

Surengiin's Journal #3

Aimless Wandering of the Second Quest

Day 41530 (2 Jan 2005)

As I reach the edge of Forest Arden, I get a Trump contact. Merlin? Who else has my Trump? With some trepidation, I accept. It is Bethany! Who made a Trump of me for her? It seems my isolation is over.

She asks me for help, her home shadow is under attack. I cannot believe what I hear. She would actually ask *me* for help? Surely she must hate me. Is it a trap? But I cannot believe Bethany would try to entrap me unless she was the pawn of another. She has shown no ability whatsoever to scheme. In the end I agree to help, and with a brief goodbye to Kaze, she brings me through.

To Rebma. She has also contacted Leonardo, it seems. She informs us that Dermott has gone completely insane, and Frederick cannot be reached by Trump. She has completely lost track of Aseric as well.

Leonardo wears the mon of Benedict; hmm. He notices that I notice; I just shrug and pretend it doesn't phase me. I don't wish them to know my intentions on this matter; I am unruhed. All in time. But I will watch him closely.

Bethany has had a no less eventful time; at the end of the matter of the Jewel, she found herself pregnant with Martin's child; Involee's doing, she claims. The child is a son, whom she named Michael. While in Rebma with her son she found that Martin was good company. She has become his mistress in truth, though there is no marriage planned. Again I shrug; I cannot fathom why she would do this, the thought disgusts me. But sexuality is quite open in many places I have found, so I will simply ignore it; it is better I do not show my revulsion.

Bethany tells us that a stranger has appeared and begun reaving her home Shadow. A good friend of hers escaped, finding her via magic. She wants our help to hunt down this reaver. To get there we must walk; it does not bother me, though Bethany seems to wish to travel more swiftly. Perhaps once we leave Rebma we can hellride; I know Kaze will find me rather quickly as we were not far from Rebma at the start.

As for helping... I will see. It might be Benedict; he has certainly destroyed Shadows before. If so, it would give me no end of pleasure to rescue her home. At least Bethany can find help from us; I had no help when the Destroyer of Worlds ravaged my home. But then, would he attack a Shadow of another Amberite directly? He ravaged mine, but I had not awakened to my potential yet... I will have to wait and see. Ironic that Leonardo would be summoned here. I will have to watch most carefully that he does not betray me.

"The direction of the eye
So misleading
The defection of the soul
Nauseously quick"
- Garden
Pearl Jam

Day 41530 cont (9 Jan 2005)

Now in Rebma, Bethany insists we see Martin. She claims she will get some things needed for the journey and turns to go. Before she can get out of sight, though, I get a Trump contact.

Martin's voice is insistent, if not urgent... "Follow her! Don't let her out of your sight!" His implication is obvious; she intends to leave us and enter into danger alone.

I acknowledge and set out at once. Quickly catching up, I take her arm. "Oh no, you aren't going off and leaving us." Although if she intended to go off without us, why did she call us in the first place?!?! Bethany is the most illogical and nonsensical person I have ever met, I think.

Finally realizing that she can't sneak off without us, she relents. We depart in a more rational way, and as we walk towards her shadow, she reveals that whomever is reaving it has broken through her seals on the kingdom.

Well, it isn't something unheard of... I reveal that Mandor broke the seals on DermottWays before he destroyed it. It also occurs to me that Kaliese and I broke the seals on the trap shadow we encountered a year or so ago, at the time she disappeared. But I say nothing of that matter.

Bethany and Leonardo discuss philosophy, and Bethany keeps harping about wanting to get to her shadow more quickly. But despite her haste, she is hesitant to initiate a Hellride. Finally she asks if I can Trump to Corwin's Pattern and bring her and Leonardo through. Apparently from there the journey to her 'Oz' is quite short. I doubt her honesty; she could walk the Pattern there and leave us. Or simply refuse my Trump call, and abandon us.

But in the end I decide that humoring her is less exhausting than listening to her complaints. I can easily enough prevent her abandoning us. I have a new trick since the last time we met...

I draw Clairvidere, and concentrate upon the image of Corwin's Pattern Shadow that I placed within it. And then I open the door. With a sweep of the blade, I describe an archway, which opens to the Shadow in question. I can see that they are surprised... Good.

I usher them through, with their mounts, and follow last of all. The arch collapses behind me. Luckily they did not hesitate overlong on the threshold. I feel wrung out after the task, but I would rather be tired now, than to have to listen to Bethany whine for another day, or week...

But don't lose focus... I position myself most carefully, to keep myself between her and the Pattern. I hope she does not dawdle here; I have no fondness for the guardians of this place. She walks away from the Pattern, for which I am thankful, until she seems to find a spot that pleases her, and she begins to shift Shadows.

Within a short time, we find a yellow-bricked road. This seems uncannily like that other place; with the ruby city and Bleys' treachery... But my equipment remains as it was, and there is no forceful change to my companions... Just the same, I mention the similarity, and Bethany confirms it, but her city, she says, is emerald.

When we seem to reach our destination, the view is disturbing. The town is in chaos. Blood flows in the streets. The air is filled with bat-winged monkeys; evil-looking beasts

that are attacking without any plan, it seems. The villagers seem incapable of defending themselves in any meaningful way, they simply run about screaming.

Bethany seems torn, and Leonardo looks ready to leap into the fray with abandon. But they keep their heads. They see it as clearly as I; in the center of it all, the emerald palace is an eye of calm in the storm. To end it we need to find the cause; to reach the center. Swords drawn, we head straight forward, attacking only when opposed, cutting our way to the palace doors.

When we reach it Bethany immediately tries to rush through the doors; only to find them locked. She seems confused; I am not. Her home is no longer hers. While she focuses on her magic to open the lock, I give Leonardo a nod. He remains by her as her protection. I slip away from the doors, and find a window I can slip through unannounced.

I try to be silent, and determine the layout of this place quickly. I know Bethany will head straight to the center of the palace, to her throne room perhaps. I simply work my way methodically forward, looking for ambush points where I can trap any seeking to slip away in the wake of Bethany's charge.

Finally realizing that there is no response in the direction of Bethany's advance, I head a different way. Up to the top of the tallest tower. And I hear voices behind the last door... A familiar voice speaking to someone named "Liir". Talk of Ozma and Bethany. This must be the place. And foolish them, they have nowhere to go but through me.

I burst in, and find Dermott! I knew I recognized the voice. Bethany had said he was quarantined in Rebma because he had gone mad... But no time to contemplate now. With him is another, one who I have not seen before. And around his neck is the Jewel of Judgment!!!

This stranger holds a woman in his arms. By Bethany's descriptions I gather this would be Ozma, her friend. But her friend is in sorry state; tortured it seems.

All this I take in, in a moment.

And Dermott says, "Take her home," and the stranger disappears in a stride or two, in the manner of Shadow-shifting. Then he turns to me. He spits insults, and shifts into his demonic form. He intends to fight me... He really is insane.

But I have to stay focused on the greater goal here... If the Jewel is still loose, I still have a duty. To Dermott, home can only mean one place, the Courts of Chaos. So as he strikes at me, I merely give a light parry, and he scores a scratch on my cheek. His demon form is quite strong, I note. But no matter. I am in the position I need. I salute, and turn the blade, and Trump away, his screams echoing in my ears. He curses me for a coward as I vanish.

I arrive on the edge of the Chaos Court. Looking swiftly about, I see no sign of this "Liir". His travel is slower as he is Shadow-walking. This gives us an advantage. I Trump Bethany, and find she has reached the tower room, but Dermott was gone before she arrived.

I informed her that this new man left with Ozma, and my belief that this is where they headed. She agrees to help me head them off.

I reach for her, and as I am bringing her through, she grabs Leonardo's arm. Argh! With redoubling of effort I manage to bring both of them through. Why could she not simply wait a moment for me to contact him and bring him

through separately? Damn her for her foolishness. The effort of Trumping one so far is enough; two at one is nearly unbearable. Twice now today my Trump abilities have been stretched to the limit. I pray they don't break.

When another moment brings no revelations, I resolve to find some reinforcements. I have friends here now... I pull out a Trump of Archon; he always is up for a fight. But before I can make contact, my concentration is shattered by a cacophonous wailing. It erupts like an earthquake, and nearly drives me to my knees. All around us the members of the Chaos Court drop to their knees or prostrate themselves in a fearfully religious pose. The Serpent of Chaos has awoken. The wail forms one word – "Liir".

The only conclusion I can reach is that there is a connection. The Serpent seeks his eye, and knows Liir has it. I urge Bethany and Leonardo to warn the Court of Amber that the Serpent is awake... And I will go to speak to the Court of Chaos.

"I hold my breath as this life starts to take its toll,
I hide behind a smile as this perfect plan unfolds
But oh, God, I feel I've been lied to
Lost all faith in the things I have achieved"

- *Away from me*
Evanescence

Day 41530 cont (24 Jan 2005)

I decide that I don't know enough right now, so I need to Trump someone who might be able to clue me in. I finally decide Gilva is the best choice.

"Gilva?"

"Ah, my sister. What brings you to call?"

"Are you at the Courts right now?"

"No, why?"

I tell her what happened with the Serpent... And it's unearthly wail of Liir's name. She confirms my suspicion that the Jewel is likely false. But that if the Serpent is actively seeking, I should try to find it and prevent the Serpent getting it. She seems to heavily indicate that I should go. *sigh*

So now I am on the hunt again. I agree I will let her know when or if I discover anything. And we end our contact so I can get moving.

Where to begin? I'm back to hunting down Corialane again... The Shadow that moves. I can't imagine where I might begin. How to find something that doesn't sit still and leaves no trail I can discern?

And then a thought occurs to me. I am no longer leashed. Personally I don't care who has the Jewel, so long as the Serpent doesn't get it. I can act according to my own wishes now.

I have a card I made of Sand... I can try to call her, as to my knowledge she and her brother had the true Jewel. I can at least warn her that the Serpent is seeking the Jewel actively.

The card is cold, so I reach out to seek her. The contact I can establish seems filtered. And I see a reflection of myself instead of her when the card shifts. Odd. But there is contact, and she waits for me to speak.

"Nice trick. May we talk?"

"Ah, you would be Surengiin?"

"Yes."

"Of what would you like to speak?"

"Of the news that the Serpent is awake and seeking its eye."

"If I may ask, what are your intentions regarding the matter?"

"To prevent the serpent from getting its eye. The end of the universe is bad for everyone..."

"Considering the circumstances of last time we met..."

"That I was on a leash, and working for someone else."

"Indeed. Would you care to join me?"

"Yes."

I step into the card, though I find it strange to walk into my own reflection. I emerge into a featureless white room featuring a single plain mirror panel. I've been here before. But this time the mirror is not solid, and I can walk into the Hall beyond it without resistance.

I immediately notice one mirror is active; an oval one with a frame like vines of patinated brass. In it is a primeval forest, the view into which focuses in on a manor-like home set into a barrow-hill. I step forward into the mirror, and find it is an autumn day.

I see no one around on the outside, and no obvious ambush, so I knock on the door.

"Come in."

I enter into a dark, old English style manor house lit by gaslight, rather homey. Sitting at the dining table is blond woman in plain brown dress wearing a wide beige belt of woven something. Sand.

"Sorry to interrupt your breakfast, may I sit down?"

"Certainly. I don't believe we've been formally introduced. I am Sand, and I believe you are Surengiin?"

I nod assent. She then invites me to join her for breakfast. I decline politely; my intention was not to impose on her hospitality, simply to bring news. I also let her know that I would help defend the Jewel from the Serpent... But our conversation gets no further. There is a knock at the door.

"Hmm. I wasn't expecting anyone this morning."

I immediately suspect trouble. Could the Serpent have sent agents here so quickly? Or is it her brother? Or has someone tracked ME? I had thought myself free of leashes. As she rises to answer, I stay close by, in a defensive pose.

Beyond the door is a red-haired man. Bleys! Argh!

"Sand... Ah, Surengiin."

"Uncle." I keep my voice neutral.

"Nice to see you again. I didn't expect to see you here."

"Nice to surprise you for once."

"And Sand, it's been a long time. I'm here to discuss the dispensation of a certain artifact. May I come in?"

"Nice to see no one is attacking anyone yet, please do." It is apparently clear to her that we don't get along. "Have some breakfast."

Bleys ambles in and seats himself with that smug confidence and overdone charm I expect of him. Just as we are about to restart conversation though, there is another knock. Another? I expect the worst.

"Would you get the door, Surengiin?" I nod and move carefully to do so, keeping one eye on her and Bleys. What a horrible time for an ambush. Will Bleys kidnap her while I get the door? Will the serpent's agent be waiting outside? Or is Bleys the Serpent's agent?

I open the door and there stands a tall thin man – Benedict.

"Surengiin, I didn't expect to see you here." Is there an echo in here?

"No one expects the Spanish Inquisition." I think the frustration shows through in my sarcasm, "Come in and join the party." He brushes past me without another thought, looking for Sand.

"I am here to retrieve that which belongs to the Crown of Amber." As he enters he sees Bleys at the table. "Bleys," he nods acknowledgement.

"Ah Benedict, want some breakfast? We have much to discuss..." says Sand.

This gets better by the minute... *sigh* And so I move to have breakfast peaceably with Sand and the two people I like least in all the world.

"Here we stand or here we fall
History won't care at all
Make the bed, light the light
Lady mercy won't be home tonight"
- *Hammer to Fall*
Queen

Day 41530 cont (7 Feb 2005)

Benedict seems not at all concerned as he seats himself at the table. As for myself, I position myself in a spot where I can see the three of them all at once; I won't show my back to anyone present.

