the official diplomatic attaches from Amber to Chaos. Lovely.

I retire to my quarters, and to be brought a proper change of clothes for the occasion, as we arrived after a long road and are not appropriately prepared. I then sit down to work on a Trump of Coral for a while. I won't finish it today, or even tomorrow, likely, but I don't have any better ideas at this point. Bethany has insisted on remaining here for a few days anyhow to reset her spells. I don't like sitting for days, but what else can I do? It is highly frustrating.

After a time, the Rebman attendants bring me a black kimono. Black here is a funeral color? I was expecting white, but I don't say anything. At this point it is easier for me to simply go with what is spinning around me. Thus far fighting against the currents, so to speak, has gotten me nowhere.

A knock. Leonardo is awake, and has been brought to me by the guards. The guards ask what attacked us, he spoke of attack? I quickly cover by saying he was hit on the head by a falling rock, and rendered unconscious, he must have been confused. This placates the guard, but I can tell Leonardo needs an explanation as well.

I gather Bethany and Leonardo in my quarters. After very briefly going over the recent happenings for Leonardo's benefit, I inform them both of a few things... Firstly that our mission is a state secret. They should not speak of it to anyone, except at direst need. Secondly, that I am a 'transceiver' to Mandor, which Leonardo seems to understand, and that nothing should be said before myself or Dermott that they don't want to get back to the Chaos Court. Thirdly, I inform them of the suspicions surrounding them, and that we are to bring them back for trial as well. Bethany is absolutely incensed by the fact the Court would hold Dermott and I responsible for the actions of others when we are obviously innocent, but I can't get through to her the political realities of the situation.

I then seek to prepare them for the dinner tonight. I tell them we are still considered diplomats. I tell them to expect everyone they don't want to see and to be prepared for the worst. They too end up dressed in somber black garb, so at least no one will present an inappropriate spectacle this evening.

So we go to dinner. We get seated at the head table. Martin sits at the head of the table, with Llewella at his right

hand. On Martin's left is Gérard. Across from Gérard is Flora. Fiona is there, as is Vialle, also, Mandor, sitting next to Fiona, and they converse a lot. He bows to Bethany and winks. She looks distressed. Lady Gilva attends as well. We wave acknowledgement to each other.

Dinner is thankfully uneventful. Somber but calm, eulogies prevail. The announcement is also made of Martin's crowning as King of Rebma in three days. We are expected to attend the coronation. Ah well, we were going to end up staying a few days anyway. Dinner is brief, lasting only 2 hours, and I retire to my quarters.

It is hard to comprehend. A real night of rest? Is this too good to be true? I decide to enjoy it while I can. Katas and meditation, and I retire to bed.

## Day 30740 (12 July 2004)

10 months and 17 days. I am bolted awake in the darkness by Dermott screaming. I run to my door, and see Dermott bolting down the hallway, apparently chased by a silver line, like a Pattern line. He is screaming that the Logrus is coming for him. It reminds me more of the Pattern from undershadow... Will it follow us forever? Maybe I should just stop running. I am tired of running.

It follows Dermott and takes no notice of me... It lays on the floor, a twisting Pattern of lines. I am tempted to touch it, but don't wish to act foolishly.

I Trump Leonardo, but Bethany I cannot contact. Strange. Have we lost more members to the Pattern? Frederick is still beyond reach as well. Leonardo joins me, but he cannot find Bethany either. I try to contact Dermott, but he seems consumed by fear, and will not speak with me, just ranting and cutting me off.

Finally on my second, or is it third?, attempt to contact Dermott, he seems more calm. He has been able to determine it isn't the Pattern, or the Logrus, but rather a locating spell, apparently aimed at him... Bethany? We know she has the ability to make such spells... She must be in trouble.

The line stretches out from Dermott's quarters, out the window and to the horizon. What has she done now? Unsure how far we will have to go, we quickly retrieve water-breathing necklaces from the castle guard, one for each of us, and one extra for Bethany. Dermott takes one even though he doesn't need it, you never can tell when an extra one would become necessary.

And so we swim out following this line. After some time, we pass the boundary out of Rebma and into the dark ocean... and the line just stops. It doesn't disappear or fade, it just... ends. Perhaps a Shadow boundary? Dermott, in the form of a giant shark, swims in large circles around the area, but can find no change in Shadow.

I call forth Clairvidere, as a yari, begin to probe the sea floor ahead of us. Perhaps there is a hidden cave or trap. And then the tip of Clairvidere meets resistance in the water, and disappears! Something invisible sits on the sea floor. And then I feel Clairvidere being pulled, and I let go, unwilling to be sucked into the nothingness... And I immediately regret letting go, for now my blade is gone.

Leonardo begins tossing small stones, to determine the boundaries of this... invisible snare. He works out it is roughly a fifty foot cube.

Dermott and Leonardo think we need to go back, to get help, perhaps from Fiona, as this is some sort of powerful magic, to be sure. I don't like the idea, but don't know what to do about it. I agree to stay here, so they can relocate the spot, as the locating spell has faded since Dermott followed us here. But then I feel a poke, and find Clairvidere thrusting out from the invisible nothing. Something sending it back? Bethany? I grab the spear-shaft to pull it out, but find it jerked from my grasp, and my hand is bleeding in the ocean. Damn! I try to stifle it, and deduce what is going on here.

And the spear reappears again. I ask Leonardo to take my hand; to help prevent me from being dragged into this strange nothing, and he does, though with hesitation. He also grabs Dermott's fin, but I doubt it will do much good. I carefully reach out for the spear-shaft, and this time it is not pulled away, though I cannot pull it free either. A tug of war with nothing.

Inspiration! I order Clairvidere to change, to come back to me in it's dormant form. I does so, released from whatever was holding it. Then I change it to its primary katana form, and move to the edge of the unseen box. Slowly, I reach out to cut this boundary, and see if the power of my blade can open a way.

I feel resistance, and it is like cutting heavy fabric. Suddenly, the water rushes in, and I am sucked along with it! I find I am in a chamber, and can see out, though I could not detect it from the outside. Inside is Bethany, and Frederick! The water is a torrent, and quickly fills the chamber, about as big as Leonardo had determined it to be. Leonardo is sucked in as well, though Dermott is not; his form is too large. Bethany has a necklace, and can breathe, but Frederick does not, and seems surprised. I quickly give him my spare necklace we brought for Bethany.

The last thing I notice in this strange place is one that stops my heart; a huge clear crystal. Inside the crystal is Coral! I recognize her clearly. The patch still covers her eye, but I cannot tell if she bears the Jewel or not. I only hope that within the crystal, she still lives. As the water fills the chamber, the great crystal floats freely.

I finish cutting an exit for us as the chamber seems to fall apart around us like a collapsing tent. Then I see a giant whale descending towards us, out of the darkness, the typical black color of Dermott's sorcery. A whale!

The whale swallows us, and the great crystal. I believe it is Dermott. It fits his typical mode of operating. I try to discuss what to do next with the others. Bethany and Leonardo think we should return immediately to Rebma; I disagree. The Rebman court doesn't know our mission, and shouldn't. Then a black tendril reaches out and strikes Leonardo. It becomes clear that Dermott is trying to communicate with us. I try to speak to Dermott through Leonardo, but that doesn't last long. The whale's maw is filled with black filaments; Broken Pattern lines? We are all struck. And now I hear Dermott's voice in my mind. I still don't like this, I never have. But I have given up fighting it.

I explain that I don't think we should return to Rebma because of the vital and secret nature of this mission. The Rebmans don't know, and bringing the crystal back would cause too many questions. Dermott says he can hide it, and I agree he could, but why? We can return Coral to Merlin, and have this over with. If she still has the Jewel, our quest is over.

If not, then perhaps he can at least free her and we can gain more information. They seem to agree, though I know they don't like the idea much. Bethany especially, I know, wanted time to create more spells. But I feel time pressing on me, and want this done with.

I Trump Merlin. He does answer, and doesn't seem too put out, at least.

"I have Coral."

"Good! How is she?"

"Encased in crystal."

"I see."

"Well, I hoped you might know how to set her free."

"Yes, I'm sure her husband would like to have her back as well."

"Yes, but I don't have a Trump of him, but I do of you..."

"Nice to know I was your second choice." I couldn't tell if he was annoyed or amused..

"I... Well, you're his best friend, it seemed... and besides..." I was spluttering, I knew. Why does no one understand what I mean?

"It's alright, I was kidding." He was as frustrated as amused now, I could tell...

"Do you wish me to come through?"

"Yes."

He reaches out for me, and I grab the crystal as I reach back. Suddenly I am in the Courts of Chaos, and everything is covered with seawater and whale bile. I had forgotten that the water would come with me. King Merlin is drenched, and covered in bile.

"Where did this come from?!?!" He seemed quite distressed, covered in mucus-like bile and dripping wet.

"Dermott."

"Oh, now I feel violated."

"You asked." For some reason I couldn't fathom, I have given up on formality. Frustration? Or just the fact that the circumstances seem so odd that formality seems out-of-place?

"Were the others with you?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"Still in Dermott's stomach."

"Why do I ask these questions?" Merlin rolls his eyes.