I suddenly feel the nagging brush of an attempted Trump call. Not now! I cannot tell who it might be, but whoever it is, I cannot afford to be distracted now! I ignore the summons; shove it to the back of my mind.

Bleys looks at Benedict with obvious scorn. "Ah, dear brother, so nice to see you again. Nice to see *something* can bring you back to reality." Benedict shows no reaction, and so he turns to me. "And Surengiin, you look lovely today, where are my manners?"

I also remain impassive. I see no reason to give him any ammunition. That and I am still ignoring the incessant Trump call echoing behind my thoughts... Stop it, whoever you are! Later! Go away! This is exactly why I don't make Trump of myself.

Sand re-enters the room, bearing a plate covered in pancakes. "I guess you're all here for the same thing," she quips, looking over the three of us.

Benedict nods, Bleys smirks. I only lift an eyebrow.

"The question is, why should I give it to any of you?" She looks at our group speculatively.

We all sit regarding each other. No one seems willing to speak, and Benedict and Bleys seem to only be paying attention to each other... They have dismissed me without a thought. I did not wish to speak or draw attention to myself in this matter, but finally I must.

"I don't recall asking for it. I just came to bring news..." This at least brings a raised eyebrow and a condescending look from the two men...

"Oh?"

“The Serpent is out seeking its eye... And in addition it seems to have acquired a Shadow of it, but one good enough to have some not inconsequential powers attached.”

“Well that is inconvenient, especially on *your* end of things,” Sand replies, looking pointedly at Benedict.

Benedict only shrugs, “We’ll deal with it when it shows up.”

Sand finally seems to reach a conclusion. “Well I will be quite honest with all of you... I’m not powerful enough to keep it from *all* of you.” Benedict and Bleys don’t react to this news, and by her tone I’m not sure if I was included in the statement or not. “So my brother and I disposed of it...”

Bleys twitches, and Benedict looks ill at her pronouncement. I can’t believe my ears. That thing is loose in the universe? NO! I can feel the headache starting already...

“My dear lady,” Bleys finally speaks, “how did you dispose of the Jewel?” His words are not really phrased as a request, but still just barely polite enough not to be an insult.

Sand shrugs. “Simple, we took it into the Hall. And then we left it there... When we came back a few days later, it was gone. So if you wish to seek for it; seek in the Hall.”

This time it is Benedict that twitches. Hmm. Note that. He seems to be uncomfortable with the thought of the Hall of Mirrors. A tiny advantage there; I realize they are connected to Trump... My strength.

“And do you know a short way to get to the Hall?” Benedict finally says.

“I guess I could arrange something...” Sand seems not to be displeased. A trap? A diversion?

“I’m sure you could.” Bleys sneers.

Sand gestures, and 3 full-length mirrors appear out of thin air. Like something emerging from a 2-dimensional plane. “Three mirrors, three seekers. Choose your mirror. And let the search begin.” Now I know she includes me in this... Or wants the other two to think she does.

We all stare at one another for a moment. Bleys gets up first. He selects a mirror, seemingly at random. I see him pull Trumps as he does so. The minute he steps through, the mirror vanishes. So, I cannot follow. Another piece of useful information.

Another minute and Benedict leaves to depart. Again the mirror disappears. I can easily believe they lead to the Hall, but I doubt any will lead anywhere near the Jewel. A random departure. And I am left with the last one.

As I rise to depart, Sand speaks. “You do not have to seek it.”

“Some of have a destiny, it seems, whether we wish it or no.”

“Yes but one must consider, with such power, do you wield it, or does it wield you?”

“There is a reason I have left some gifts unaccepted.”

“Probably wise.”

“But, I do not want it. I just wish certain... others... not to have it.”

“Now you understand our position perfectly. We are... custodians of powers better left unwielded.”

I nod, looking at the last mirror. Even though I expressed a wish to aid her, I see she will not be granting me any insight here. She has only tried to dissuade me from the trip. Why? I cannot let myself be stopped. There are too many out there

that would misuse the Jewel if they obtained it... Or be driven insane by its power.

“Ah well,” I sigh. “I best not let them get too much of a lead.” Sand shrugs, and I bow and depart through the last mirror.

I consider my situation as I stand in the Hall again. This is the fourth or fifth time I find myself here. I grow accustomed to the oddities of this place. Perhaps I will construct a Trump of the place again one day.

Bleys has called for help. That much is obvious. But from whom? As for Benedict, who knows? I myself, who could I call? Who should I call? Bethany is the only one I can think of. Frederick and Aseric are gone. Leonardo is in Benedict’s pocket. Dermott is insane, and allied with Liir.

I don’t care if Benedict finds it. Though I personally hate him, and would love to upstage him, I trust that he would return the stone to Amber, which is my goal as well. But Bleys is another matter. He is in this game for himself, and I will not see him win.

I am alone in the hall. The first mirror I see is made of seashells. Inside is Bethany. Looking at a card in frustration. My card. So, she is still in Rebma? Good. I will contact her... But I stop. I have an idea.

Benedict. Though I hate him, I can use this situation. We are not at odds in this search. If I offer an alliance, I may have a chance to learn something of him, and increase the chances of the outcome I desire. I will ‘deal with the devil’ as it is said. But I don’t want this conversation to take place with Bethany in tow. She is far too likely to say something unwanted. And so I turn away from the mirror of Rebma and fish out my Trump cards.

Benedict does not deny my call.

“Yes, Surengiin?”

“We aren’t in competition on this search...”

“Oh? You would return the Jewel to the King of Amber?”

“Yes.”

“Come through.” He holds out a hand to me... I do not hesitate. He is at his own camp, it seems. But I do not wish to dawdle too long...

“I offer a truce.”

“I didn’t realize we were at war...” he regards me with narrowed eyes.

The reply catches me off-guard. Damn... observant him... That was more than I wanted to let on. “I could not assume what you might have perceived my goals to be.” I tried to cover myself. “I’m just laying the cards on the table, so to speak. We’re working for the same goal, so there is no reason for us to compete. I wanted to let you know that I would support your goal to return the... item to Amber. And would hinder the progress of others who would not... If we work together we double the ground we cover... And we might catch ‘uncle’ Bleys off guard.”

I realized that by now my penchant for not working well with others must be reasonably well known. Especially after the first incident of Jewel-hunting...

“Very well. Do you have a Trump of yourself available?”

Caught off guard again! Hmm. But useful information nonetheless. He asks me for Trump, not for permission to make Trump... So he does not draw them himself? That would square with his discomfort at the idea of the Hall...

“None at present.” I do my best to appear sheepish.

“Well that makes communication rather difficult.” I cannot read his face.

“I can give one to you as soon as I have had the opportunity to make one...” Oops. I revealed a bit too much there... He probably already knew I draw Trump, as I have never been given a ‘family deck’, but perhaps not. He does now, at any rate... Damn. Tit for tat. I have to be more careful in the future. “And I will keep you apprised of any progress.”

Benedict nods assent.

“I will be on my way.”

Benedict nods dismissively.

I move away from him, to an area where I may find more privacy. Now I will retrieve Bethany. I Trump myself to Rebma first. No sense in calling her and giving her a glimpse of who I have been speaking with. Proceeding to her quarters in Rebma, I knock.

The chamber door is answered by a servant... “Lady Bethany is not in.”

Of all the devilish... Where is she now? I brush past the servant and once again whisk through my Trumps.

“Bethany?” I call out to her...

“Surengiin! I’ve been trying to get a hold of you! I need to get back to that tree. I have to go back to the Emerald city to start fixing things there... Can you give me a card of the tree?” The gall of her! What am I, her Trump-taxi? Well, I can play this game too.

“I will make you a Trump to Corwin’s Shadow... that tree... if you help me. When we’re done I’ll give you the card.”

“Help you? With what?”

“Finding the Jewel of Judgment. It’s loose again.”

“Oh no...”

“Yes.”

“So long as it doesn’t mean talking to Sand and Delwin again. I hate them...”

“That shouldn’t be necessary.” I’ve already spoken to Sand. I can easily enough keep Bethany out of that loop... As she has just asked me to.

“Fine...” I reach for her, and she accepts my hand.

“Rebma?” she looks slightly surprised. “Well, let me just tell Martin where we’re going...”

“That really isn’t necessary. The fewer people who know about this the better...”

“I at least want to leave a note so that my son will be taken care of.”

I just sigh. “I can’t stop you, can I?”

“No.”

“Fine.” It occurs to me that while she is occupied with the note, I can use the time to my advantage. I have learned how to scry with the Trump... And I want to know what Bleys is up to. Who he called; where he headed. And so I fish out his card, and gently lay my hand upon it. It is quite cold; he isn’t far...

An image fades softly into view. Underwater, greens and blues... In Rebma? Here? And with him two figures. Women. I recognize Fiona and Llewella. So, this is his cabal? Hmm... And as I begin to slowly retreat from contact, Fiona seems to look toward Bleys curiously... She senses something? Yes!

I break contact instantly... But not fast enough. The water around me begins to froth and bubble. I lunge for Bethany, grabbing her as I call upon Clairvidere’s power to open a

Trump gate... Forest Arden, the first place I can think of... Where I left Kaze.

Ripping open a Trump gate so fast is taxing, and for a moment all I can do is regain my composure. I am dizzy and almost nauseous. When I have caught my breath again, I find Bethany in Trump contact with Martin. I overhear her half of the conversation; I gather something similar to a depth charge damaged a good bit of that portion of the castle, including the royal suite. My, my, Fiona is vindictive. But at least it honestly wasn’t my fault...

I say nothing as she finishes her conversation. I just retrieve Kaze and adjust her saddle.

“What happened back there? What were you doing?” Bethany demands of me...

I look her square in the eyes. “You really want to know?”

“Yes.”

“I was spying on Bleys through the Trumps. He’s after the Jewel too.”

“Again?!”

“Try *still*. I wanted to learn who he was working with, or what leads he had.”

“And?”

“He was with Llewella and Fiona. Unfortunately Fiona noticed my scrying. When the water started boiling I decided a hasty departure was in order.”

Bethany says nothing for a long time, only looking at me accusingly. “I don’t have a horse.” Bethany finally speaks to me. “I haven’t seen mine in a long time. I can’t even remember where I left it.”

“She doesn’t follow you? Kaze follows me.” I can tell by the tone of her voice that she didn’t care for her steed; it was just convenient transportation. Like me and my Trumps.

“It was a she?”

I just shake my head. “Kaze can carry us both. She’s strong.” Where to now, I ask myself... Back where I began again, hunting that damn stone with no clues, and nothing but my Trump and an angry Patternwalker on my side.

Trying to race to where the Jewel *will be* only got me there one step behind Bleys last time. How to eliminate that lead? Benedict is on the trail as well... How quick is he? Hmm. Time to test Kaze’s speed. Time for a Hellride...

“So I sit there scheming, can’t help, but wonder, How to keep from going under...”

Put my principles behind, I’m ready to win!

Even if the win is through the road of sin...”

- *Sold to the Devil*

KaLiFF

Day 41530 cont (21 Feb 2005)

Benedict should perhaps know about Bleys’ cabal, I thought idly as we began to ride... But I’ll let him know later; when I have more to say, perhaps...

I inform Bethany she must lead us to where the stone is. She claims she isn’t sure how. I am not a Patternwalker, I admit, but I remind her that last time, Frederick was able to lead us to where the Jewel *would be*, so going where it *is* shouldn’t be a problem. She admits the possibility, but still claims to not know how to accomplish the deed. Why am I constantly surrounded by idiots?

Finally she finally casts a seeking spell, like the one we used to track Frakir long ago. She had seen the Jewel, so she can manage at least that much. We follow the glowing red line through changing scenery as fast as I can get Kaze to go safely. The blind leading the blind, I think vacantly.

Finally, on a flat open plain we are approaching a house, with a windmill. The red line ends at the house's door.

Bethany exclaims "Kansas!"

I am not sure what the significance of Kansas is, but instead dismount, and with hand on sword-hilt I move to open the door. I don't know what to expect. When I firmly push on the door, it opens easily. Inside, the home is simple and neat, if a bit threadbare of furnishing. The red line of Bethany's magic continues to snake through the house.

As Bethany follows me with trepidation into the house, then the trap springs on us. The door slams shut and I can hear a bolt shoot home. Bars fall over the windows. And then comes a noise I am unfamiliar with... A loud rushing noise like a great wind, or some huge beast.

Through the window, I can see Kaze take off at great speed. Behind her, silhouetted against the horizon is a massive funnel cloud. I am transfixed; I have never seen such a thing before. It looks like a wind-devil, but it is much larger, and so dark it is nearly black. It seems to get louder and larger with each passing moment.

Then I am surprised to feel Bethany's hand on my arm... With surprising strength and desperation in her eyes, she bodily drags me away from the window into a small closet. Why? How big is this wind-devil?

Within seconds I find out. The entire building shakes as the wind hits it. With a shrieking, I can hear wood tear and break, and the house is lifted from its foundations.

"If we're really lucky, we'll live through this" Bethany says. I can see she is quite afraid. I think I am too shocked to be afraid just now...

Just then the door to the closet is torn off and Bethany shrieks, "We aren't going to live through this!"

The clouds before me are like a black wall, and I can't hear anything except the roaring of the wind. Then I see Dermott, on a bicycle riding through the storm. The image of him seems to float in the air for a moment, before being swept away.

"What have we been smoking?!?" Bethany shouts. I can barely hear her.

And then my stomach jumps into my throat. I can feel myself starting to fall. Bethany's eyes are wide with fright. Mine must be too... We are falling through this storm for what seems like forever.