"Shall I bring them?"

"Do. I'm going to go get cleaned up." And with that, King Merlin departs, leaving a trail of water behind him.

I Trump Bethany and Leonardo first, bringing them through one at a time. They come willingly enough. Do they not realize, or have they forgotten, that they will likely be arrested the moment the Chaos King returns? I know I explained this to them. Frederick I contact thirdly, and he also comes willingly. Finally, I Trump Dermott. I am canny to his tricks, and ask him to change back to human or demon form before I bring him through. He would stay a whale otherwise, just to spite or harm us, most likely.

And so we are all together, for the first time in months. What will become of us now? I have the feeling our quest is not yet over. We have Coral, true, but we have no way of knowing if we have the Jewel of Judgment. And we have no idea who really did this, only that our group did not. Not enough to free us, certainly. I may have just sentenced my 'cousins' to death by bringing them here at this time.

But who uses crystals in their magic? Mandor. Another good reason not to return to Rebma immediately, as he was there with Fiona. And another reason we aren't free. It is he that pulls our strings. Damnation. I only hope Coral is still alive in that crystal prison, and that she can be freed, and tell us what happened. But we don't have much time.

One last thought occurs to me as I stand there dripping... I have heard Mandor's voice in my head. He can speak to me, and he hears my thoughts. Can I hear his as well? Doubtful, but I could at least try. At any rate, I haven't heard his voice in the past few hours. Even he must need to sleep. I hope that he is still in Rebma, sound asleep. That at least would grant us a few hours before everything really goes to hell.

## Day 30740 cont.(19 July 2004)

"Well we delivered Coral, can we go back to Rebma now?" asks Bethany.

"No, I was requested to bring you here." I reply.

"What?"

Just then the guards arrive, and arrest the three, clap them in irons and drag them off. I can only shake my head as I stand there dripping. Didn't I warn them? Are they so thick as not to realize it? The guards congratulate myself and Dermott, but I do not respond. Dermott makes sarcastic comments, while he shifts shape and renders himself dry and well-groomed.

Finally Dermott and I are left standing there with the crystal. We hear the march of booted feet... and here is Mandor.

"Ah excellent, you've done an excellent job. I see you've found Coral although she seems a little... indisposed. Shall we take care of that?"

I just shrug while Dermott banter. He raises his spheres, which spin and orbit the crystal. Faster and faster, they lift the crystal off the ground and cause it to rotate. I can't see what all is happening. I don't even really watch; I've seen enough of Mandor's magic. The crystal glows brighter and brighter, and then I hear breaking glass. It finally slows and Coral is free, surrounding by spinning spheres.

As the spheres release her, she slumps towards the ground, and I catch her. With a quick check I determine she is alive, though unconscious.

"Ah Surengiin, good catch. Lets take her to bed." Mandor leaves with a sly grin.

I make no comment, though I hear Dermott laugh as I follow. He stays behind, probably trying to set up the circumstances for more rumors. But then Mandor calls for him to follow, and he slinks after us.

Mandor leads us through the labyrinthine court, to where Coral has chambers. I lay her in her respectfully in the bed, tempted for a moment to check her eye, I do not. I instead take a guard position at her bedside. She has still not shown signs of regaining consciousness. Mandor implies she needs to be woken with a kiss. Dermott seems put out, and I suggest summoning Luke. Mandor leaves the room then. An illusion of privacy at best; he still can see and hear everything.

Dermott tries reaching out to her mind and she awakens, startled. She recognizes us, but doesn't know where she is. I introduce us and give a brief explanation; not wishing to overwhelm her.

She is then taken aback; she feels different, she doesn't have the Jewel anymore. She tells us that she knows it wasn't our companions, but rather constructs that looked like them.

Coral recounts that she was taken to a castle. She was in a bedchamber in a castle with barred windows, with shutters closed outside so there was no view. Three came into her chamber. Two she did not recognize and had never seen before, and the third was hooded and concealed the whole time. A man, a woman, and the third of undetermined gender. The woman had long, straight, flaxen hair, and she was dressed in beige trimmed in dark brown. The man wore a black shirt, and brown leather vest. He had green eyes and blond hair. The third was of average height in a featureless grey robe. The third person never spoke. The trio never said who they were. They questioned Coral about the Jewel, and other things.

I asked Coral, about what other things? She replies, they asked about her child. You have a child? A child not yet born. Coral is pregnant!

Coral continues her tale. The one on the robes nodded and they left the room once questioning was complete. The two apologized for the inconvenience, and stated it wouldn't last a moment longer than needed. Then Coral says she fell asleep, probably due to a magical compulsion. Finally Coral remembers that as she was drifting off, she heard them speaking; that they would not take her with them to Corialane.

I have never heard of Corialane, and neither has Coral, apparently... Who or what or where is that?

While Coral recounts her tale for us, Dermott magically examines her for any medical problems. He seems to indicate she is physically unharmed, though he can't confirm her pregnancy? This seems odd to him, but I just shrug. She isn't far enough along to show, I deduce.

The door bursts open and in rushes Rinaldo/Luke. He is much distressed and we smoothly leave the room. Time to let the couple have their moment. Mandor awaits us in the hallway. We let Mandor know she doesn't have the Jewel, although he certainly already knows the whole story. Dermott begins to speak to him in more detail as I quietly slide down the hallway away from them, to prepare to depart again. Our quest isn't over, and I feel no need to dawdle.

I reach my chambers here in Chaos, and clean the whale bile off of myself. About the time I finish, there is a knock on the door. Mandor again.

"Hello. I thought you might want to check in on your friends." He informs me they have been implanted with crystal insects as well. He also feels the need to remind me that we need to keep searching, and we must go back to Rebma for the state funeral/coronation as well.

As if I would have forgotten? Didn't I tell *him* that we needed to leave again before I departed? Finally he leaves. I have been rude to him, intentionally, and I know he knows it, though he doesn't show any ire. I don't care anymore.

Finally, ready to return to Rebma, I go to check on the others. No answer from Bethany's door. Leonardo answers, and I speak to him for a time. I try to explain what has happened to him, and he seems to understand a small relief.

We both go to Frederick's room together. At our knock, he insists we enter, he will not answer the door. I try to explain what happened, a bit, but I end up arguing with him. Frederick says he is tired of this whole situation. I say fine, give up, I

don't care, sit here and die. In the end he agrees to go to Rebma with us and onward. Don't they realize I feel this way too? No, I'm sure they don't. I conceal my emotions too well for that. But giving up is the coward's way. I would not meet so ignominious an end.

Finally we all go together to get Bethany and explain to her the situation. She is also upset, especially since she has just finished scrubbing the salt from her hair. But we must return to Rebma. The funeral and coronation are not yet over, and we are expected to be there; it would be rude if we aren't. Frederick takes my spare Rebma Trump. He will arrive on his own, as he was not originally with our party. I Trump Dermott and let him know we are returning to Rebma, and he says he is ready to go. He has apparently been talking further with Mandor and Coral.

I Trump to Rebma and bring the others through. Time differential is such that we have only half an hour before the funeral. I grab the black kimono and get dressed quickly to go.

The funeral is long, but underwater singing is interesting, in a weird way. Both Martin & Llewella are there. Martin looks nervous. His hair is blond hair now, no longer orange punk. Finally the funeral closes, the last eulogies are spoken, and the seneschal announces that the coronation of King Martin of Rebma is to be held in three days. The castle is to be sealed as a security precaution between now and then. We are then escorted back to our chambers.

Bethany promptly locks herself in her room. She says something about resetting her spells. She seemed the most angry of all of them about this situation. I only hope she doesn't do anything rash. Since she is now a Pattern-walker, she's one of our better transportation methods.

I go to speak to Dermott about this, but then I hear Bethany scream at the top of her lungs. Rushing to Bethany's room, the door is locked! Of course... In a second I simply break the knob off, shove the door in, and rush inside.

Bethany floats in a huge cloud of blood. Crystalline shards protrude from her all over. The failsafe! I forgot to tell her about the failsafe. She has tried to 'cure' herself. I try to find Mandor, but only manage to contact him mentally. He agrees to deactivate it for now. She passes out, as the crystals retract and I try to assess her wounds. The injuries, externally, are minimal, but certainly it has done more damage internally. I am useless here; I cannot help her.

I summon Frederick and Leonardo and explain to them what happened to her and why. Frederick informs the guards, who by now have arrived due to the screams, and they carry her to the infirmary. I then gather them all together including Dermott, to do an information exchange session. I explain to them more carefully about our time limit, and the failsafe. I don't want this to happen again. Such a waste.

We are then left with nothing to do until Bethany regains consciousness and/or the coronation is over. So we have an information exchange. I try to coordinate what intelligence we have between us on this situation.

No one recognizes the name Corialane. We can bring forth a list of candidates with blond hair, male and female. After much discussion the list includes Benedict (whom I have never met), Martin, Random, Flora, and Dalt. But Coral says she did not recognize her captors, and in theory she has met all of these people, except possibly Benedict... And besides, she said her male captor had green eyes, which eliminates

Random and Martin. And we can think of no one whose colors are beige and brown; the only thing that comes to me is the image of the beige-robed figure from the Hall of Mirrors. I wonder if I could get back there? But I say nothing to them of this.

Damnation. We are all tired and frustrated. And Dermott points out that appearances are useless in a court of shape shifters. Have I forgotten that so easily? There is nothing further to discuss, so we all eventually turn in.

## Day 30741 (2 Aug 2004)

10 months and 16 days. Bethany awakens. I try to more carefully explain to her what happened and why. I don't want her to hurt herself again. She is upset I didn't tell her earlier, but I had no way to know she would try what she did! She refuses to leave until she gets answers we can't give her. She seems determined to try and force the issue. She won't do anything further without proof that the crystal things can be removed. I reply Mandor wouldn't give us that proof, so why fuss over it?

But Bethany won't let it go. She argues that she won't continue without proof we can be released after. She would rather spend her last year enjoying herself. Why do they all insist on giving up like this? I argue back that if she won't continue, she has made the decision for all of us, not just herself and we don't appreciate it. She says how's that? I reply, well what if the answer lies in that other-Pattern she walked? She may be the only one who can help us all. Grudgingly, she agrees to take us all that far

They then proceed to argue about what to do with the Jewel, but I say that the important thing is to find it first. There is no point deciding what to do with it until we have it.

Finally Bethany testily demands a description, what color, gem type, size, cut? She says she can't track it without a description. We have no idea. I say I will contact Coral, or Random, or Merlin, and ask once the lockdown of Rebma is over. This seems to satisfy them at least a little.

Frederick wants to go back to Chaos eventually and asks me for a Trump of Chaos. I reply that I don't have a spare one, which is true for the moment. He seems a little TOO eager. I'm not sure it's a good idea to give him one. He has let slip more than once that he would wish the Jewel, and the Court of Chaos, destroyed. He doesn't seem to understand, despite explanations, that this would destroy the whole universe. Or maybe he is in denial, or just suicidal. In any case, Chaos is one card I won't give him, at least not until this is long over.

I decide I need to finish my Trump of Coral. That way we can reconnaissance without going all the way back to see her. The others don't seem to agree, and Bethany seems to think that I should immediately start on Chaos Trumps. But I digress. Dermott retreats into a bottle of wine in the kitchen. Bethany and Frederick sulk. Leonardo seems to have disappeared into his room. At least I can work in peace.

Throughout the day I work on Coral's Trump, which finally is completed. I decide I will spend the next two days working on Trump, unless I am interrupted or something else comes up. I decide the next Trump I need is either Vialle or Random. Vialle gave me permission, and I quite like her, aside from the fact that she knows about the situation. I decide she should be next, then Random. These two will be done in

Clairvidere. I should have done Coral there as well, but I didn't, as I started it before I knew she no longer had the Jewel.

As dinner time approaches, I go out to find the others again to check and see if they are done arguing. Frederick is alone, but Aseric is in Bethany's room with Bethany and Dermott. How did he get there? Kaliese brought him? No, Involee disguised as Kaliese. They have moved on and agreed to go to Bethany's Pattern. They are trying to figure out what to do with the Jewel after we find it again. Bethany thinks we will go to some isolated Shadow and hide. Planning for the future needs to wait until the present is taken care of, I remind them. Why do they end up in the same conversations over and over again?

Anyway, we end up updating Aseric on the situation; somehow he also has the crystals in him. Although he doesn't remember it, apparently he has been captured by Mandor as well. We give him the summary of the Amber/Chaos strife and the family tree and current situation. He calls it all a 'soap opera' whatever that is.

Dinner is served a bit later. Martin, Llewella, Fiona, Flora, Gérard, are there. A tall thin man is there as well, with straw-colored hair, looking really bored. He's wearing gold & brown, with a bit of orange, and has hazel eyes. Aseric approaches the new fellow.

"Hello,"

"Hello."

"I'm Aseric, may I ask your name?"

"Certainly,"

"And what is your name?"

"Benedict."

So that is Benedict? Well, he doesn't have green eyes either. I know I've heard his name before... Ah, yes. When we first arrived, Flora called him anti-social. Aseric says a few non-committal things and drifts off. Bethany then tries to speak to him as well. He answers in monosyllables, saying as little as possible.

Martin looks frazzled, and Aseric says "congrats and condolences." Martin seems a bit bothered by it, but doesn't say anything. Bethany also speaks to him for a moment, but apparently doesn't say much with any great tact or wit. I don't pay much attention.

I myself have nothing to say worth saying to any of them, so I just get a plate and look for a quiet place to sit. Dinners like this are so... boring, unless you have something specific to speak to someone about. So I find a corner table with a goban, and watch the flow of the room while I play solitaire. Perhaps I might notice something interesting as the evening progresses, but I doubt it. At any rate, I don't want to get involved in any (more) intrigues while I am 'bugged'.

Aseric goes to talk to Fiona, then. I just shake my head. Is he still after 'lessons' from her? Bethany goes to talk to Gérard.

Then the thin man, Benedict, sits down opposite me at the goban...

"Do you wish to play?"

"Certainly." He plays? Perhaps the evening won't be a total loss.

He gives me black, though I am tempted not to let him. I haven't lost a game of go in decades, and it is rude to take the advantage, however slight. We play for about half an hour,

and I can honestly say it is the most challenging game I ever played. At first I think I will win, but then at the last moment he turns the board and wins by a landslide.

"Thank you for a spirited game."

I am speechless, and chagrined. I haven't lost at go since I was 6. How did this happen? Go is like battle, and warfare has never been a weak point of mine. I just stare at the board, remembering each move, what did I do wrong?

"Next time don't overextend yourself in the third quadrant." Benedict comments.

"...thank you." Is all I can bring myself to say.

During this time I have been aware that Dermott has been speaking to Flora, but I didn't pay attention to what was being said; the game took too much of my concentration.

Benedict goes on to document each and every weakness of my game. I don't think I have managed to remove the pole-axed look on my face by the time he leaves.

I myself am simply disappointed. I not only lost, he humiliated me! Am I to be beaten at everything, no matter what I try? I stifle a sigh. Frederick is talking to Martin, then Fiona. Bethany has apparently left.

Frederick approaches at the end of the game as Benedict leaves. "How did you do?"

"I lost," is all I can bring myself to say.

"I'm not surprised." Frederick replies. I just shake my head.

Bethany returns about the time Benedict hands me a cup of green tea. "I have information about Corialane," Frederick replies.

"Good, tomorrow." I say to him. I don't wish to ignore Benedict. If he's that good, maybe I can learn something. Until then, it is better not to discuss our mission too openly, although it seems the others have been doing so... Can no one keep a secret?

Bethany and Frederick both speak to Benedict briefly, asking about training. He directs Bethany to Fiona with a point, and Frederick takes her to Fiona to introduce her. They speak for some time.

"So you're a sword master?" I finally say to Benedict...

"That's what I'm called." He answers, and then the silence falls again.

"Well, go is much like battle." I say at length.

"Yes."

I can think of nothing else of moment to say to the dour man, so eventually I simply drift away. In polite time I retire to the suite of rooms where myself and my companions have been placed. I meet Bethany there shortly, and ask if she would consent to lead us back to that Pattern which she walked, in order that we question the Pattern-spirits there as to information about Corialane. She seems agreeable to the idea, but suggests I make a Trump instead. She thinks it will be quicker. I have to explain to her that one card will not transport everyone, but that if I used it, then I could perhaps use my other cards to bring through all the others, one at a time. She agrees.

I am surprised at how easily she agrees with my thoughts. She seemed quite hostile toward me earlier. Perhaps at last she sees wisdom. So I agree to try and draw a Trump of that strange place, with its unique world-tree, if I am not interrupted in the mean time. Tomorrow evening, after all, is the coronation, and we must not be late. Privately, I decide I

shall place the image in my blade, rather than on a card, to guard such a rare location. It seems that very few know it, and I would prefer to keep it that way.

I go to speak to Frederick then, and coordinate. I am tired of differing ideas diluting our effectiveness on the search. Frederick spoke to Florimel during dinner, he lets me know, and has learned that Corialane is a place, and the ruling family there are blondes. So at least our information converges a bit here. He agrees the trip to Bethany's Pattern is a good idea. He then ribs me about losing at go, though I try to show no emotion regarding it. Apparently common gossip hold Benedict to be the foremost strategist of Amber, and that losing to him is considered a foregone conclusion. I simply reply that one does not learn by studying only ones inferiors.

The thought occurs to me that if reaching the center of the Pattern allows one to go anywhere, that if Bethany simply walk her Pattern again, she could go to Corialane, and contact the rest of us by Trump. Expressing this to Frederick however, he shows grave misgivings. He seems to think it would not work. He has traversed a Pattern as well, though not that one, so I defer to his experience.

The two of us then opt to join Leonardo. It seems he is feeling a bit better after his recent travails. He has nothing new to add to our information so far, but that is only expected. He also agrees to the plan.

The evening grows late, and if I am to make any progress on the Pattern Trump, I must begin. I therefore ask Frederick and Leonardo if they can contact Aseric, and Dermott to confirm our plans, and they agree. Even if they dissent, at least they cannot accuse us of acting without informing them.