The house hits the ground with a deafening thud. All around us the impact cracks beams and powders plaster. A piece of the ceiling hits Bethany in the head as the tiny room crumples around us. By some miracle, I remain conscious through all this. Though I wonder if that is a blessing?

After a few moments, the world stops spinning, and I can assess the situation. Although we are covered in debris, I can see the sky. With effort, I manage to push away the wreck of the walls and crawl out. Of the storm there is no sign. Everything is bright; too bright. Colors all seem unnaturally clear and gaudy. A yellow-bricked road stretches away into the distance. Oh no. Not again.

I pull Bethany from the wreckage and assess her condition closely. She is bleeding from a scalp wound, but her pulse is strong and even. She should be fine. I manage to get the bleeding stopped and wipe away most of the blood and dirt.

After a few minutes, Bethany does come around, and thankfully seems not to be suffering from any other injuries. She looks about as well, and I can see understanding wash over her.

"Apparently we're repeating something from the movies on Earth. I don't know if this is home or not. It might be..." she begins. Then she looks at me, and I find my own glance drawn downward...

I am wearing ruby slippers somehow. Damn! Not again, not again, not again!!! I say nothing, but I think my frustration showed anyhow.

Suddenly the report of gunfire surrounds us. We are being shot at! Spinning about, hand on sword-hilt, I try to find where the shots are coming from. I finally spot some short forms crouched behind a low barricade along the road a ways up. Some sort of midgets, bearing musket-type firearms, and bayonets. They are re-loading for another volley.

"We're stuck here!" Bethany suddenly shouts, "I can't change the Shadow!"

Hmm. So the place is Pattern-blocked somehow. I quickly check Clairvidere. It lies quiescent on my arm. It is not cold.

"It's Trump blocked here, as well." I reply.

Bethany then shuts her eyes and concentrates for a moment; perhaps trying some sort of magic. But it seems to have no effect. By now the midgets are aiming at us again...

"Apparently whomever destroyed my shadow is at this one too." Bethany replies.

By this time it is my turn to urge action. I grab her and drag her away from the barricade, off the road and into the trees. I hear musket shots ring out behind us, and all around us are little explosions of wood and stone where the balls impact.

"Logically we should be on the way to the castle." I reply. Is this the third, or fourth time I've been to a similar place? I can't recall. But there was always a gem-city, and a castle.

"Yes, but we should stay off the road and detour around the villages." Bethany is indeed a master of stating the obvious sometimes.

"Is there a straight path?" I inquire of her? If she knows a path through the forest it would be helpful. But she seems still caught in her own train of thought...

"And avoid poppy fields."

"Obviously." I reply. I would roll my eyes, but I am too busy to waste time on sarcasm. Bethany finally seems happy to run with me and not be dragged, so we make our way widely around the area of the midget... 'munchkin' Bethany corrects me... village. Whatever has attacked this Shadow of 'Oz' has obviously gotten them on the defensive and I doubt they would be friendly this time.

When we are almost past the village far enough to risk a scout to the road again, we hear something odd from above. A group of flying monkeys is approaching the village in a military-style wedge formation. As they glide lower, we begin to hear explosions, and I can tell the beasts are hurling small objects down on the munchkins. Some form of explosives.

Bethany can obviously see it too. She hurls a spell at the wedge suddenly. One of the monkeys jerks, and seems

paralyzed. It falls from the sky, landing with a sickening squish. Unfortunately, Bethany has once again acted without thought.

The other monkeys have noticed the fate of their comrades, and Bethany just got their attention. Now they begin lobbing their explosives at *us!*

I duck and roll to avoid the worst of the blasts, but shrapnel is flying all around us and we are both covered with numerous cuts and wounds from the debris. As I run, I urge Clairvidere into my hand. If the munchkins can use firearms, I can to! It forms into a Colt, and I pull out the ammunition I has stored in my sash for it. Lucky for me I thought to acquire it during my past travels...

I aim and squeeze the trigger, and there is nothing but a hollow click. Damnation! No time to figure out why it won't work now. I shove Clairvidere into my sash and draw my katana. I don't understand. Gunpowder should be gunpowder! Unless the explosives *aren't* gunpowder, but something else...

Finally Bethany and I reach an area of particularly dense vegetation, and seem to lose our aerial pursuers. As we keep running, the noise of combat eventually fades. But another sound then begins to approach. What now? Crashing in the branches above.

What eventually comes into view through the canopy is the remains of a hot-air balloon. It seems to become lodged in the lower branches. I cautiously approach to see if there are any survivors. I can see bullet-holes and tears all over the fabric and gondola.

Bethany speculatively looks at the balloon and asks, "The wizard?"

"No, it's me, Leonardo!" comes a familiar voice from the gondola. He jumps out, even though it is at least fifty feet off the ground. He slows his descent by leaping down from branch to branch, with great dexterity.

Hmm. "I presume Benedict sent you?" I decide to get it all out quickly.

"Yes he did. He requested I come along to aid you."

I can see that the remains of the balloon are becoming dangerous, and I pull Bethany away, with Leonardo on our heels. The burner in the gondola has continued to burn, setting the fabric of the balloon on fire. It quickly spreads to the surrounding trees.

So Benedict set him to watch me, hmm? Not unexpected. I'm sure he trusts me as little as I trust him. Ah well. First things first... A hard run gets us barely past the tree line with smoke at our heels. That forest won't be the same for a long time... But the end of the trees brings me to a sharp halt. The field before us is open.

Poppies? No. Ambush? No. But the cautious continuation out into the open lets light fall on those damned shoes again. Bethany and Leonardo begin to speculate immediately on whether the shoes have some magical properties. It seems they are both familiar with the Earth-movie that so resembles this Shadow. At least they are still moving with me away from the burning trees...

Finally I relent and join the conversation. "And how are these magic shoes supposed to work in this movie of yours?"

"Click your heels together three times. Then make a wish." Bethany replies.

And so I do... And nothing happens. When I try to take them off, as they are a bit impractical, I find that I cannot!

What sorcery? Perhaps the only power or purpose they have is to annoy me. I can still remember the last 'Oz' I was in... With emerald shoes and disgusting clothes and that insufferable Bleys behind it all. Is he here as well? We'll soon see.

Then I notice Bethany, examining the shoes in a disturbingly close manner. She and Leonardo begin to speculate that they might *be* the Jewel of Judgment in some strange form. But even I can tell they aren't. If they were, I should be able to Trump out of here. Finally they agree the shoes are just a coincidence and allow me to move on.

Choosing a direction, we decide to try and find the yellow-brick road again. And they continue to blather on endlessly about "Too bad the road isn't a moving sidewalk" and other such nonsense. Do they never shut up? How am I supposed to listen for an ambush with them making all that noise and attracting attention to us?

I can only shrug and pretend to ignore them. I feign ignorance to some of the blather. They think they can talk over my head. But I've had some education since last we met. If I show them the ignorance they expect to see, perhaps they will let something useful slip. Unlikely, but possible. Although I would still prefer that they just be quiet...

"Yeah, I do it; I wake up and walk,

To the flame of the dream I've been trying to stalk,"

- *Sold to the Devil*

KaLiFF

Day 41530 cont (21 Feb 2005)

Finally Bethany thinks of something useful she can do. She recasts the seeking spell to find the Jewel. There is a flash of light. Nothing else happens. I suddenly notice that Leonardo is gone. Damn it!

Where he went and how I cannot say. He simply was gone with no disturbance to indicate his going other than this light... *sigh* so much for Benedict's spy. Already gone. Is he now in hiding somehow? Or did the miscast spell whisk him away? I can't tell. Bethany seems sure it wasn't her doing, however it happened. I am truly frustrated, but at least with Leonardo I have fewer worries about a watcher from Benedict.

Bethany thinks the entire Shadow itself is a trap, like the one set to snare Merlin that we encountered those years ago. She believes continuing here is futile, and we need to focus on escape. Why are her first instincts always to run?

I believe we need to continue on here; that we are here for a reason. And I tell her so! Even though the last trap Shadow didn't hold Frakir, it allowed us to gain the clues we needed to find Frakir. And I think this place will lend us the clues we need as well.

I ask Bethany if perhaps her spell misfired because we are in fact too close for it to function? I seem to recall that the closer we approached it last time, the more difficult Pattern and Trump abilities became to manifest. That nearer this Jewel Shadow becomes less fluid; more static. She disagrees with my reasoning, but admits she isn't sure.

We speak for a time about the Julian/Frakir incident. I tell her a bit more of what happened then. But in the end, it seems she has gained no enlightenment from it. She finally relents for a time, and agrees to continue onward with me.

I suggest that if we encounter Bleys again, she use her grabbing spell to take away Bleys' magical sword. Confused and frightened by my suggestion, I explain my observation that his blade was canceling her other magic. If she disarms him, he will be much easier to deal with for both of us. She seems to be completely intimidated by the thought of taking him on at all. I try to assure her that I don't want her to directly engage him, just make him easier for me to engage. She doesn't seem encouraged.

I then ask for any insight she has about Fiona. How to deal with her. Bethany seems to despair at the mere thought. She assumes that Fiona is undefeatable because her magic is so strong. In the end I have to tell her we are looking for non-magical strategy. She is useless.

I simply have to convince her to serve up a distraction while I sneak up and disable her in melee. The same goes for Llewella. In the end she has no backbone. I tell her running is not an option. But I don't believe she will really stand. I think she will collapse blubbering and betray me. She has no grit. But I'll have to deal with that when it happens.

Until then I ask her to prepare her grabbing spell just in case, and she says she has it ready. She also whines that she can't come up with anything useful against Fiona, and I say that we'll just have to take things as they come and see what the situation is then.

After all her hemming and hawing about continuing though, I finally agree to try and help her break out of this shadow. I tell her how Kaliese and I got out of the Merlin-trap Shadow by channeling Pattern power through a Trump. If she really can't or won't be of support to me in whatever confrontation may commence upon my reaching the castle, there is little to be gained by trying to force the issue. Besides, it does seem fairly obvious who set the trap, if this is indeed a trap meant for us. What could we really learn?

I pull out a card of the blue-crystal Shadow. As usual, it seems to be the most neutral place to reconnoiter that I can think of. As Bethany begins channeling her powers into it, I concentrate on activating the card. At first it seems to work, as the card grows cold. But then something changes. The energy begins to fluctuate, looping back through us, each fluctuation building, with more energy than the last. A feedback loop. I fear this is a bad thing. I force the card away, seeking to break this cycle and end our experiment.

In a rainbow flash, I flip the card, and all the built-up energy discharges. When the afterimage fades, I see Bethany has vanished as well. It seems that even in success I have failed. The trick worked; Bethany escaped. But apparently I either broke the bond too soon to take both of us, or something else happened. At least Bethany is out of the trap, like she wanted. Or at least I hope she is.

Alone again, naturally. Now where do I go from here? The Trump is warm again. And I'm not a Pattern initiate, so I can't try the same trick again. Do I go to the castle? Do I go back? Going back would only be admitting failure, and as far as I know there is no exit there anyway.

In desperation I click my heels again just to see what happens. But nothing happens. Did I really expect something to happen? Even after years of wandering Shadow, I still sometimes feel like this is all a fever-dream. Especially when I am in places like this.

Finally, I decide the best course is to continue on to the castle. Whatever rules this place is likely to be there, like a spider in a web.

As I walk, odd thoughts flit through my mind. Did the escape ploy really fail? Did Bethany abandon me here? Did she leave me intentionally? It isn't *her* Oz, so she doesn't care, but she's close enough to reach hers? Using me as a shortcut again? I don't know. I don't care.

I decide to take a more cautious approach. Without Bethany to hinder me, I can at least attempt to be somewhat sneaky. So I try to use the cover, poor as it is, to my advantage. Whatever, or whomever, awaits me at the castle must know I am coming, but that doesn't mean I can't surprise them as to the time of my arrival. I just wish I could take off those horrid sparkly shoes. Mud doesn't do much to hide them.

"And where do I go from here?
So many voices ringing in my ear..."
- *Where Do I Go From Here*
Pocahontas

Day 41530 cont (21 Mar 2005)

I then see Leonardo standing on the side of the Yellow Brick Road. "Decided to come out of hiding, eh?" I decide to acknowledge him in a forthright manner. At least he has had the decency not to hide anymore.

"Hiding? I wasn't hiding..." He replies with a confused look on his face.

"Then what happened to you?" Wonderful. He's still trying to play some strange game. I know he's spying on me. Why won't he just come clean so we can deal openly with each other?

"I don't remember anything after asking to join you and Bethany. Where is she?"

"Hmm. It must have been that miscast spell backfiring and sending you away."

"Miscast spell?"

"Bethany cast her seeking spell to find the Jewel again. There was a white flash, and then you were gone." I don't really believe the spell did it, but I may as well let him think I do. I'm sure he was just shadowing us. Shadowing me to be more precise.

In my continuing journey I decide I had best make plans with Leonardo as well. I fill him in on what Bethany and I discussed, on the off chance he really *didn't* follow us. He has no additional insights to deal with Fiona. Oh well. I hope that there is no direct confrontation, but as they say, wish in one hand... Finally we agree to head for the castle.

"Shall I summon a horse?"

"If you can, please do. Bethany said Pattern use was blocked here."

He seems to make an attempt for a few moments, then gives up. "I guess we walk."

"Why walk when you can run?" I ask, looking meaningfully at the road.

"Why not?" he replies.

"Best speed?"