With that, I retire to my own quarters, and prepare myself for work. After some meditation to clear my thoughts, I bring forth Clairvidere in its guise as book. I gather my inks, and focus my memory on the incident at that other Pattern, and the brief time I was there. I remember quite clearly that singular tree, and it is this around which I focus my drawing.

After scarce an hour has passed, however, I am interrupted. Frederick has discovered Aseric has boiled to death...? He tells me with much surprise that what we saw as Aseric was an artificial construct. This comes as no surprise to me, and I remind him that 'Aseric' had been re-produced by Involee. The 'real' Aseric had been consumed back in the spider grove. This seems to make him consider for a moment. I simply say that if he feels we need an agent uncontaminated by Mandor's crystals, that we should try to contact Involee and have it create another version of Aseric. He considers, but I cannot tell if he thinks it a good idea or not. But I bid him goodnight. If I am to make any progress on this Trump, I will have to work through the night.

## Day 30742 (13 Sept 2004)

10 months and 15 days. With the strange kelpie dawn, I get some breakfast and set down to work again. The Trump is taking shape, but more slowly than I would wish. Even working through the night the image is scarcely half-completed. I have been as careful as I can, as detail on a Primal Shadow must be even more important than with other places. I must focus on the tree, the rocks, the quality of the sky, as that 'other' Pattern simply slips from my mind's eye when I try to picture it.

With the coming of afternoon, I am finally nearing completion, but I am once again disturbed. A knock. A palace page with a note that says "Come to Dermott's room." Also a bag, containing a severed toe which seems to be dissolving away in a stream of bubbles. I gather my inks, send Clairvidere back onto my skin, and go.

"I'm here, whose toe is this?" I quip, as I knock and enter...

"Aseric's," replies Frederick.

"Why did you send this to me?"

"Uh, I dunno. We thought you could contact Aseric." Frederick seems sheepish. Dermott appears quite angry.

"In case you didn't remember, Trump contact is cut off until after the coronation." I remind them. They seem to have forgotten.

"I thought in light of the situation they might make an exception." Dermott replies.

"I doubt it, they didn't with what happened to Bethany. Besides, I was working on the next step of our journey. I doubt one day will make much of a difference with the real Aseric."

"Your humanity is astounding."

I just snort and leave. I have to focus on priorities. If Aseric is in trouble, I am certain that it is of his own doing. And besides, if the 'real' Aseric still exists, I am certain he lies within the morass that is Involee. We have seen not but a construct since the dwarf was consumed months ago. Dermott surely must realize this, he simply refuses to admit it to the others.

I am focused on finding the Jewel, for the universe if not for myself. I could care less for the fate of the clown. He can wait, and find his own way out of his predicament, if truly he exists any longer. I have larger concerns.

Barely an hour after the meeting, I must once again pack up my meager things. It is time to prepare for the coronation. I dress myself soberly in the finest kimono I can get my hands on, in celadon and pearl colors. I carefully arrange my hair with the picks of jade so long ago given by Flora, perhaps if she sees I still wear them she will be slightly appeased. I also place around my throat one thing I have not worn for a long time; a claw carved of jade, from my homeland, on a chain of gold. I know not why I feel the need to wear it, but I do. Perhaps the crowning of this king brings some resonance with my long-ago past of imperial days...

I am still not quite finished with the card, but no matter. Clairvidere sits on my arm again, safe. I am packed to leave, in a hurry if needed, with my few important things tucked into my obi inconspicuously. It always seems to me that important events spawn trouble, so I go ready for anything.

The thought occurs to me then, that I need to go to retrieve Kaze soon. I hope she is alright. I left her in that wilderness place of crystal caves. I feel guilty that I have not yet made a card to go to her.

Finally I go to gather with the others, and find I am not the only one in a kimono. Benedict is wearing one as well. It catches my attention, as I am so unused to seeing garb like that of my home these days. As he passes, I am impressed with the figure he cuts, quite commanding. Then I notice the mon... a Gold Chrysanthemum!

I can only stand in the hall until I see him move around a corner out of sight. My blood boils, and freezes, all in a

moment. I know now why I felt the need to wear the necklace of jade. I recognized him, somehow, without realizing it. But I dare nothing, especially here, especially now.

I am washed by hatred, and anger. All the years of searching my own world for him, and I find him here? And here, it seems all my achievements, all my training, is for nothing. It seems at every turn I am eclipsed, and cannot compete with anyone. I myself am no stranger to strategy. I cannot move now, no matter how much I hear the voices of my ancestors calling. I am too embroiled with larger affairs. I am immortal, I remind myself, as obviously is he. I have all of time to hunt him, later. Now I must simply wait, and watch, and learn.

I decide simply to stay as far away from him as possible. I must do nothing rash or stupid, not now. And I do not wish to alert him to my own intentions.

As I gather loosely with the others, I see at least they have dressed appropriately, for them. And it quickly becomes apparent that all of Amber is here. I see Random, though not Vialle. Julian, Bleys, Benedict, Fiona, Flora, Rinaldo/Luke, Martin, of course...

I simply keep back, and thankfully our party is led to an area near the rear of the great hall where all are gathering. We are shown to where we are to stand, and the coronation commences. It drones on and on for quite some time. I pay attention only briefly to the coronation itself, and instead scan the crowd. If there will be trouble, it will come from there.

I notice then, someone wearing beige, hooded, somewhat to the middle, ahead and to the left of our group. It looks like the figure I saw in the hall of mirrors! And beige! The figure that Coral saw? I feel the urge to charge the figure, to attack, but I do not. I have no proof of anything. I would be arrested, or worse, charging forward in such company.

Instead I vow to trail the figure; to follow it. I start to subtly watch. As the priest of the Unicorn goes to finish the crowning, the beige robed figure reaches up and claps over his head. Waves of light and force emanate around him.

Damn me, I spotted him and did not act in time! I am blinded. When my eyes clear, I am alone. Damn it all! Too late! I am transported. I am lying on a white bier, in a plain white room. Everything is white. And then there is a mirror on one wall. I am naked. Yipes! At least the tattoo is still there. Clairvidere is with me, though it is not cold, and does not respond to my commands.

The mirror is cold to my touch, Trump cold, and as I regard it, it clouds, then clears to show the hall of mirrors, once again whole. In each mirror is another face, seeking release.

No time but the present to solve this. I begin to summon the image of the beige figure. I've had enough of running. Time to end it. It is slow going, and all my concentration, but I begin to call up an image in the mirror. He or she is obviously a master of Trump, but no matter, I have no other solution to hand.

After what seems endless time, it is completed. It feels like a... filtered Trump contact? Like there is something between us? It seems tenuous, like I am looking through someone else's eyes. I see the view is still underwater. I see through eyes striding through hallways. In Rebma? I see them walk out into the city, and leave it as well. They keep walking

across the ocean floor, past the edge of Rebma to where we found Coral, nearly.

Standing there are two other figures, one is wearing green robes, the other brown robes. Hooded. One starts to chant, in green. I recognize the voice! Llewella. As she is chanting, a pinprick of green fire-light expands like a line above the ocean floor. It forms a sigil. They are drawing a Pattern. It is finished, and sinks into the ocean floor, sizzling. The brown robed person draws out the Jewel of Judgment. They walk to the start of the tracing and pull back the hood, and reveals himself to be someone I do not recognize. A male. I try to call Clairvidere to break the mirror, but I can't. The man has medium-length blonde with green eyes. I must do something! Stop this, disrupt it! I don't know what is happening, but it can't be good.

Then a fourth person approaches, wearing red robes. And another voice resonates, coming from the person through whose eyes I view the scene, "Is it secure?" A feminine voice I do not recognize.

The red hood goes back, "Oh yes, absolutely secure." Black curly hair, a woman, looks like Kaliese! Is it a clone, or Involee? It must be Involee! I try to get enough of a connection to step through, but cannot. This is unlike any Trump I have ever experienced.

"Take your place," says the woman I view the scene through...

Kaliese walks across the lines of the Pattern, ignoring them, and begins to cast fiery energy forth. The flames drain away into the lines on the ground, that turn from green to red. Then I see tendrils, Logrus tendrils, draining from Kaliese's eyes and ears and such that also drain, into the area between the Pattern lines this time. Then finally she is covered in blue sparks, like Pattern energy, that drain into the lines of the Pattern on her feet, and the flaming lines turn from red to blue.

Finally, the woman in green reaches into her robes and pulls out a mirror.

Suddenly, I can feel someone else, another personality, a secondary contact, quite strong... Merlin?! The contact rushes into being.

"Can we do anything about this?" I indicate the scene directly, no time to waste...

"Holy shit!"

Llewella holds the mirror in front of her and begins to chant again. She chants for quite some time, while the mirror glows white.

"We must destroy the mirror," we seem to decide together.

The two of us engage in psychic combat with this figure we inhabit. The personality with which I am engaged seems somehow impossibly to blend in to me, but I am too engaged to feel the horror of it. It is not one persona at all, but two. Dermott and Merlin. No doubt he tried again to change form. This split form is weaker in mind than I, but perhaps more directed.

Together we push to take command of this body we seem to inhabit, and the form staggers. The blond man seems to show concern, coming to the woman's aid, but she urges him away, to continue the ritual. We push again, harder, and she drops to her knees, saying "They are trying to escape!"

Then the mirror begins to pour forth white light, energy, and I feel a drain on myself. The light is Trump energy? Or

life energy pulled through Trump? I cannot guess. The light strikes Involee, and she absorbs it until it seems to overflow from her. She throws her head back in a soundless scream, and the energy seems to shoot out in a great torrent, upward, expanding with the energy already resident in this new Pattern.

We continue to push, though I can feel the drain on my energy, and the weakening of Dermott/Merlin. And then the woman seems to pass out; all goes black.

And I open my own eyes, to find myself slumped in the chamber of the coronation, surrounded by other unconscious forms. I see Dermott at hand, also struggling to consciousness.

"Dermott, wake the others!"

I sprint as fast as I can, underwater as we all are, out of the room. I slow only to grab a water-breathing necklace from a palace guard. I have moments, only.

In the distance I can see the glowing pillar of light. I must reach it, must stop it! I summon Clairvidere, and it springs to my command, a katana, its edge reflecting the cold light. As I finally reach the plain, it seems an eternity has passed. The pillar of light has fallen in on itself somehow, and it seems that as I ran Shadow moved around me, though I have not the ability to shift Shadow myself.

I see the beige man standing there, the woman through whose eyes I saw draped over his arm. He is activating a Trump card! Too late, I arrive on the scene. All that remains is a shining blue-white Pattern on the ocean floor, and on its opposite side, Llewella. Involee is gone.

Llewella stands opposite, with her mirror in hand. I try to run around to her, but she only says "All hail Martin, King of Amber." And disappears...

I am left alone. I can no longer see Rebma, it is gone into Shadow. I stand on a barren ocean plain, with nothing but a glowing Pattern. They have all escaped, I know not to where. I have failed.

Dejected, I Trump back to Rebma. There I see Dermott has managed to wake the others in our group, though he seems barely conscious himself. The other Amberites and Rebman are also regaining consciousness. All I can think to do is wait for the firestorm that I know will shortly erupt around me.

I have not long to wait. As the Elders awaken, they are confused and angered. As our party was conscious before them, they demand from us explanations. And I am the only one capable of answering. Dermott seems too confused, perhaps damaged through his attempt to channel Merlin, to be coherent. The others were in no better circumstance than the Elders themselves, only quicker to awaken thanks to Dermott's efforts.

I try to be concise and accurate. There is no point in secrecy any longer. I explain that we were tasked to find the stolen Jewel of Judgment, and that at last I discovered who had it, but too late to prevent what followed. I reveal that the plot was brought forth by Llewella, and Involee, the construct which escaped from Dermott, and two others I do not know, blond-haired and green-eyed Amberites, who escaped via Trump. That these are the rulers of Corialane.

A party of the Elders is swiftly convened. To my surprise, and annoyance, it is led not by the new King Martin, or King Random, but rather by Benedict. All the others, even the sovereigns, deferred to him when he stepped forth. What place

does he truly hold here? I say nothing, only refusing to blanch beneath withering stares.

At the Elders' command, I lead them back to the place of this new Pattern. It is more difficult for me to find it this time, but I manage. The analysis of the Elders is swift. They discover in short order that this is, in fact, not a new Pattern at all. That the Primal Pattern, which I saw once when I visited Dworkin, has been transplanted to this undersea place. That no longer is Rebma a reflection of Amber, now Amber is a reflection of Rebma. Now I know what Llewella's parting words meant.

## Day 30742 cont.(20 Sep 2004)

10 months and 15 days continues.

Benedict, Fiona, Bleys, and Gérard escort us to where we are to wait until told otherwise. Bethany asks for aspirin what is that? Gérard hands her a bottle of laudanum. I deny the chance to take some, my head is bad enough. We are led out of Rebma, out of Amber, traveling a while until we are left in a manor house in a place that seems quite idyllic and pastoral. We are told to wait.

I just grumble and set down for a while, I can still hear Dermott's echoes in my head. Leonardo goes to explore the castle. I finish the Trump of Bethany's Pattern, and explain to everyone what happened. But then Mandor arrives.

I then propose we go ahead and leave anyhow, waiting is not an option for me. For supper tonight Mandor has laid a spread. I sit at his invitation, I'm angry and I don't care.

"Has anything been resolved in the conference?"

"Oh, you mean back in Amber? Well, other than not getting the jewel... I guess the Shadow Storms will get here within a few weeks."

"Shadow Storms?"

"Well the universe has to equalize itself?"

"Something like that."

Like dropping ice in a glass of liquid, Mandor explains. Now the universe is one pattern less, the Amber Pattern was erased.

Pattern walkers shouldn't be affected, it's just the Pattern was moved, consolidated, as it were. TirNaNogth's Pattern is uncertain in status.

"Why are you glad about this?" asks Bethany?

"Because now the universe is more balanced."

"You sound like someone who might be involved in it."

"Do I now? It's still true..." He explains the multitude of Patterns, and how it off-balances the one Logrus...

Frederick tries to confront Mandor about why we are the victims here, but I am simply angry and wish the argument to stop. Instead we get a lecture on the politics of Chaos.

Infinity in an hour, whatever. Bethany and Frederick are both so politically naïve. Mandor now tries to convince us to bring the eye back to him, and Chaos, once we achieve it. To right the universal balance of power.

"Does she always make so little sense?" Mandor asks me after Bethany tries stupidly to express her understanding of things...

"Yes," is all I reply.

"Sometimes I think you are very clever, but sometimes that frightens me..." he finally comments.

She keeps going on about "why would Llewella do this", and genealogy, and suchlike.

Mandor finally gets to the point. "I heartily suggest and put forth to you that the next step on your journey involves finding that which is lost."

"He means Aseric, I gather."

I tell them that the Amberites want us to stay, the Chaosites want us to go, and I don't care about either. I am doing what I want now. I tell them I am leaving in the morning. They ask if it is to find my horse, I tell them follow and find out.

I tell them that we have to find Involee to find Aseric. I ask if Involee went through Bethany's Pattern. She says she thinks so, so I reply good, that makes things easy, see it in the morning.

## Day 30743 (20 Sept 2004)

10 months and 14 days. The next morning I am ready to leave. I Trump out to Bethany's Pattern and bring Bethany, Leonardo and Frederick through.

"Well no shit." Corwin-ghost says. "You're batting about zero."

He tells us Corialane moves. More pointless conversation. I think I am developing a permanent headache. Bethany is appalled at me. I've been too nice so far. I don't care anymore. He says the answer is simple, walk the Pattern, go to Aseric.

I testily demand Bethany get it over with. She starts to stand up to me, but folds. She does it. She is so... weak-willed. I tell her to go to Aseric, and if she doesn't get Trump contact from me in a few minutes to start walking him back towards this Pattern.

I then shuffle out my Trump cards, and find Bethany's card, and wait a moment or two... Contact is slow in coming, and finally she tries to convince me not to come through I do so, and encounter an entity called Sharu-Garul. He shoots liquid flame, and I reflexively dodge. The flame melts the stone at my feet, then flows behind me as if it were liquid. I try to attack this mysterious hooded figure in this strange elemental palace, but he melts into the ground, and the flame morphs into a 12-foot creature, demonic praying mantis, with orange-ish stained glass window wings. It wails like a wounded animal and a bonfire. It attacks, and I attempt to jump in to behead it... A quick end. I will try to get out of here quickly to bring the others, but Bethany may be killed if I don't at least incapacitate the thing first. It seems fire-based. Perhaps I can use Clairvidere, to transport it, if it transports me. A new thought, and a new use.

But it dodges, just as Dara appears from nowhere, in my path. I will not interrupt my strike, and continue on the attack. Dara darts aside, but it seems the edge grasses her cheek anyway. Too bad. The mantis-thing dodged, damn it. Try again. If I can transport it with a blow, to Chaos, perhaps, that would...

"Sharu-Garul, attend me."

The ghostly man arises out of the stone to Dara... "Mistress Dara."

"This is all very cute, but it doesn't amuse me, turn it off."

“As you say.” He claps and it dissolves into flame and rejoins with the flaming fountain. Bethany is released from the stone where she was imprisoned.

“According to Mandor, we need Aseric to complete the quest,” Bethany says...

“Well, if you need a favor, certainly.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh you are quite welcome.” She then turns her comments to this Sharu-Garul... “Bring him out of the fountain.”

“As you wish, my mistress will not be pleased.”

“Your mistress can talk to me if she is displeased.”

Aseric tumbles out of the fire, sunburnt-looking and hairless. Bethany moves to him, but appears unable to do anything.

“Should we leave now?” Bethany turns to me.

I turn to Aseric. “Aseric, we have to go to Involee, NOW.”

“Uh, I don’t like Involee, why don’t I like Involee?”

“Later.”

“Hmm, I have a dinner engagement with Mandor, I must go... Hmm, Surengiin, you are quite lovely. I can see why Merlin was enamored...”