He nods, and then we set off at a fast lope, like in a marathon. A good speed, without being too trying. The road flies by underneath us and we finally reach the Emerald City.

We duck into cover as a wing of flying monkeys passes overhead. The castle is heavily guarded, it seems. Creeping to a point where we can get the lay of the land, we can see the odds aren't good. Hundreds of men, if you can call them that, march through the city. Green-skinned, they wear red uniforms with tall fuzzy black hats.

I suddenly feel that going on here isn't worth the effort. But I will ask Leonardo and see what insights he can bring.

"What does your tactical expertise tell you, oh student of Benedict?"

"I don't think we can take on the whole army."

"I've taken an army before, but I'd rather not if I don't have too... Path of least resistance and all that."

He nods assent.

"We can try the trick I attempted with Bethany again. To channel Pattern power through my Trump and overwhelm the block on the Shadow."

"But it didn't work when she tried."

"Yes, but for all the power she has, she doesn't always seem very confident or proficient with its use. Perhaps if someone more skilled gave it a try?"

He looks at me and shrugs. I pull out Bethany's card., and we hold hands, with each of use holding the card. Leonardo then focuses his Pattern and begins to push power through Bethany's card. I can feel the feedback loop restart. No, this isn't right! When I tried with Bethany, I let her control the power, and it failed. Perhaps the loop formed because the power needs guidance from someone with Trump ability.

I focus my mind, and impose my own willpower onto the power conduit. I try to grab control; to will the contact to form properly. The power seems to slip and twist in my mental grasp, and then everything suddenly goes black.

I feel myself floating in complete and utter blackness. Whether I blacked out or not, I don't know. I don't *think* I did. I can't feel my body. In fact I feel nothing. No sense of temperature, of anything physical at all. This is alarming, but I force myself not to panic.

I feel a Trump contact from somewhere... It is Leonardo, I determine. I reach out and strengthen the contact.

"Where are you?" he says.

"I don't know, I'm in total darkness."

"Same here."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm okay, but the card is really hot!"

"Then drop it," I say practically... And then all contact is lost. There is nothing but the darkness again. I try to find something, anything, but see nothing.

Contact again, distant and faint. I reach for it.

"What happened?" I ask Leonardo.

"Surengiin, is that you?"

"Yes, what happened?"

"The card of Bethany is now you..."

"Tell her she's stuck in the card." Says a strange voice behind Leonardo... The image of him clears and I see Liir! I see Bethany there as well. At least the two of them have all come together. The escape idea at least partially worked. But I am stuck somewhere in transit, as it were.

"The card is getting hot again."

"If it gets too hot, put it down. Let me think for a moment."

He does so after a few more words. I am left again in darkness. But not without resources. So I am inside a Trump? Perhaps stuck half-way through a transfer. Perhaps I can finish it. The power of Trump must be able to work for me, as I have just called Leonardo...

I have found through my Trump studies that I can summon Trump images only in my mind, without a card. As I no longer have a physical presence, this is probably my only choice. I summon Bethany's image.

"Hello? Who is it?"

"Surengiin."

I try to tell her what happened, briefly. She tries to pull me through the Trump card, which seems a practical solution, at least. It is like straining against a black wall of nothing. I can make no progress here.

"It's pulling me in!" She finally says, so I let go of her and break the contact. No sense in her being sucking into this non-place with me. Something is holding me here...

I then think for a minute. I best warn her about Liir. I contact her and tell her, and then she suggests using Pattern to get me out, but I remind her that Pattern and Trump mixing is what caused this problem. I break contact again, before she tries something unwise.

I then contact Leonardo, and give him the same warning. Then I ask him to let me think. I may be able to figure a way out of here.

I bring to mind an image of the Hall of Mirrors, and the mirror that forms reflects myself. I try to walk through it, to leave and enter real space again. It seems to work, at first, and I feel myself sliding through the card. Then it stops. I feel 'stuck' like something is holding me back. Something of me but not. The ruby shoes! Damn. Something of Oz won't let me go. Something of that place wants me back again.

Think, Surengiin, think! Finally I have another idea. Perhaps if I try to find the source of the problem and go directly there, I can break free. I try to Trump-scry mentally. An odd philosophical conundrum to be sure, but I try to just blank my mind and let the process work.

A blank card forms in my mind's eye. It fills with mist, that resolves into an image of a red stone. The Jewel of Judgment. Aha! I reach for the stone, try to grab it. To bring it to me, or me to it.

And just as I feel my concentration resolve into the faintest physical being, everything is shattered by an overwhelming Trump presence. A call that forces itself upon me; that I cannot deny. Leonardo.

"No! Damn it! DAMN IT DAMN IT!" My thoughts are as words in this state, I cannot squelch them.

"Bad time?" he seems surprised?

"I think I just found a way out!"

"Then I'll let you go." He breaks contact suddenly. Argh. Why did he call? He didn't even say. How typical. He could have at least told me what he was calling to say.

Nothing to do but begin again. At least now I know what I am reaching for. I bring to mind the card border again, and try to draw in the Jewel; to summon it to my mind. Minutes pass by while I concentrate on the image, but I can't seem to hold it all in my mind at once. As I try to firm part of it up, another spins apart. Eventually the whole image dissolves. Damnation!

Perhaps I need to let the image come to me. I can't force it, I have to let it come, like the Zen masters say.

I compose myself into a meditative state and try to clear my mind again. Moments pass as I gain my calm center, and try to summon the empty card; to let the image come as it will.

Once again my concentration is shattered. This contact is not casual, nor insistent. It is simply overwhelming. I am suddenly in contact, without an acceptance or thought on my part.

"Ah Surengiin, have we met? I'm Princess Fiona." The voice in my mind reveals nothing, the image of her clear as crystal, but without a background. I see nothing of her surroundings.

"Once yes, or twice." I acknowledge dutifully... The power of her mind is awesome. I dare not even try a deception.

"We never really had a chance to talk. A pity."

"What brings you to call?" I ask tentatively...

"You seem to be in a bit of a bind, and since this falls in the area of my expertise..."

"Ah, yes. An interesting state of being, but not one I wish to continue indefinitely. I do seem to be held here by something."

"Well, I might be able to do something about that. I assume you do want out?"

"That would be a good thing."

I feel her contact fade to a peripheral buzz, like cicadas in the forest, and power builds all around me. I see a mirror form from the darkness, like my attempt to reach the Hall. Then the flowing sensation returns, clear and without impediment. I willingly step into the mirror, and step out of it into a blue-bricked room.

In the room stand Leonardo, Liir, and Bethany. Bethany seems to be drooling vacantly. Bleys and Fiona are also present. I stand quietly while Fiona sits down. I don't know what has occurred here, I had best proceed with caution...

And then Bleys stands. I try to subtly pop off the ruby slippers, but they still won't come off.

Bleys draws his golden-filigreed sword.

"I Bleys, Prince of Amber, do formally challenge you, Surengiin, Princess of Xangzhu, to single combat."

What is this?!? A formal duel? He knows I am in competition with him, and he wants to end it. Oh, this is wonderful. I couldn't ask for better. He has proposed a fair fight! Not that I believe he knows the meaning of the word fair...

I consider for a moment the proper way to respond. I am worried though that it is another ploy. Those shoes... I can't take them off, and I suspect that Bleys and Fiona arranged for me to end up wearing them. It could be another trap...

It also occurs to me that he called me a 'Princess of Xangzhu'. He knows the name of my home Shadow. This isn't a good thing. I am more glad than ever that I removed my ancestors all those years ago.

Liir then intrudes and asks the terms of the fight. Bleys replies surrender or incapacitation. Sounds acceptable to me.

"Yes, I will accept, although I feel that before we commence, I must deal with an impediment." I tap the crystal shoes on the floor with meaning.

"You think your footwear will impede your ability?" Bleys looks at me with derision.

"They are enchanted, and I can't remove them. I feel they have a sinister purpose, and they might impede me." I admit frankly.

Fiona gazes at them, a cup of tea in one hand as she lounges in a chair. "They won't be a problem."

"So you say, but unless you were the origin of this dilemma, then I have doubt that you can discern their purpose..." I know I'm walking a fine line, but if I can get them to admit they are behind it, perhaps I can get them to remove the enchantment that binds the shoes to me.

"Discerning their abilities is not the same as knowing their purpose, and I swear they will not impede you." Fiona replies without hesitation.

Hmm, they aren't going to get the shoes off me. So much for that idea. So I shrug, and with a smirk and a cocky bow say to Bleys, "Well, then I accept, by all means. Though I would ask that you allow me to use a blade worthy of the one you carry."

He mimics my bow and grin, and gives a wave to acquiesce. I call forth Clairvidere, as the djin sword I drew before, when I last faced him with swords drawn. The straight sword is a better match for his rapier anyhow. And there is no sense in giving away Clairvidere's multiple forms before I have to...

"It's good for you," Fiona comments to the others, "as by her acceptance you all have gained your freedom."

What is this? I don't take my focus from Bleys just yet, as the battle could commence at any second. But he doesn't seem ready to begin. With a wave of her hand, Fiona summons a doorway, and waves the others through. Leonardo carries Bethany, who still seems to be stunned. Bleys nods to me, and we follow.

I step out into the sunlight, and find myself in a great arena. Sand covers the ground. The stands are full of hundreds of cheering spectators. I quickly scan the boxes. Fiona has taken the others to one. With a clap of her hands, she brings Bethany around, and raises a transparent barrier between their box and the arena floor.

In another box I see Mandor, Dermott, Dara and Jurt. In a third sit Merlin, Gilva, Kov, and Archon. Now I *know* this wasn't a fair challenge. This is about public humiliation. They never intended to be fair. They set this all up. And so I decide I won't be fair, either. I won't hold back, and I'll take any little edge I can. If Bleys thinks he is going to break me, *especially* in front of the few people in this world I respect, he's got another thing coming. At least I can finally face him openly, and hopefully without interference. Although I still feel that Fiona has somehow tried to stack things against me...

And so I simply force myself to ignore the crowd. Ignore the watching eyes. I focus entirely on my opponent. On that cocky bastard Bleys. Clear my mind; focus my ki. If I am to fight, it won't be halfway. No distractions. No interruptions. I will take him down.

"Do what you will, I bring you the edge
I am the one to sever your head
I cut so deep, I can cut straight
All depends on the moves you make"

- *I Am The Sword*
Motorhead

Day 41530 cont (11 Apr 2005)

As I prepare myself to engage Bleys, I hear a thunderous clap from Fiona's box. Half-looking up, I can see that she has summoned my erstwhile 'companions'. Dermott is there, Frederick, Leonardo, Bethany, and even Liir. All are to be witness.

"We are gathered here today to witness the duel of honor between Lord Bleys of Amber and Surengiin." She states, her voice echoing through the arena, "Is the duel to be fought to first blood, to death, or until honor is satisfied?"

I look at Bleys squarely, and he waves nonchalantly for me to answer.

My reply is without hesitation. "Until honor is satisfied."

"Then let the duel begin when my handkerchief touches the ground." And Fiona tosses a silky red handkerchief out onto the sand.

Of course, I expect it all goes to hell the moment it does... But it doesn't. Bleys simply draws his magical sword, a golden-filigreed saber, and salutes. I return the salute, Clairvidere as a straight-sword, to preserve my element of surprise.

He is fighting right-handed. I typically fight left-handed, unless the occasion calls for things to be otherwise. He simply stands there, not even particularly in a defensive stance. This confuses me, as I cannot believe him to be so sloppy a swordsman... He must be overconfident.

I close cautiously. I begin with some basic attacks, although they are made with great speed and strength. He parries each one, without even moving an inch from his starting position. His speed is amazing, as he retakes his sloppy stance after each move... His strength is the equal of mine, at least. His parries are solid, with almost no give.

Quicker and quicker we move, beginning to circle one another, as finally his stance becomes more serious. We deliver upon each other several small cuts and nicks, and in one close he strikes my nose, breaking it; again.

Finally the one opportunity I sought comes to pass. I close with a thrust that he narrowly sidesteps, leaving my sword overshot behind him. I immediately shift it to a dagger, and strike. Even such an unseen move is countered by him; though not totally. The move intended to sever his spine strikes, but only delivers a cut to his side, though not an insubstantial one.

He seems surprised, perhaps pleasantly even, which is even more unnerving to me. Finally the attacks from him come more in earnest, and we strike and parry, circling faster and faster. The sand is kicked up into a growing cloud.

I don't like the lack of visibility, so I attempt a jump forward, to clear myself from the dust and perhaps surprise him again... But too slow. Lightning strikes the sand, deafening me, turning the whirlwind from sand to molten glass.

The strike I had intended fails, and I barely manage to pass through the firestorm and land on my feet, shaken. I am covered with lacerations and burns. He throws another handful of sand at me, and I reflexively attempt to block this assault, changing my sword to a tessen, but to no avail. The sand turns into a glittering cloud of glowing motes, and the burns fade away... What is this?

But I have no time to contemplate.

He salutes again, and charges forward with an overhand slice. I step to the side and thrust, but he turns mid-swing, knocking my blade aside, and then returning a riposte that slices my sword arm, though not to incapacitation.

Our duel continues as the minutes tick by. I get a few little cuts on him, but he lands more, including a significant cut to one leg. Finally we are corp-a-corp, my katana locked with his blade. If his strength is greater than mine, he is not pressing it. And I then I draw my hidden dagger. One last surprise strike for him.

But as I strike, he seizes my arm at the wrist. My arm is immobilized. He smirks at me, as one squeeze from his hand shatters the bones in my arm. The dagger falls from my nerveless hand. With the look in his eyes, I know it is over. And my heart falls, and I know despair.