I just stand there and say nothing, with a clear look of disbelief on my face. “Aseric, can you take us to Involee now?”

“uh...”

“Can we go back to Corwin’s Pattern now?” says Bethany...

Corwin’s Pattern? Fine, I’m disgusted and want out of here before something worse happens. I Trump there and bring the others through. They camp and have dinner. Dermott is there sleeping in a pavilion tent. It’s big enough for all of us, with dinner laid. Whose, they ask? Mandor I reply, he’s the gourmand.

Clothes are procured for Aseric, and food is had by all. I start to work on a Trump of the blue crystal shadow so I can retrieve Kaze when I have the chance. But then, I hear whinnying. Behind the tent is Kaze!!! She is curried and ready to ride, bearing an oriental saddle... How? Who? In the saddlebags is gear, with a golden chrysanthemum. I crumple the blossom and greet her.

The other’s horses are similarly here and cared for... Bethany astutely surmises that the Elders can’t be TOO upset with us. I’m not so sure. But I don’t care anymore. Seeing Kaze again, even at the hands of HIM, is still the happiest moment I have had in many days.

Dermott and Aseric are unconscious. The others are talking, eating, and generally being the same they have been. One hour of happiness.

## Day 30744 (20 Sept 2004)

10 months and 13 days. What came over me yesterday? I don’t know... Everyone seems to be conscious now except Dermott... And I’m not sure where to go from here. I no longer need to go to the tragolith shadow to retrieve Kaze... So I guess we are back to square one... finding Involee, and the two beige figures, and Llewella. One of them now has the Jewel, or knows where it is. *sigh* And the Elders said

something about Shadow-storms. Sudden travel might not be wise.

Aseric is awake, and seems confused. The last thing he remembers of us is being in the Hall of Mirrors. So now we have to update him... A long tale indeed. And as usual he seems to pay little attention. Bethany tries to sense it magically, but can’t. Aseric agrees to try to magically find Involee. I let him know he can teleport, and trying it, he finds he still can. We agree to make a plan, though Bethany seems appalled at my suggestion she prepare combat spells.

Bethany agrees finally to walk the Pattern, and disappears. I cannot Trump her when she gets there. Then Aseric has us all arrayed in a chain and tries to teleport us all there. He, along with the horse he rides, and the one he holds (Bethany’s) disappear, but the rest of us remain.

Finally we ride out of the camp, trying to Shadow-walk to our companions, as we have no other choice. We quickly find Aseric, unconscious, next to the two horses. He apparently didn’t make it far. It seems his teleportation either has a range, or he is running out of power.

He is tied to his saddle, and then awoken. He says he made it, and complains about being tied. Leonardo cuts him free and he falls on his head. Frederick gives him aspirin.

He found her, but she was somewhere very dangerous, to the point that he reflexively left suddenly. Frederick says he chickened out. I don’t care. We keep riding, until we need to camp.

After three days we find a campsite perfectly laid, with a spear wrapped in laurel bearing a note and a gold chrysanthemum. I suggest we move on. We are obviously expected, but how? I don’t like it, and suggest we move on.

Leonardo takes the note, and finds he is summoned back to Amber for garrison. Apparently he can walk Pattern as well, and he must leave to gather a force from his home and go back to Amber at dawn. Right. Once again HE interferes with our group, and the others simply accept it as if it is the most natural thing in the world. Ha! Little do THEY know.

But then a thought occurs, and I sit down to speak with Frederick. If we can go where it was, following it and hoping to catch up, can we not go to where it WILL be? It seems no more improbable than what we have been doing.

We finally decide that instead of following behind all the time, we need to go where we need to be... To head them off... It’s time to start being proactive.

## Day 30745 (16 Nov 2004)

10 months and 12 days. Dermott awakes, though Aseric is unconscious again. When will this end? With Leonardo and Bethany gone, that leaves just me, Frederick, and Dermott. And something is definitely wrong with Dermott.

He mocks me. He has shifted his form again, this time to the form of an oriental male. He wears gold, and subtly insults me in a relentless and constant fashion. He calls me a ronin, and honorless, and says I don’t understand family. My temper flairs, and it is all I can do to bite back my responses. I feel like lashing out and killing him on the spot. But I still need him alive, for now. Still, it takes everything I have not to lash out at him.

Frederick just scouts ahead to get away from us. As for me, focusing on Trump art is the only way I have to calm

down and maintain something resembling composure. At least all the constant practice of my art seems to have led me to a more adept state. It comes easier than it used to.

## Day 30752 (16 Nov 2004)

10 months and 5 days. A week on the road with Dermott. He continues to mock me.

He goads Frederick into questioning my past, but I am resolute. Neither of them has yet earned the story of my origins. I will not tell them. Dermott seems to know things, but yet does not. He skirts the edge of knowledge. How much did he learn of me in that one instance of blending?

Even my patience is not endless. Finally I result to the old arts of the Court, and poison his food. But it is to no avail. He screams and contorts all night, but come morning seems fine.

We get closer and closer to the end of the world. Closer to Chaos. Dermott recognizes some of the areas here.

During this week of travel, I finished the Trump of the blue-crystal Shadow anyway, even though I don't need it right now. I also draw one of Random, because I think I will need it. I draw the crystal shadow in Clairvidere, but Random on a card. I have a plan.

## Day 30755 (16 Nov 2004)

10 months and 2 days. This area looks familiar even to me. It is close to DermottWays. Then we top a hill, and face the undulating black sea. In the middle of it rises a gargantuan structure like a giant red crystal dome. That was not there before. The island with the great temple is gone.

Dermott says it is his throne risen, and Involee does good work. It is about a mile in diameter. Dermott speaks in koans, very annoying.

Suddenly it all clicks. Dermott IS Involee...

Dermott says "I think we should go to the dome."

"Of course Involee," I reply.

"I am not Involee, I am Dermott. Well..."

I go to the shore and the ocean is Involee, moving counter to the wind. Frederick calls me back and I consent, though I am not pleased by any of this.

There is no entryway, no bridge or tunnel. Dermott is very relaxed about all this, and I feel betrayed again. Dermott is saying things that really make me think he is Involee. He then dips his hand into the morass, and I know we must flee.

This is where the Jewel WILL be, but not where it is. I can't Trump here, but we can still Shadow-walk. I need to get Frederick to leave. NOW.

If we can backtrack from here, we can still meet the Jewel coming. But it won't work if we are here. Not on Involee's home turf. An ambush before it reaches here would be better.

## Day 30752 cont.(22 Nov 2004)

It seems Frederick shares my thoughts. With only a look and a nod to one another we turn and leave this Shadow. He leads us back along the path the Jewel will take, towards where it is now.

As we backtrack, I summon Leonardo from barracks duty. We need him now, here. He is an extra sword that won't utterly betray us. He joins us readily enough, seeming not at

all nervous about leaving his post. Hmm. Note that for the future.

As I bring him through, Aseric stirs. It seems whatever had incapacitated him has finally worn off. I cut the bonds holding him to his horse, although Frederick complains. Frederick and Leonardo try to question him about what happened to him, but he still seems incoherent to me. He says it was like "that movie, you know, the one, with the thing, like a volcano, but not..." and blithers on for a while. We learn nothing of any use, but then I didn't figure we would.

They suddenly get into a debate as to whether we should rescue Bethany first, or get the Jewel. I speculate the tasks are one and the same, but they disagree. I hold that the Jewel has precedence; we are so close, we can't let it slip from our fingers. Finally they decide to test if they are in the same place. Leonardo reveals that he has Pattern as well. He says he will walk towards Bethany while Frederick continues towards the Jewel. They both set off, and Leonardo immediately disappears. We stop, and in a moment he reappears. Bethany is back the way we came, towards DermottWays... Why am I not surprised? I convince them finally that the Jewel is close and we can't abandon that quest. Once we have the Jewel, Involee has no reason to hold Bethany.

As we continue to near the Jewel, we end up in a strange place indeed. We enter a Shadow where we are on a yellow bricked roadway, and the sky is bluer than any I have ever seen... Some strange sort of Primal Shadow, we quickly gather, as our clothing changes around us.

My kimono changes into a strangely patterned short dress, and I find myself wearing shoes looking like they are cut of green crystal. My bun collapses into pigtails, and I try to put it back up... Scandalous! And worst of all, the sword on my hip, thankfully not Clairvidere, begins to writhe and twist. In moments, it as dropped to the ground and taken the form of a small white dog. It yaps and circles my feet, much to my chagrin and the amusement of my companions. They seem to be under the impression that the little dog is Clairvidere; I won't break them of that impression.

Clairvidere is still upon me as the dragon tattoo, comfortably chilly against my skin. At least I know Trump still works here in this odd place. The others seem to have noticed the tattoo as well, as my arms and legs are revealed by this too-short gown. I am embarrassed but try to ignore it.

The yellow roadway twists onward towards a great red crystal palace; it looks like ruby. Hmm. So the crystal is bending reality around it? I can't tell, but it seems too alarmingly reminiscent of the red dome in DermottWays.

I am greatly bothered by all of this. Aseric is beginning to look as if he is stuffed with straw. Frederick is growing tawny colored fur, and Leonardo is turning silver... "Can we leave, if we're supposed to get the Jewel here, I don't know what I'm supposed to do about it, my sword is barking at my heels..."

Even such a simple declaration is almost impossible to make. I feel an almost uncontrollable urge to sing. The others slowly fall victim to it as well; their speech becomes sing-song, and nonsensical the further along we go here. I am horrified and simply keep quiet.

As we near the castle we walk through a great field filled with poppies. To avoid the odor, I tear a piece from the hem of my dress, wet it from my waterskin and cover my face. Leonardo and Aseric quickly follow suit, but not Frederick.

Though he claims to be a physician, and should know better, he goes and wanders into the flowers, breathing deeply. In moments he has fallen unconscious. I force myself to trudge into the field and retrieve him, holding my breath the whole way.

I can't leave him to perish in a stupor. Baka! Of all the times to do this, not now when we all need to be alert! Striking Frederick rouses him somewhat, but he isn't really coherent. I ask Leonardo to take over leading us, as I don't trust Frederick to do so in an opiate stupor.

We eventually reach the gates of the ruby city. After a rude reception, we are admitted when Aseric says "We're here to see the wizard." Whatever that means... What wizard?

Once inside, we are surrounded by singing midgets who seem joyful at our arrival, especially mine. Apparently they have some great significance to green shoes I can't comprehend. I am swept away in this storm of overzealous midgets to a strange room where overly buxom red-headed midget women bathe me and change my clothes. I seem helpless to do anything, it all happens so fast.

Things go from bad to worse when the dress I am placed in is emerald green (to match the shoes) and cut in a way even a whore would be hesitate to wear. Clairvidere is shown off even more than before. My hair is curled up, and excessive makeup applied. They deem this appropriate, and then sweep me out again to the others, who have also been 'groomed' it seems. Leonardo is covered with oil, looking more metal than ever. Aseric has been restuffed, and Frederick combed and ribbons tied all over his hair... What madness is this?

I simply resolve myself to ignore this absurdity. Like when Flora caused my kimono to color-change at dinner, there is nothing to do but bear up. I just hope they don't expect me to seduce their king or some stupid thing like that...

The throne room is a huge vaulted ruby chamber. A voice booms from behind a dais "Why do you come to this place?"

Aseric answers "We come for the Jewel of Judgment."

And the voice answers "What makes you think you are worthy of it?"

Aseric stutters and looks to me. I say nothing. He is singing all this time. I have no intention of opening my mouth at this point. Better for me to remain silent. "Uhm, all the trouble we've gone through to get it?" His answer is pathetic.

Frederick has been poking behind some curtains where he apparently finds another man, tied up and unconscious. Odder and odder.

But then the dais begins to rotate. It turns, revealing a throne. Draped across it is a familiar figure in orange and red, with a gold filigreed sword on his hip... Bleys. At his feet are the crumpled and unconscious forms of the two blonds we have been pursuing. He twirls the Jewel from a chain in one hand.

"Random wanted this done right, so I went ahead and did it. But now... I *could* return it to Random, but that would be generous, and altruistic... No, I think it will remain missing. And as for you, well I can't let you go. But I don't feel like killing you either. So I suppose I could just leave you here... Forever."

Oh by all things holy. That git. Well, I can't stand for this. I have to get the Jewel from him... Now. I have no idea what will happen, especially if I let the others get it, since they have

spoken of trying to destroy it. But these Elders don't fall for the obvious... So I'll have to be clever.

## Day 30752 cont.(29 Nov 2004)

"Wait," I begin, smiling haughtily, "If you are so sure in your victory, make me a wager." I only hope Bleys will take the bait. "I still owe you a dance. If I can get the Jewel by the end of it, let us leave, and I swear we won't implicate you in the matter; after all, you weren't involved in the original theft."

"Well, that sounds interesting. And if I win?"

"What more do you wish than what you already have?"

"Well, I'm already going to get that anyway, how to make this interesting..." his mumbled comments following hint at incest again, but this time I am unphased. I've come to expect such from him. "Oh, I'll figure out something..." he finally concludes.

As I take a ready stance and begin to summon forth Clairvidere, the Jewel jerks from his fingers and flies toward a curtain to the side of the chamber. Bleys looks annoyed and pulls a dagger from his belt, pinning the chain to the floor with one practiced flick of the wrist. My, he IS quick... And who else is here interfering?

There really is no time to contemplate. Clairvidere is quickly forming into a straight sword, the better to match Bleys' narrow blade. But I have no intentions of fighting if a simpler solution is at hand. Bleys can wait, the Jewel itself is more important.

I dive for the stone, bringing my blade up into a blocking position as my hands close around the setting. Bleys is moving in, but twitches as if being held back, and some sort of sigils on his sword flare. As they do so, the invisible pull on him seems to slip away. His speed is increasing to an alarming rate.

Suddenly a great demon plows out from behind the curtain, ripping it to shreds. I recognize Dermott, but have no time to react. I only have time to see a flash of both Dermott and Frederick lunging for the prone bodies of the two blonde-haired ones who helped instigate this plot. They seem on a collision course.

But my own concentration must stay focused on Bleys. I deflect his first strike easily enough, but cannot maneuver away. He steps in and strikes me a solid kick, to the face, and I can feel my nose crush with a sickened noise. The force of the blow is enough to send me spinning, the chain of the Jewel describing the arc of my slide.

In that split second of red haze, he has batted aside Clairvidere, and begins a swing towards my arm – he means to cut off the hand holding the Jewel. I try to react, but too slow. Suddenly his blow is parried, by Leonardo. I barely have time to register this before I feel a stunningly cold black ooze creeping over my hand and the Jewel. Damn it all, not Involee again! I manage, just barely, to trigger the Trump I had prepared of Castle Amber before anything else distracts me.

I appear outside Castle Amber, and spend a moment summoning my senses as I fish for Random's Trump. I need to contact him before something ELSE happens... I turn to look at this Jewel that has cost me so much effort... It is gone! I hold only an empty setting. Involee! Curses on that construct!

I change tactics. I have to get to DermottWays, and fast. I can't Trump there. It seems the pseudo-prophecy of our Patternwalk came true. The Jewel HAS ended up in DermottWays. I turn the sword and summon a Trump of Merlin. He can get me there.

Contact comes, but not as expected... Beyond any explanation, the image of Merlin in the Sword blade morphs, into Mandor! It must be that crystal parasite. More curses!

"Bad day Surengiin? Shall I join you or do you wish to join me?"

I can only try to hold what is left of my nose and stop the bleeding while I mutter, "I'll join you. I need to get to DermottWays now."

He brings me through, and immediately summons his silver spheres. "You used to be so pretty. Let me fix that nose of yours..."

"No time. Involee has the Jewel at DermottWays. I can't Trump there, so I need transportation."

"Really? Well, then let me talk to someone and we'll be off." He proceeds to have his spheres spin about my head and with some strange magic shift my nose back into place. With one snap of pain it sets and heals, leaving behind a dull ache. I decide not to tell him about the jerk my shoulder took... That should be fine on its own. During this time Mandor has apparently summoned a great deal of House Hendrake, and they together proceed to use their Logrus-travel abilities to drag us all into DermottWays.

Though speedy, the trip is highly disconcerting. I feel as if I am being stretched and released, only to snap back. We arrive on the beach, at the edge of the black morass. Now what? This is not what I had planned; not by a long shot.

Seemingly in answer, Mandor pulls out a card. Clairvidere is warm in my hands, what could he be planning? But he seems to manage a contact, and in a shimmer of light Dara appears. How in creation? This Shadow is Trump-blocked.

"Ah, but you haven't spent as much time here as I have," he says, in answer to my thoughts, "I have the keys to the kingdom, so to speak..." I hate it when he reads my mind like that.

Dara and Mandor turn to one another with a knowing look. They agree it is time to ... finish it. They link arms and begin to summon a bubbling nothingness. Primal chaos, it seems, and the shadow begins to bubble away into nothing in an expanding ring.

What now?!?!?! This is NOT what I had intended. How can someone hijack a Trump contact? How can one Trump into a Trump-blocked zone? Why are they destroying the shadow? Will destroying all around the Jewel cause it to plummet into Primal Chaos and be reclaimed by the Serpent? I fear it so.

How can I twist this to my benefit? I can't attack Dara or Mandor with all of House Hendrake around me. But if I do nothing, they have won... At least they are busy with their summoning and can do little to me at this moment...

Then the red dome flickers and the morass bubbles and red lighting shoots out all about. Legions of black shifting...things swarm out of the sea. I am caught in this overwhelming surge along with the members of the House of Hendrake. Any plans I could have come up with are useless. I can do nothing but fight them; I am left without option.

I slay countless things, whatever they are, but not without cost. The other members of Hendrake are also involved. It is like a hurricane of destruction. Never have I seen such slaughter, not even in the great battles of my own realm. I am fighting for survival, as those black things try to kill us all.