I make what I knew in my heart would be my last move. I shift the katana to a tessen, trying to twist and cut his sword arm. He disengages, quick as an asp, and strikes the fan, which flies to the ground a few yards away.

The last thing I see is his sword blade coming toward my head. All goes black.

* * * * *

Consciousness returns suddenly. I'm wet, cold, bleeding, and in pain. As my vision clears a little, I see Bleys staring down at me, half-smiling, holding the Jewel. The Jewel, A Jewel? My head is pounding and I can't think clearly. As I begin to move I find that I am barefoot. Damn it, the shoes WERE the Jewel all along?!?! I thought that they weren't... Were they? I am confused. I must have a concussion.

I sit up slowly and sigh. My broken arm throbs, and I have to rise carefully. Bleys offers me his hand, and I take his right with my left. There is no point in refusing now. As much as I hate it, and hate him, I can at least admit when I am beaten. He pulls me upright with no effort at all, and nods.

"I believe your weapon is over there..." he nods to the fan, lying on the blood-spattered sand. For all his scuffs and little wounds, he seems no less perfect in his demeanor, no less at ease in his movements. "Here," Bleys tosses the Jewel to me, and I can barely catch it... "Be careful with that thing, it tends to cause a lot of trouble." He begins walking out of the arena. "And tell Benedict I said 'Hi'."

I just stand there for a moment, confused. Why would he give me that Jewel? It must not be the real one. It can't be the real one. I can't think. I stow the Jewel in my sash and mechanically walk over and retrieve the fan from the sand. It is cold... Cold. Trump is active here, wherever here is...

I open the fan, and after a long moment manage to bring an image of Amber to mind. I disappear in a flash of rainbow light.

When I arrive, I am still dizzy, in a haze... The transition was more disconcerting than usual. I check the Jewel in my sash, it is still there. It didn't disappear again, it didn't change into something else. I replace it and begin to limp my way towards the castle. At least I might be able to complete one goal. Deliver this Jewel, real or not, to Random.

A carriage with Benedict's mon pulls up alongside me as I work my way up the road. I pay it hardly any mind at all until the door opens.

Benedict arches an eyebrow as he looks out at me. "Rough day?" His delivery is deadpan, I can't tell if he is being snide or not.

I cannot summon the mental fortitude to make a sarcastic comment. In fact I can barely summon the energy to look up at him and answer at all. "You could say that," I finally reply.

"Jump in and we'll get you bandaged up." He seems serious. Any other day, I would probably refuse. But I have been beaten. I can't believe it. The dizziness and throbbing pain threaten to pitch me into a yawning black abyss. After what seems an interminable time, I manage to nod.

A servant helps me step up into the carriage, and the vehicle takes off at a fast clip. Or at least it seems a fast clip. I have to close my eyes and focus, to maintain my consciousness. The concussion is worse than the broken arm in this case; the pain from the arm helps me stay awake.

Once we have reached the castle, I gingerly step down and start to make my way inside. But Benedict lays a hand on my shoulder, and inexorably guides me not towards Random's audience room, but towards the infirmary.

"I have to see Random," I try to stop him, but by the time I've managed to get the words out, it seems we are there. The body is apparently working better than the mind right now...

"Then I assume you have the Jewel." It takes me a moment to register his words. He points to a bed with a huge featherbed on it. I really am too tired and dizzy to protest.

"I have A Jewel. I don't know if it's THE Jewel." I pull the red stone from my sash with my good arm.

"May I?" It is as much a command as a request. I hand it to him. He puts it to his eye.

"It's the real Jewel."

"You're kidding."

He gives me a look that clearly conveys he isn't.

"You're not kidding. Count me surprised."

"Good work."

"No, not really." I respond, fuzzy and fading.

"And I thank you for all your efforts on my behalf."

"It wasn't for you."

"I know."

"I need to get it to Random... So he can fix...things."

"I will give it to him. And let him know who delivered it for him."

"I don't care about that..."

"Fair is fair. And if you ever need my help, I'm not hard to get a hold of."

"Mrrph."

Benedict pulls a curtain around the bed. And with that I pass out again, blackness and feathers enfolding me.

Day 41532 (11 April 2005)

Consciousness returns. When I open my eyes, the room doesn't spin, and the fuzzy feeling is just the receding edge of sleep. I still feel pain, especially from my arm, but I can tell my wounds have been tended. The large cuts have been stitched; the arm splinted, all bandaged neatly.

I then realize several things, almost simultaneously. I am in my own quarters, in Amber. I am not only bandaged, but wearing a clean dressing gown. And what awakened me was a pungent odor... Coffee.

Sitting up cautiously, I can see that I am not alone. Sitting in the lone chair at my table is Queen Vialle. She wears only a simple dress, a large mug of coffee steaming in her hands, her face turned to the warmth and light of the window.

"I see you finally woke up." She turns to face me, though I have made no sound other than sitting up. How *does* she do that?

"Yes." Some acknowledgement is only polite.

"So, how are you feeling?"

"Better?" The only truthful answer I can muster. I can't say good... I still feel pained. And above all I feel empty. A blackness purely spiritual threatens to overwhelm my soul.

"Good. I thought you might feel more comfortable in your own quarters. So I had you brought here."

"Thank you." I am confused, a little, at the kindness, and I still wonder who bound my wounds... Certainly she didn't, did she?

"And no one saw you in any untoward condition."

She seems to think that this is important to me; I'm not sure anymore. It doesn't seem to matter. I make a non-committal reply.

"Would you like coffee?"

"Yes, please." That at least is an unhesitating and true reply.

"Would you like me to bring it to you, or are you getting up?"

"I'm getting up, please don't trouble yourself."

As I rise and carefully gather a robe around myself, I see her pour another mug of coffee, without missing a drop. She continues to make small talk, as I drink and make only the most minimally polite answers. I really don't feel like talking, but then again, I somehow don't want her to leave.

She reveals that King Random didn't visit because he thought he would be unwelcome. I am confused by the comment. I assure her I have nothing against Random... uh "His Majesty... uh, Uncle Random..." I am embarrassed. The informality and chaos of my personal thoughts have spilled over into speech and I have blundered again.

"It isn't important." She dismisses my faux pas with an elegant wave of her hand.

I discover along the way of conversation that Dworkin, Fiona and Bleys have been tasked with 'fixing' the Pattern. The news unsettles me deeply. How can so unstable and untrustworthy souls be given such an important task? Why them? The blackness in my soul only grows.

Vialle seems to pick up on my unease. "Do you have any questions?"

"No intelligent ones, at this time," I admit ruefully. If I started to discuss it, I would only end up ranting, or revealing far more about myself than I want to. No point in even beginning.

Finally she leaves me to wake up and shows herself out. I continue to sit, staring into my coffee cup, alone and depressed. I've 'won' according to Random and Benedict, but I know I really lost. By the mercy of my vanquisher, who took pity on me and gave me the Jewel, I returned it. He gave it to me...after crushing me; after humiliating me in front of the Courts of Chaos, in front of my cousins, and my adopted family.

And now Bleys has the Jewel himself anyway. They gave it back to him, as soon as it was returned to Amber. A hollow

victory. Empty, like my soul. So what, in truth, did I accomplish? Nothing. And all my efforts brought me only pain.

“As your servant patronize me,
Put my face inside of paintings.
Blessed are the royal favourites
Blessed are the royal favourites
A ruby necklace for his majesty
You do not a thing for me,
Can’t you see me bleed, my suffering?
Make me a martyr!
Make me a martyr!

Waiting for your king to disown you...
I’ve been called traitor your majesty.
Waiting for a king to enthrone you...
Perhaps I’m your traitor your majesty?
At the center, I must serve you
All of space and time around you
Blessed are the royal favourites
Blessed are the royal favourites
A ruby necklace for his majesty
At your call, I come in rushing,
Without your patronage I’m nothing,
Make me a martyr!
I’ll die just another!
Waiting for your king to disown you...
I’ve been called traitor your majesty
Waiting for a king to enthrone you
Am I your fat traitor your majesty?
I am nothing to you all along...”

- Parody of

A Pearl Necklace for Her Majesty
by Colour of Fire

Day 41532 (18 April 2005)

After Vialle leaves, I sit and think for a time. But my thoughts don’t make much sense, even to me. I am in such a black mood that nothing seems to matter.

By now, I am sure, the story has already made its way all around the Court, and there is nothing for it. I have been broken at last, by Bleys.

In the end, there is nothing for it but to get on with life. Coffee isn’t enough to sustain, so I need to make my way to the kitchen for a decent meal. There is no point in having a meal brought up to me, for it would only indicate weakness, whether physical or emotional. My best option is simply to carry on as normally as possible. If the gods have any mercy at all, the gossip-mongers will at least have the decency to wait until I leave to speak of it.

Carefully, I change from the bedclothes I awoke in to a decent kimono. I have to arrange a sling in the folds, as my arm is quite painful. I wonder whether the bones were shattered, rather than merely broken. The other wounds have been stitched closed, but still are painful, and I am left with a rather bad limp. And so I summon Clairvidere, and soon lean upon a mirror-topped walking stick.

The walk downstairs seems longer than ever I remembered, with pain dogging each step. When I finally settle myself in the kitchen, it is a great relief. I saw no one on

the walk down. Breakfast is beignets, or at least that is what the kitchen staff calls them, and more chicory coffee. My breakfast is undisturbed; no plots, no summons. I keep waiting for something to happen... But it doesn’t.

After I eat, I retire to the gardens. Perhaps in the sunshine I can find a quiet spot and some peace. I slowly work my way around and eventually find bonsais, and a well-tended zen garden. Very peaceful. I try to meditate for a while, but my black mood denies me focus or peace. Sitting upon the rocks, my wounds ache from the stiffness and cool. In the end I need to move on again.

Rising is an exercise in self-control. Once I am erect the pain subsides a bit. Walking slowly, I work my way into the general gardens again, and come upon a pond. There, Flora sits, feeding breadcrumbs to a flock of tame ducks. She sees me before I leave again.

“Oh Surengiin, how are you today?”

“Fine.” I really don’t feel like talking...

“How have things been with you lately?”

“Busy.”

“Anything in particular?”

What is she fishing for? Why is she doing this? Like she doesn’t know what has happened to me! “The usual.”

“One person’s usual is another’s unusual.”

She wants me to talk about it?!? “I suppose that would be true.” My leg is aching again. And I feel a headache coming on.

“Would you like to feed the ducks with me?”

Without even a sigh, I sit down. After all, right now sitting is no less uncomfortable than standing. And at this point, I don’t have the determination to resist her. Let them all have their way, it doesn’t matter...

She makes small talk, and invites me to go shopping. But my expression brings her a smile, and she revises her offer. Instead, I should join her on Shadow Earth, once I get to feeling better... I just nod non-committally. Maybe I will, I don’t know. Right now I don’t care.

After a short while, she leaves to go about her way, leaving me and the tame ducks behind by the pond. I wait until she has gone before I rise.

I don’t really want to return to my quarters, but I can’t really figure out what to do. Finally, I decide to check the stables. Hopefully, Kaze has returned. The last time I saw her, she was fleeing a whirlwind across a field of grain. When I reach the stable she is there, and I am quite relieved. I let her out into the stable yard, before I continue. It is then that I see Leonardo approaching the castle.

Leonardo is not alone. Liir is with him. He sees me as well, and detours in my direction. Leonardo inquires after my health; this confuses me, as I thought he was present during the duel. I find out he wasn’t, apparently. Liir told him I was carried off the field.

I assure Leonardo that I walked off the field on my own two feet. Liir simply dismisses his ‘error’ by saying that he wasn’t paying attention to such ‘trivial matters’. A poor attempt to mask his ignorance and foolishness. I ignore it; Liir doesn’t deserve any acknowledgement from me. When he continues to insult me, calling me by one of those misanthropic names that Dermott favors, the game is up. Either Liir and Dermott are in league with one another, or

perhaps one and the same in various shapeshifted forms. I don't care anymore.

Liir makes some very rude comments about women, and Leonardo suggests an introduction to Florimel. I agree with him half-heartedly, but I can't even muster the sarcasm that the comment warrants.

I really can't bring myself to hold an extended conversation, so I return to the stables with Kaze when I can get away from the chatter. I decide that taking a ride, although a physically daunting prospect to me right now, would be mentally refreshing. But even simple tasks are not left to me today. Stable hands flock around me, insisting that they saddle Kaze for me.

I relent to their ministrations, and soon regret it. They bring a side-saddle, of the type the useless ladies use, and I am offended. I ask them to bring a *real* saddle, and they simply return with a more elaborate example of the previous sort. In exasperation, I practically shout that I want a *military* style saddle, like the one that Kaze usually wears.

Finally they saddle her correctly, and then they insist on helping me mount. They bring steps. It is positively humiliating, but arguing with them only makes it worse. In the end I let them help, just to be on my way.

I ride for hours. I don't let Kaze achieve more than a swift walk, though, as I can't handle a faster gait. But I really don't have any destination in mind. There isn't really anywhere I want to go... I just want to be moving. Anywhere but sitting still. I let the miles go by while I think.

What should I do now? I am too embarrassed to go back to Chaos. I can't face the Hendrakes. I have been shamed, and brought shame to them. I wouldn't be surprised if they disowned me. But I don't want to be here in Amber, either. Too close to the source of my pain.

I realize that I have no goal, and no direction. No one has requested me to do anything. I don't really feel capable of doing much anyhow. If Bleys, a foppish sorcerer, so easily humiliated me, then my quest to get revenge on Benedict, Amber's warmaster, is truly hopeless. And I'm not worthy of Hendrake's consideration. And if one of *these* is my father, what hope do I truly have of avenging my mother's spirit? None at all. Hopelessness envelopes me.

Some small part of me also must admit that I am curious to see if the Pattern gets fixed. I don't hold out any real hope; but I would like to know. An insane old man and two megalomaniacal mages... Can they really *just* fix the Pattern like it was? I really doubt it. I still don't even understand why or how any of this came about.

The day's exertion really has been too much. I feel exhaustion creeping up on me, and turn Kaze back towards Amber. As much as I hate the humiliation of being here, at least the servants will make my recuperation easier. The thought of caring for myself, and Kaze, on the road is more than I want to contemplate right now.

When I dismount, I feel a twinge as a few stitches pull loose. Yes, definitely too much for today. And I can still barely make a fist with my broken right arm. It will likely be weeks before I can use it again.

One small blessing, at least Random has not called a formal dinner, or even a family one, for tonight. I can retire and have a quiet dinner brought to my rooms.

But when I finally reach my room, it seems I am not to be left without some word. A message lies on the table, sealed with green wax.

I regard the message with hesitation. Who would send it? Fiona is fond of green... But I cannot imagine her wanting to speak with me. Llewella or Florimel? No. Merlin would Trump me... And regardless of who sent it, do I want to read it? Do I dare? I don't feel up to a summons, much less a meeting.

In the end I examine it closely, and seeing nothing other than mundane paper and plain wax, I pop the seal. Inside is flowing script. An invitation from Sand and Delwin. Sand invites me to join them for dinner, and an explanation as to why the Jewel was inflicted upon me the way it was.

To accept, I merely have to affix my own seal. But should I? I am tired, and pained. Exhausted in both body and spirit. I don't want to get involved in another plot. But I am curious. Why did things happen as they did? I occurs to me that Sand *did* say that 'I did not need to quest.'

At the time I thought she was trying to convince me not to seek the stone... Now? Perhaps she was hinting that it would be given to me all along.

In the end, my mind will not rest, though my body sorely wants to. I retrieve my chop, and affix my mark. And in a flash of light, I am transported.

"I have only come here seeking knowledge,
Things they would not teach me of in college
I can see the destiny you sold
Turned into a shining band of gold"

- *Wrapped Around Your Finger*
The Police

Day 41532 (2 May 2005)

When the afterimages clear from my eyes, I am once again by the little house in the woods. Entering, I see Sand at the table, sitting with the blond man whom I assume is Delwin. I recognize him from the encounter thirty years past or more; when Bleys first dueled me in that weird ruby-city version of 'Oz'.

They sit before a table laden for breakfast. What is it with breakfast? I was just ready to get some rest, I don't think I'm up to starting a whole new day yet...But whatever. I just take a seat and pick up a muffin.

The man introduces himself as Delwin, as I suspected, and I introduce myself in return. After a few mindless pleasantries, Sand and Delwin seem ready to get to business, such as it is.

"I'm sure you have questions," Sand begins, "So ask away."

That's it? They said they would explain, not merely answer questions. How am I to know what to ask? Typical of Amberites. I think for a few minutes, but the best I can come up with is "Why... shoes?"

Sand begins by trying to explain in a roundabout way, that the shoes were part of a reference to the 'Wizard of Oz' movie. I tell her that I am familiar with movies, though I never saw that one in particular. When she waves her hand and begins playing the movie in a mirror's reflection, I let her know that 'Oz' such as it is, or isn't, is a place I've visited

some version of a number of times. I finally have to ask what the attraction is to the Shadows of Oz. Over and over, the Jewel has ended up in some version of Oz.

That finally triggers something of a real explanation. Sand claims that they decided that the Jewel needed to end up in Amber. That the balance of power required the Primal Pattern be restored to its former location.

In response, they placed the Jewel in Bethany's home Shadow, where they thought we would be the first to find it. Because they 'knew' we would go there eventually. But things did not go as planned. Apparently, despite the fact that I retrieved Bethany immediately, and we went to Oz straight away, we were too slow. (How surprising that a straight line is the slowest route to any given location in Amber.)

Having beat us there, Fiona took control of the Shadow, and upon my arrival, Sand and Delwin transformed the Jewel into the form of the ruby slippers as a last ditch effort to keep it from Bleys' cabal. They knew I would defend myself.

Apparently the whole farce was to prevent open violence from erupting at their table between Benedict and Bleys. How well that worked. No violence between them, no. I was just made a pawn of sacrifice. But they show no regret over it. As they wanted, the Jewel ended up at Amber, though I am still not sure why. Bleys could have taken it from me, apparently at any time. Why did he give it to me then, I wonder quietly to myself? Pity?

But after the explanation, I am not left to ponder the situation for long. Sand does not offer an apology (I would never believe it even if she had). Instead she offers something in the way of reparations.

With a gesture, she summons a hand of cards; Trumps. "You have some passing familiarity with these, I believe?"

With my own gesture I call forth a card of my own. "Some, yes."

"Then, I will teach you the mysteries of the Hall of Mirrors. If you want such instruction, that is." She claims the Hall is the ultimate source of the power of Trump.

"The Hall... It isn't sentient, is it?"

"Probably, though it hasn't directly shown itself to be, that we are aware of."

"I have been trying to avoid placing myself under the sway of sentient Powers."

"A noble endeavor, but every power worth having comes with a price."

"True, I'm just trying to make sure I can pay it..."

"Probably wise. But..."

I see where it is leading, "but I've already walked partway along this path on my own, so I may as well finish it."

"Exactly."

I just shrug. Why the offer of training? What scheme does she have in mind for me next? Or is this pity as well? Regardless, I suppose I should take what I can get at this point.

"Very well then."

"Good. Then your training can begin as soon as you arrive here."

"Arrive here?" I look around. The house seems solid enough. "I'm not here now?"

Sand chuckles. "No. This is just a dream. When you sealed the letter, it ensorcelled you. You are still asleep, in your quarters in Amber. It's the same technique we used on

your cousins. Once you walk out the door," she indicates the entrance to the little house, "you will awaken."

I look back at the door. On that one count I believe she is truthful. I believe her because the ache of my wounds is lessened here. They feel more distant. But is there anything else I should ask before I go?

After a moment's thought, I cannot think of any further questions, so I see no reason to continue this odd conversation. I simply nod, and rise from the chair. As politely as I can bring myself to do, I give a short bow to the two of them, and open the door.

The door is a door of pain. With a start, I open my eyes to the world of Amber again. Sharp pains shoot from all my wounds. My ungraceful collapse upon sealing the letter only aggravated unhealed wounds already stressed from a long day's ramblings.

I slowly rise from the floor, and stagger off to bed. I only hope that the rest of my night is filled with less eventful dreams...

"I had better times waiting ahead,
I had worse ones too, wishing I were dead,
Characteristic of the present is average
Due to lack of funds and power leverage"
- *The Devil and the Savant*
EDGUY

Day 41533 (9 May 2005)

Morning's light wakes me from a thankfully dreamless sleep, still exhausted and stiff. But I've never been able to sleep past the sun's rising. Old habits die hard, I suppose. I try some tentative stretching, but pain and ennui prevent any real katas.

I decide finally that I would rather not test Sand's patience. I force myself to retrieve a large breakfast from the kitchens, and sit down with my Trump. I know it is going to take some time to get the little house, Corialane I would guess it is, drawn into both Clairvidere and in a card. Especially as I am reduced to working with only one arm for the time being.

Perhaps its paranoid to want both images complete before leaving, but I've found that Clairvidere is my ace; best to maintain the edge as much as possible. For whatever its worth, which it seems isn't much.

Sand seems a master of Trump, so I suppose she could turn access to the place on and off at her whim. I already know the Shadow 'moves' at her wish. That she has somehow linked it to the Hall of Mirrors...

As I eat, I go through my notes. A few half-finished sketches are there, along with notes on my few attempts at scrying and divination with the Trumps.

I come across some old divinations I attempted, to discover the identity of my father... Back during that time in which I actually thought I might pursue him for vengeance. Looking at the notes, I see the results were consistent, but typically for me, obscure and indecipherable. The same cards keep re-appearing over and over. Like some sort of short circuit, even now, when I am not seeking him they arise. It seems destiny must have something in mind. Karma seems determined to point me to it, but I don't know what it is. Why

am I cursed with such blindness? The same cards; Judgment, Justice, and the 4 of Swords. I don't understand the message.

What does it mean? How does it help me? Justice... Judgment... The only time I faced those aspects wasn't in Amber at all, but in Chaos. I was judged by the Court of Chaos, and given a death sentence, since commuted. Perhaps it means the judgment of popular opinion? There I would surely be found wanting. And what does the 4 of Swords mean? The swords are crossed in a star.

Does someone use a star of swords as their badge? I don't remember ever seeing one. Perhaps I could summon the target directly through the card, like a Trump call... But perhaps not. Who would I ask about this? Dare I ask anyone? Every time I've tried to do anything I've failed. Should I even try? I'm not sure what would be more disappointing; failure or success...

But again I am interrupted. My door is opened without even a knock. I am left to set down my notes nonchalantly and face this new intrusion...

And intrusion is an understatement. Flora is all exuberance, "Good, you're awake. Get dressed and let's go shopping!"

I look down at my clothes, a practical kimono and hakamas. About the best I can manage with one arm in a sling. "I...am...dressed?"

"Those 'pajamas' might be alright if you're trying to seduce Benedict, he might even think that's sexy, but it won't do otherwise."

"What?!?" What on earth is she talking about?!? Benedict? I *hate* Benedict!

"I heard you didn't like that white dress I sent you, something about a funeral, but we'll find you something... Now blue, that would be a wonderful color on you."

"What?!?" White dress? That was over thirty years ago... She still remembers that? Who told her I didn't wear it?

"Why, you *aren't* trying to seduce Benedict, *are* you?"

"What?!? No! I can't *stand* him! And I like what I wear just fine..."

"Ah, love and hate, such a fine line! But your style leaves quite a bit to be desired. I mean the ivory and green are alright... But why brown? Awful..."

"It doesn't show dirt? I spend a lot of time on the road..."

"Humph, well when you travel you do what you have to, but this is Amber. It's a lot cleaner here. At least, aside from your quarters..." she runs her finger over my dresser with a grimace, as if expecting to find it covered in grime. When it comes away clean she almost seems disappointed. "Besides, how will you ever catch a man looking like that."

"You seem to be under a misapprehension."

"Well, you certainly need a man, it would do you a world of good."

"Lord forbid!"

"Well, regardless, before we leave, you'll have to see a chiurgeon. You look like something the cat dragged in..." Flora takes me by the good arm and drags me away down the hall without a second thought. My notes are left scattered on the table, and the door shuts behind me. I can tell I won't be getting any work done today.

"I just *saw* a chiurgeon. I'm feeling much better." I try to protest...

Florimel simply shakes her head. "Not that hack. A *real* chiurgeon." She drags me down the halls, towards the private

quarters of the other Elders. Not towards the infirmary. Who is she taking me to see now? Oh lord no...

She knocks, and Fiona answers. No. Not her. I can't face her...

"Ah, Flora, what can I do for you?"

"Surengiin here needs patching up, I wonder if you would be so kind?"

"Oh certainly, poor dear, do come in..."

Its all so saccharine sweet. I can't believe it. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was actually being nice to me... Maybe she is. Pity again? I wonder how long before Flora picks up on the fact that Fiona hasn't asked what happened to me... But then again, Flora hasn't asked either. She must already know. Now I'm sure this is all some kind of pity.

Fiona waves me to a seat, and excuses herself for a moment. I just take it without a word. It isn't worth the effort to resist whatever is going to happen. I doubt I could change the outcome anyhow.

When Fiona returns, she seems ready for business. Looking around her sparse apartments, with that upscale Swedish look, I can almost believe this place is as sterile as an operating theater in here...

"This won't hurt a bit."

Ah, the magic words. I resign myself with a sigh to a great deal of pain. Whatever will come will come. I doubt I'll even flinch, you can only take so much pain before you become numb.

But Fiona only holds her hands on my temples, and with a word triggers some spell. Healing energy, tingly and soft, washes over me. Everything fades away. The tingling suffuses my arm, and it seems to knit instantly.

I expect a wave of exhaustion; like the time Bethany healed me long ago... But there is none. However Fiona did it, she isn't powering the magic from my own body as Bethany did back then. I stretch my wrist experimentally while she proceeds to remove the bandages. Very thorough.

"So what brings you two to be out today?" Fiona asks casually.

"Oh, I was going to take Surengiin shopping. She seriously needs a makeover... Want to come?"

"A girl's day out, sounds wonderful..."

And so Fiona joins the merry cavalcade... I can't deny that Fiona's magic is effective, but I still consider the motives behind this whole expedition suspect. Why are they doing this? Why? Just to torture me? Or is this some strange way of trying to make me feel better? I wanted to be alone...

But in the end I don't have the will to resist them. I don't want to make them angry. Not after what happened in the arena. I just go along. A carriage is summoned, and the day is wasted in Amber city.

The first stop is a spa, or bathhouse, whatever they call it here. A mudpack and a long soak in spring water. When it comes time to soak Flora seems half-surprised that I don't protest the communal spring, but I've seen far worse in my travels. At least this place is gender-separated. And of course past the towels they both get a good view of Clairvidere, shining silver. Not that their regard is more than a brief flicker of attention.