The nothingness becomes a great whirlpool of darkness surrounding the red, glowing dome. The crystal dome becomes the center of the whirlpool, the center of reality, as all bubbles away around it. As the darkness reaches the horizon I can see that the dome is in fact a sphere, like a red crystalline sun. It is pulsing with inner light, seeking to fight the darkness.

The gem spins and glows in the maelstrom, brighter and brighter, as I can only slay, black blood and red flowing around me. Red blood. My blood.

Cracks begin to lace through this sun, this point of order in the chaos. I wish I could touch it. I never wanted to fight for Chaos, how did this happen? From the cracks pour light purer yet.

Then Dara says, "That should take care of it, its time to go." We are an island, in the ocean of Chaos. Mandor summons his metal spheres and weaves a globe around us, ripping us out of the remaining shreds of DermottWays, as the sun explodes like a supernova beyond...

When the afterimages fade, we are in Chaos again. Myself, Dara, Mandor, and the scions of House Hendrake; Lord Kov, Lady Tessa, Gilva, others...

Out of battle, I finally begin to feel my wounds. I did not realize I had taken so many... I can barely stand.

Dara looks at me, "Well fought, we appreciate all that you've done for us and our House, and that you did do your very best to retrieve the Jewel for us. Such loyalty does not go unrewarded. I've spoken to Lord Kov, and he wishes me to offer an invitation to be inducted into the House of Hendrake.

"I told him you would probably refuse, but regardless, I have instructed Mandor to remove that which he implanted within you... And any issues we had between us in the past are just that... the past. Let us start again, with a better understanding of one another. And please at least consider Lord Kov's offer. Such a thing isn't given very often."

I simply nod tiredly, and watch Dara leave. How is it she looks none the worse for wear from all this? At least I see I have not fared much worse than the others of Hendrake. All of us are bloodied this day.

As I begin to wipe away the ichor and try to assess the severity of my wounds, Mandor ushers me to a side chamber. I don't have the heart to protest. His spheres weave a web of stinging light, bright enough to pierce flesh and show the bone beneath. After several moments of this, he declares the crystal parasites dissolved and gone.

He seems about to consider the rest of my wounds when he receives a Trump contact, and abruptly vanishes. I am somehow relieved by this turn of events.

The rest of House Hendrake has retreated, to tend to their own wounds. And I am left alone.

I return to the quarters I had a few months ago, when I last stayed here. Pain still gnaws at my thoughts, but I am somehow gratified to be left to my own internal suffering for a change. No one jumps in to 'fix' me, no one tries to claim a favor. No foreign thoughts or bizarre plots leap upon me. For one evening, I am my own person again.

But I have failed. I had meant to return to my companions and retrieve them, but I couldn't reach them. Had Involce taken them as well? Where were they? Were they even alive? I contemplated the possibilities as I slowly bathed, and bound my wounds. I am so tired.

## Day 30753 (29 Nov 2004)

Morning brings no revelations. I wake from a deep sleep to find the sky has turned nearly to mid-day. My wounds still pain me, but I feel in no danger of passing out. And for the first day in months, I am not counting down to my own inevitable death. Or am I?

I am left depressed and frustrated. I have failed at everything I try to do. The Jewel is still gone, but Mandor and Dara, at least, seem to consider the matter closed. My 'leash' has been removed, or so I've been told. And I'm still alive to talk about it, to my own chagrin.

But is it really over? I limp my way to a quiet balcony overlooking the Abyss and stare. Does it stare back? What other universal powers brood now? After a large meal, the first in months, I feel more myself in a physical sense. But I still have no enlightenment.

I should at least discover if my debts to Chaos are truly paid. I don't count the words of Dara as final by any means... But I really don't want to speak to Merlin, particularly. I just got Dara off my back, for now, and don't wish to begin any new baseless rumors...

What the hell am I supposed to do now?

And there is still the offer from Lord Kov to consider. Hendrake hasn't betrayed me... But can I really bring myself to join them? Random and the others in Amber claim I am one of their kin; but I have no proof. They HAVE betrayed me... and the others. Chaos, for all that they scheme openly, has ironically been more open. Much to consider.

As my thoughts travel among these people, I have found myself shuffling Trumps. Not through Clairvidere, but the physical cards. The feel of them, physical and solid, seems somehow comforting. My party members... Amber... Martin... Rebma... Merlin... Xangzhu. It seems I shuffle up Merlin's card quite frequently. At least the cards of my 'cousins' are still cold... They seem to be alive, wherever they are. But I doubt they want to hear from me.

I could go back to Amber, and speak to Vialle... Somehow I think I could speak to her. But would she speak to me, after all this?

And Merlin's card again... Should I talk to him? What do I really have to say? But I should at least check if this debt is truly paid... "Merlin?" I mutter to the card, only half concentrating...

The response is almost instant. "Ah, it's you... And what brings you to call?" the card takes on dimension, and Merlin is to be seen in his library.

"I don't wish to disturb you..."

"You already have, so get on with it."

I shrug, instantly regretting it as it pulls on all the wounds beginning to knit on my arms. "I just wanted to inquire as to whether on not the..."

"Would you care to join me? I always find face-to-face conversations more satisfying than Trump calls..."

"...Uh, perhaps it's best if I don't... No sense in giving the rumormongers more cannon-fodder."

"Oh, my mother's gotten over that, just come in and sit down... Unless you'd rather I joined you?" I can't quite tell what his expression is supposed to be; amusement perhaps?

I can only give a sigh. "As you wish." He reaches out a hand and with my acceptance of the gesture he steps onto the balcony.

"Ah, didn't we have breakfast here when all this started?"

"Is this the same balcony? I hadn't noticed. I just thought the view was nice."

"Hmm. Indeed." Merlin regards me, and I suddenly realize that I haven't risen from my seat to greet him... A breach of protocol. He seems to pick up on my train of thought however, and interjects before I can act. "No, don't get up. You look like hell."

I shrug just slightly, trying not to wince. "So does a good portion of House Hendrake."

"So I heard. Grandfather was telling me he hadn't seen that much action since the end of the Patternfall War... So what was it you wanted to speak to me about?"

"When I returned with Lady Dara and Mandor yesterday, Dara said something I felt the need to follow up on... I wanted to inquire as to whether the judge and jury of Chaos has truly acquitted me," I say with as level and toneless a voice as I can muster, "or whether I am still on the hunt, so to speak..."

"Didn't Mandor remove those crystals?" Merlin seems to give me a searching look.

"He did something, before Trumping off in rather a hurry yesterday..."

"Hmm..." his gaze lingers for a time, but I just ignore his scrutiny. "No, they're gone. You did your best to do what was asked of you..." Another reminder of my failure, just what I wanted to hear... "So will you accept my grandfather's offer?"

I am relieved to hear that the crystals are truly gone, though the matter of this potential alliance still hangs on my mind. "Ah, you've heard about that... I am still considering the matter."

"He doesn't offer such things lightly, or often."

"I am aware, but there are other factors to consider. I am not the ronin I may appear to be, and would not bring my unfinished business to Hendrake's door."

Merlin laughs. "I'm sure you couldn't have any business that Hendrake couldn't handle..."

I give Merlin a sour look. "My business is mine to finish. I was just trying to be polite." My tone was perhaps more sharp than I intended, but I don't feel very conciliatory right now.

Merlin looks falsely contrite for perhaps a whole second. "My pardons..." the sarcasm was thick, "But that doesn't answer the question at hand. Would you accept?"

"Honestly, it would depend on the exact nature of the alliance offer."

"How do you mean the nature of the offer?"

"Well, not to... overcomplicate matters, but in my own idiom such an offer could be made... in different ways. Is it an offer to be accepted as a house vassal, and become one of the men-at-arms, if you will? Or, not to be presumptuous, might it be an offer of adoption, to become one of the family directly in name? Or an offer of alliance by marriage? The offer was conveyed by Lady Dara, in a rather passing fashion, without

details... And I have not yet had the opportunity to speak to Lord Kov about the matter.”

“Well, I don’t know how things are done where you grew up, but this is more an adoption thing, you will be legally adopted into the House of Hendrake in Chaos... There is no marriage involved, simply an oath to become a member of the family and behave with honor and loyalty to the family. Qualities that the Hendrake see that you have in abundance. Because by accepting you into their house they are taking as much or more of a chance than you are... And certain high members of the Court spoke highly of you...”

“Really.” I am a bit afraid to consider *which* members might have thought to speak highly of me. “Well, I am honored by the offer, although I would rather wait until my other... oaths... are taken care of.”

“Well, I doubt the oaths would be contradictory... you would hardly be the only one with other issues, most of the House has their own baggage. By joining the House, you could call on as much or as little aid as you wished in the matter.

“And you were asking about the judge and jury; he said it was fine. I did make inquiries to the Justicar of Chaos and he announced the matter was at an end; though I am a bit upset at Mandor for preempting the Chaos legal system. I believe what I said to him was ‘The next time your reach so exceeds your grasp, you will pull back a bloody stump.’”

I actually smile to that. It makes me feel better to think of the insufferably prim and confident Mandor called onto the royal carpet. “Well then let me ask you one question. Would *you* wish me to accept this offer?”

<<*The story continues with the events in “Thirty Years in Shadow, or, Cynicism Abroad”>>*