Fiona knows it for what it is, I am certain. She just doesn't care. Flora just raises an eyebrow as if assessing its artistic merit. I don't know if she recognizes the tattoo, I doubt

she ever saw it before. My usual mode of dress covers it completely. But the spa employees pay it slightly more mind. I doubt they've ever seen such an extensive tattoo on a woman, much less one in metallic tone. But even they don't say a word, though I can tell they'll talk of it after we leave.

Fiona and Flora pay more attention (though even this only the shortest of glances) to the quickly fading scars that lace my body. The most recent, from Bleys, were almost completely removed by Fiona's magic. That and the power of the Blood of Amber seem to be in the process of eliminating even the oldest scars. Most are little more than discolorations of the skin.

Fiona seems to be critically assessing her work, while Flora shows her disapproval of the scars with the slightest raise of an eyebrow. I know she is trying to figure out how revealing of a dress she can put me in and still not show them. I'm not sure how I feel about that. I used to consider them well-earned badges of honor.

From the spa I am then taken to a coiffeur. Flora finally puts my hair up the way she wants it, in a tall, elaborate pile of curls... It looks ridiculous, but Flora and Fiona seem to think it is grand.

Finally I end up following them to more tailors and seamstresses than I could have guessed existed in the city. The first purchase is a fancy dress in that renaissance style so prevalent among Amber. Though it is a chocolate brown so dark it is nearly black, with trim of celery green and ivory, it is fluffy and frivolous. Flora despises the brown, but couldn't deny that the fabric is so rich that, in her words, "It looked good enough to eat." The look on her face made it clear she meant it as an innuendo at my expense, but I ignore it.

The trim alone weighs more than a sword. More than two swords, perhaps. Thankfully Clairvidere doesn't require a sheathe. The dress covers *most* of the tattoo, but the front is cut low enough for the curve of the dragon's back to snake out from shoulder to breast. Flora seems to think the effect is charming and provocative. As for myself, I can hardly breathe in the corset, and I am just glad it isn't as revealing as some of the other garb I have found myself in due to the twists of Shadow I've encountered along the way.

Fiona and Flora don't hesitate to buy for themselves whatever catches their fancy, but the bulk of the purchases made are picked out for me... And put on Random's tab.

When I protest that I don't wish to upset Random with all this profligate spending, Flora just laughs. "He expects it of me," is her reply...

"But not of me..."

She waves off my concerns, and I can't deny her wishes. I can only try not to wince as she buys for herself an obscenely cut green dress practically the twin of one I found myself magically wearing those years ago; in Oz on my first hunt for the Jewel. I wish I could forget that dress. But she seems to love it. Of course she would; I think she would wear lingerie and call it a dress. And she accuses me of wearing pajamas... Humph.

By the end of the day I end up with an armful of clothes in something akin to my colors, and nothing achieved. My only accomplishment seems to be to keep Flora between myself and Fiona as much as possible. They both make interminable small talk, and I just try to say as little as possible. I still can't fathom that there hasn't been the slightest

snide remark from Fiona regarding the duel with her brother. More pity? Does Flora know? I can't imagine she doesn't.

The dress Flora had me wearing also caught more than passing attention from the locals... By the end of the day two of the local nobles insisted on dueling for the privilege of 'escorting me for the evening'. Flora of course did nothing but encourage them, and in the end was enamored enough of the winner to 'escort' him herself. Which finally gave me the opportunity I sought to escape.

Fiona had her own distractions, so I hailed a carriage and headed directly back to the castle without further ado. I count my blessings though, in that I encountered no one else on the way to my quarters, laden as I was with packages and in such... unusual attire.

The packages I unpack into my wardrobe. I can't bring myself to get rid of these new clothes, purchased as they were with someone else's funds, though I can't think of when I would wear them. There is nothing wrong with them, for the most part, they just don't feel *right* somehow. I am relieved when I can finally don my own practical garb again.

I finally resort to having dinner brought up to my room; I really don't want any more distractions. I have Trump to finish, when I can. But I am tired tonight, worn thin by all of Flora's 'help'. I can't focus on work, and I end up sitting by the windowsill, staring blankly at the horizon until the sun goes down.

"Vex me, O Night, your stars stuttering like a stuck jukebox, put a spell on me, my bones atremble at your tabernacle of rhythm and blues. Call out your archers, chain me to a wall, let the stone fortress of my body fall like a rabid fox before an army of dogs. Rebuke me, rip out my larynx like a lazy snake and feed it to the voiceless throng. For I am midnight's girl, scouring unlit streets like Persephone stalking her swarthy lord. Anoint me with oil, make me greasy as a fast-food fry. Deliver me like a pizza to the snapping crack-house hours between one and four. Build me an ark, fill it with prairie moths, split-winged fritillaries, blue-bottle flies. Stitch me a gown of taffeta and quinine, starlight and nightsoil, and when the clock tocks two, I'll be the belle of the malaria ball."

- *Vex Me*

Barbara Hamby

Day 41537 (16 May 2005)

Morning's light and another early breakfast. Waking up is easier today. Only the ghosts of aches accompany me through the morning routine. I go through with finishing my Trumps of Corialane, and pack to head off to my destination with Sand.

I then retrieve Kaze, and prepare to rip a Trump gate there... But I hear swords. Benedict is fencing with Frederick on the edge of Forest Arden. Frederick isn't scratched so I know it isn't serious. He's better than I last remember so I depart and go out to the edge of Arden and finish the gate to Corialane. There is no purpose to my remaining here.

"Mirror mirror lie to me

Show me what I wanna see

Mirror mirror lie to me”
- *Mirror Mirror*
M2m

Day 41943 (23 May 2005)

It has been roughly a year since I arrived to train with Sand. More mentally taxing than physically so. When I open my eyes, it is to a field of reflection. I am in the Hall. Is this real, or another of Sand’s dream-voyages? It is so devilishly difficult to tell.

I find that I am fully dressed and equipped, my traveling pouch at my waist. Sand had hinted my training was nearly complete. In the folds of my kimono I find a note.

“Survive. Exit. Good luck.”

So this is real. And the end of my training is here, it seems. She said it would involve an ordeal of the Hall, in some ways similar to walking the Pattern or the Logrus.

I walk a ways, not really sure what to expect from this endeavor. Every time I have entered the Hall, it has been a different experience. Visions of what is, what may be, what has never been, and will never be. The Hall itself is sentient, I have come to believe, and shows what it wishes to those within it.

And then I hear voices...

One seems familiar, in word if not in tone. Dermott. The other I have not heard before. Dermott calls him Manellous. They speak of hunting the unicorn...and retrieving the Jewel from it. So that is what happened. Rather than leaving it in the keeping of any of the Amberites, the unicorn itself has taken it into its keeping. That is probably for the best, I tell myself, although it doesn’t make me feel any better about what happened. But now another pair of Amber’s lost scions seeks it. This is not good. Is this part of my test, or merely a coincidence? Or both? In either case I cannot allow this to go unanswered.

I position myself leaning among the mirrors where they will see me and speak.

“Looking for something?”

The two of them stop. One, looking rather like a Spaniard, actually starts. The other, a dark-haired, pale-visaged fellow, does not. This second looks slightly familiar. I decide this is Dermott.

“Who is that?” Manellous asks Dermott.

“I don’t know,” Dermott replies.

“Oh come now, Dermott, surely your memory isn’t that bad...” Dermott is trying to be coy again.

“I’m not Dermott,” Dermott turns to Manellous, “That’s the second person today looking for Dermott.”

“Yes, the other was... Frederick?” Manellous replies to Dermott. He then turns to me, “And what is your name?”

I see no reason not to answer him. By his attitude I would guess him another lost cousin. A new one. “Surengiin. And Dermott here is a poor liar.”

“I have known this person as Finieous.” Manellous states. He seems to ponder my name for a moment. “I’ve heard of you.” He finally says. He then turns again to Dermott and whispers, “Is that what you meant by Asian?”

Dermott nods.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding when you said the Amberites were beautiful...” he continues to whisper. After a moment he turns his attention to me and begins flattering my beauty.

I just raise an eyebrow and stop him. “And this is relevant how?”

He splutters a few more inane comments before I turn the conversation back to where it began. “I believe you were looking for something?”

Manellous nods. Dermott just narrows his eyes.

“About so big,” I indicate with my right hand, “Red, shiny?”

“Why yes...” Manellous replies.

“Why do you seek it?”

“Power.” Manellous replies immediately, and without guile.

Oh no. I won’t let this pass. Not again.

“Wrong answer.” As I speak, I try to summon the power of the Hall; to expel them. Send them somewhere, anywhere, far from Amber. I’ve been on the hunt for that damned Jewel twice now, and I don’t want to go through it again. I shift to a combat stance.

The mirrors in the Hall all flash, and turn quicksilver bright, and begin sucking with a growing wind. Like that time Delwin threw me from the Hall so long ago. I didn’t expect such a sudden and violent response from the Hall; it must also want these Jewel-seekers gone.

But they won’t go without a fight. Manellous reaches out for me, shouting “Dermott! Grab hold!” as he tries to grip Dermott’s arm as well... So I *was* right. Too bad. I see the look of frustration on Manellous’ face as he realizes he has given himself away in that instant.

I smoothly turn, evading his grasping hand. But Dermott lunges forward with a dagger. I manage to block his thrust with my arm, but not before he manages a cut on my side. Damn, that was close. He then changes his stance, and comes forward with a second dagger, in a double strike. I swing my left arm around, the one Clairvidere coils upon, and block both blades; they snap off at their hilts, much to Dermott’s surprise. Clairvidere shines through the torn kimono sleeve.

But I have neglected giving Manellous my attention in these seconds, and he manages to grab me around the waist. I despise having anyone lay their hands on me! The response is nearly automatic – I swing forth a tessen from my left hand, slashing him across the chest. But he won’t be so easily defeated. He grabs my left arm, twisting it behind my back. Dermott is recovering his stance, and I must act swiftly. The Hall still seeks to expel them, and if I don’t escape Manellous’ grip soon, the results could be disastrous.

The only thing I can think of is drastic, but necessary. I dislocate my own shoulder, and as I twist, position my right hand close to Manellous’ chest. Simultaneously I withdraw the tessen, summoning Clairvidere as a katana in my right hand. The blade shoots out, through Manellous. I can feel it cut through his lung, and out his shoulder. It misses his heart, as I intended, but the blow should be incapacitating nonetheless. A new cousin doesn’t deserve to die simply because he was sucked in by Dermott’s lies.

Dermott then tries to strike me with the pommels of his knives, but I twist, and he pulls back rather than strike Manellous. I call Clairvidere back to my arm with a thought, and Manellous’ grip gives out as the wind reaches hurricane

strength. Dermott grabs onto Manellous' arm as they are both sucked through a mirror. With the intruders removed, the Hall returns to normal.

As I pop my shoulder back into place with a wince, my eye is drawn to a large mirror framed with spiders of metal and obsidian. In it I see Dermott and Manellous, in a cove of trees surrounded by thick fog. It looks like that lobster-trap shadow we stumbled into long ago, when hunting Frakir. Serves Dermott right. It won't hold them long though. Dermott escaped that place easily enough back then. He should have no trouble now.

And then I see Kaliese. Kaliese! I had thought her freed from that shadow when I escaped. I looked for her, but couldn't find her. I couldn't even find the shadow again. But apparently she hadn't managed to escape it.

I watch as she tosses a first-aid kit to Dermott.

"Better patch up your friend before he bleeds out."

"Uh, yeah." Dermott starts bandaging Manellous' shoulder, but by the looks of it, he's going to have a hard time of it. Internal bleeding is a real pain. I feel badly that I had to strike such a... potential fatal blow, I acknowledge truthfully to myself, but time was of the essence.

They make small talk as Dermott works, in which Dermott, again calling himself 'Finieous' blames me for the situation. Kaliese has developed a real hatred for Dermott in that time however, blaming him for not freeing her all those years ago. Dermott is quite careful not to reveal himself to her then, I note.

After Manellous, now unconscious, is patched up as best as Dermott can manage, Dermott offers to spar with Kaliese. All this while, I can't help but feel badly for her. No one deserves to be trapped in a place like that for a decade or more. I want to free her, and help Manellous, but not at the price of setting Dermott free as well. He has already caused me enough trouble. He actually drew blood! He has gotten *much* better. And Manellous was no slouch himself. I had thought myself a master of combat. I must be getting rusty. I *have* been neglecting my katas while I was training with Sand.

But Kaliese provides me with the opportunity I need herself. As they spar, it quickly becomes obvious to me that Dermott is far better than she is. It is obvious to him as well. He suddenly turns the sparring serious, and with a lightning strike, breaks her arm with a sickening crunch. She sees his treacherous intent. She moves in, blocking his next swing with her already broken arm, and touches him.

Dermott jerks like a man being electrocuted, and drops to the ground, limp and unconscious.

"Dermott, you bastard." Kaliese mutters, recognizing him now...

In that moment I act. I lay my hand upon the mirror glass and call her name, projecting my mental power into it, hoping she will hear me... "Kaliese."

As she moves toward Dermott's limp body, she stops. She looks around, as if trying to locate a sound, and I realize she has heard me...

"Kaliese," I repeat her name. She seems to turn toward me, and look around. "Kaliese, it's Surengiin. Follow my voice."

After a few more moments, she seems to reach the mirror, from my perspective at least, and starts.

"Can you see me, Kaliese?"

"Uh, yes...barely. How did you do that?"

"That isn't important. I finally found you."

"Can you get me out of here?"

"I think so. But get the others."

"Oh no, I'm not letting that bastard Dermott go. I'm gonna kill him."

"Normally I wouldn't stop you Kaliese, but time is of the essence here. You can kill him later. And the other is another cousin. God knows what Dermott had in mind for him. And if you leave Dermott here you know he'll escape. So carry both of them over here."

Kaliese seems to consider for a second, then nods assent. She grabs them by the arm, one at a time, and drags them slowly back towards whatever surface holds my reflection there.

"Good." I say to her. I try to project my power into the mirror, willing it to become a doorway. To let me reach through it, like a Trump, and bring her through with those she carries. The mirror flashes, and my hand sinks into the rippling quicksilver. "Take my hand and come through."

"What?" She seems distressed. "I can't walk through solid rock!"

Rock? My image must be reflected in mica of a rock outcrop. "It's like a Trump card Kaliese, take my hand and you'll step through."

She seems skeptical for a moment, but eventually shifts her balance to not drop her charges, and takes my hand. In an instant, she stands beside me in the Hall, and the mirror behind has faded to blank reflection. I can see that her ordeal of the past decade hasn't been kind; she's battered and worn by it. But I am happy to note she is at least in one piece.

"What is this place?"

"The Hall of Mirrors. A place of reflection. But that isn't important. I need to get you to Amber. So you can get cleaned up, Manellous there can get patched up, and Dermott can get what is coming to him."

Kaliese smiles wickedly. I take Dermott from her and swing him over my right shoulder... The one I hadn't just dislocated. I then begin walking the Hall, looking for a route to Amber castle.

"Don't be too bloodthirsty, Kaliese. We've all had our share of problems in the past decades..." I decide that honesty is important here. "Dermott didn't abandon you in that shadow. When you and I tried to combine our powers to escape, something went wrong. I was flung out of there, and I thought you were too. We looked for you, and for that shadow again, but we couldn't find you or it."

Kaliese seems shocked, angry, and skeptical, all at once. But she at least still seems to be listening as I walk the Hall, her following with Manellous.

"Not that Dermott isn't a bastard, he is. But it wasn't entirely his fault, if you remember. We both chose not to accept Invollee's method of escape. And then we both had to try and find our own way out. It didn't work as planned. When your Trump card never got cold again, we thought you were dead."

Kaliese fumes. "I still hate him."

"Fine. Just don't do anything rash. Right now its more important you get back to Amber. Bethany will be thrilled to see you again." I don't really like small talk, but I feel I need to keep Kaliese's attention. That otherwise the Hall might

enrapture her on some other tangent. Where is a mirror to Amber when I need one? I tell her about Bethany's son Michael, and Leonardo's apprenticeship to Benedict. I try briefly to summarize the betrayals and trials of the past thirty years... To give her some iota of preparation for the larger world.

Finally it seems the Hall sees fit to grant my wish. A familiar room, the infirmary at Amber Castle, appears in a frameless mirror held with corner clips of silver on my left. I sigh, and call over Kaliese. I lay my hand upon the glass again, and in a flash it turns to quicksilver. I wave Kaliese through, and she steps out onto the white tile floor. She seems surprised, and somewhat relieved. She lays Manellous on a bed, and turns back toward the mirror.

I try to step through as well, but the mirror becomes viscous. Dermott slides from my shoulder, landing in a heap in the infirmary, but I cannot follow. It seems the Hall is not done with me yet...

Instead, keeping one eye on the image, I quickly pen two notes, and pass them to Kaliese as the image fades. The first for Manellous, and the second for Dermott. As I do so, I try to tell her to be cautious, and avoid getting tangled in the weird politics of Amber, but I don't know if she listens to me.

The first note, for Manellous reads:

Cousin Manellous,

Hate me if you wish, I only did what was necessary. Consider this your first lesson. Never trust family. If I had wanted you dead, you would have been. The web you find yourself tangled in is directly proportional to the one you weave with lies. Dermott is a master of deceit, as are we all. And some power is best left unsought. Consider whether you wield it, or it wields you. The greatest powers have a will and agenda of their own. Good luck,

Surengiin

The second to Dermott:

Dermott,

Do not seek the Jewel. The unicorn will likely not be as merciful as I have just been. You are free, as are Manellous and Kaliese. Let it go. I never hated you, only the lies you told. My hatred is reserved for more important things.

Surengiin

I urge her to put the notes in their things where they will be found. And as I pass the second note to her, the mirror goes blank again.

And I am alone.

"Mirror mirror on the wall
Whose the master of them all?
Mirror Mirror split in two
Look at me, who are you?"

- *Mirror Mirror*
Halloween

Day 41943 (13 June 2005)

As I continue my long walk through endless mirrors reflecting endlessly, I wonder about the cards I kept drawing in my past attempts at divination. Judgment, 4 of Swords, Justice. Who does it indicate? Or what?

And where the Hall is taking me, I don't know. How am I supposed to exit a place without doors? Or is this perhaps a place with infinite doors?

In a large obsidian mirror I see the many shifting hued sky of Chaos. Nowhere in Chaos I've seen before, though. As my viewpoint swings lower, I can see a busy thoroughfare, and a crier tacking up a broadsheet. The broadsheet announces a trial, one Tomagen vs. the Courts of Chaos. Never heard of him. Trial to be held tomorrow in the Palace of Justice.

Hmm. Justice. A clue from the Hall? Perhaps I should try to check this out a little more closely. Willing the Hall to let me pass, I step into, and through, the mirror. Success! Have I left the Hall and completed my journey?

Looking about for a bit along the avenue in Chaos, I see a significant number of people (and demons, and things I can't identify) filing toward a large building with very formal architecture. Is this the 'Palace of Justice'? There are no signs that I can see marking it, but it seems a good a place as any to start.

Following the crowd, I end up inside this massive building, in a huge domed chamber, where banks of balcony seats surround an open central area. Not an arena, it feels more like a gigantic senate-forum... A central spire holds a podium, upon which is a figure clothed head to toe in red robes.

That figure I recognize. The Justicar of Chaos. I have encountered him before. I then notice something I did not notice during my last encounter with him, being preoccupied with the torture inflicted by Mandor at the time. On his right arm is a red metal gauntlet, which he uses as a gavel.

The gauntlet is familiar as well! Years ago, during my very first sojourn into the Hall of Mirrors, a gauntleted right arm dragged me out of the Hall, and into the dream-castle. That red gauntlet. It was him, this Justicar! So I have met him not once before, but twice!

The proceedings end with an innocent verdict, and the spire lowers into the floor, but honestly I wasn't paying attention to the trial. I was too busy trying to figure out who the Justicar is. I want to speak to this red-clothed man. But how? What would I say?

When the crowds have thinned, I finally rise to leave, having thought of no real way to contact the Justicar. And even if I did, would he even agree to speak with me? After all, I am one over whom he has passed judgment.

Judgment. Justice. Where is the 4 of Swords then? As I reach the hallway outside the courtroom, to the left a great mirror flashes silver. Wait, there wasn't a mirror there before! I am so startled with the flash that I am thrown from my feet by the transition, and land flat on my face. How embarrassing.

“He deals the cards to find the answer,
The sacred geometry of chance.
The hidden law of probable outcome,
The numbers lead a dance.”

- *Shape of My Heart*
Sting

Day 41943 cont(20 Jun 2005)

As I dust myself off, my eyes are almost immediately drawn to another mirror. One with a red metal frame. In it is the red cloaked figure of the Justicar, walking down a hallway. Before I can do more than contemplate my next action, the mirror flashes, and I am again transported. At least this time, I manage to keep my feet, as I land in the hall before him.

Many thoughts go through my head simultaneously... Is this real? Have I really left the Hall? Will he even see me, or is this a vision or illusion? How did I do that, or did I do it at all? Is the Hall becoming more quick to respond to my thoughts, or is it just following an agenda of its own by sending me here?

“I know you.” The Justicar speaks... One question answered, he can see me.

I try not to look surprised. “Yes, I believe we’ve met.”

“I passed judgment on you.” He remembers that... Hmm. Perhaps not the best thing. Damn the robes, I can’t tell what sort of reaction he has to my arrival. Of course, that is exactly the sort of thing such robes are meant to conceal...

“Yes.” I try to be neutral and pass off his comment easily. “I’m not here about that, this is a different matter.”

“How did you get here?”

Hmm. I would seem to be best served by honesty when facing a judge... “The Hall of Mirrors sent me here.”

“Why would it do that?”

“I don’t know. Apparently it thought I needed to be here.”

“Then, oh student of the universe, the question becomes ‘Why are you here?’.”

Directly to business then. No sense in drawing this out too much. “I believe there is a greater connection between us than only our... last encounter.”

“I’m listening.” He doesn’t deny it?

“I encountered you in the Hall once before.”

“Did you now.” I can’t tell if that was a statement or a question... He is a master of vocal tone. All I can tell is that he is male, of which there is no doubt.

“Well your right arm is rather unique.”

“My right arm is much like anyone else’s’.”

I stop myself from rolling my eyes. “Then what you wear upon it, rather.”

He stops for a heartbeat. “I see you recognize that.”

“It is the one feature you do not disguise.” Which is true... Why wear it openly if it could be a personal identifier? His very reaction proves to me that it is not a badge of his office.

“Justice is meant to be impersonal. Whether king or pauper it is the same.”

I won’t let him distract this conversation, so I nod and continue. “It is not justice I’m here about.”

“What then?” Is there the tiniest bit of menace in his tone, or is it just my imagination?

“I wish to discover the nature of the connection between us, which time makes more and more apparent to me.” My words hang in the silence for a moment. What will his reaction be? My heart is in my throat. Will I have to flee this man? Being an adopted scion of Chaos, I dare not lift a finger against him, even if he moves against me...

“Indeed.” He seems to have made up his mind, and the brief menace vanishes. “Come with me, then.” And the Justicar sets off at a smart pace down the hallway again, leaving me to follow in his wake. Is this real, or another vision?

Judgment and Justice are here, embodied in this man. Where is the 4 of Swords? Does this man know my father?

”Eight forces of change

Hidden knowledge you gain...

... The wheel of the law

It’s destiny...

...Themes of renewal you may rejoice
though triumph may bring it’s own defeat

Confusion of your misery

Confirm the reading already taken

Search for the answer of resurrection

Rejoice with neither fear nor favor

The inquisitor’s art work is not what it seems”

- *Divination*

Nasty Savage

Day 41943 cont.(11 July 2005)

I follow the Justicar down several corridors, through the maze that is the Courts of Chaos. We eventually end up in an office. It has an antique air, yet sleek and well-tailored. It speaks of efficiency and grace. It seems to evoke the man’s character; what I can tell of it. The desk has a marble top, and red velvet drapes shroud the walls in shadow.

”Care to sit?” He gestures to a red velvet-covered chair.

“Fine.” I shrug and sit with as much grace as I can muster.

He turns a knob and a bar spins out from the wall. “Care for a drink?”

“Sure.” I shrug nonchalantly. If he’s going to poison or drug me, fine. The hall sent me here, so I may as well follow it to the end.

He pours red wine. Red, his theme. As he fixes the drinks, he throws the hood and robes casually aside. He reveals himself to me? He appears middle-aged, or perhaps a bit older. Hair of dark auburn, shot with silver streaks. Obviously of great strength. But every movement he has made has an unearthly grace to it.

“So what brings you to my humble abode?”

“I want to know what this connection is between us, as I said.”

“What do you think?”

“I’ve learned not to guess, or make assumptions. I’ve been made a pawn of sacrifice too many times to let myself be drawn in by assumptions.”

“Good point. But surely by now you must have some idea.”

I have a thought. Perhaps I can draw out some information. “Four of swords, what does that mean to you?”

“As the tarot? Order out of chaos; or more precisely order in chaos...”

“Order in chaos. I’ve found that Chaos is a much more orderly place than the name would imply.”

He gracefully seats himself and drinks. “Order in chaos, chaos in order; but I can’t imagine you’re here to discuss metaphysics. You’ve been visiting the family lately?”

“To which family do you refer? There are lots of people claiming to be related to me, but I haven’t seen any proof of anything.”

He shrugs eloquently. “Is my little brother still on a quest for perfection?” Brother? He has volunteered information, but in a completely useless way...

“You have a brother?”

“Apparently.”

“Someone I’ve met?”

“Most likely.”

“Does he have a name?”

“Perhaps.”

Argh. He is answering every question literally. So I have to ask a very direct question in order to get a useful answer. “What would your brother’s name be?”

“Ah,” he finally deems to give an answer, as if I was a little child he was teaching. “My little brother, the one always trying to emulate me, to reach the level of perfection I have achieved... That would be Benedict.”

I can’t believe my ears. He’s *Benedict’s* brother? Benedict’s *older* brother? He considers Benedict to be his *lesser*?

“Going to answer?”

Think quickly.... “Other than missing an arm, he’s still in one piece.” Honest answer, and I suppose I really couldn’t give a less flattering one at that.

He seems amused. “I could have told him not to take up with Lintra. But that’s something you can ask Dara about next time you see her.”

“Right.” He knew I lived in Chaos, that’s no surprise, but he’s definitely speaking of the Amberites as if he is one of them. His familiar and yet dismissive tone is somewhat disturbing...

“And does he still seek perfection?”

He’s asking me this as if I know what Benedict is up to. I can’t answer this. I have no care for Benedict. But I suppose I have to tell him that. “I haven’t seen anything from him other than pure destruction.”

“Oh??” He seems surprised, but not really.

But now, my temper has been piqued. I try to subsume it all into sarcasm. “Something about destroying the entire empire I grew up in... World-ending catastrophic war...”

“And you are sure it was him?” He seems to think I was mistaken. He’s trying to lecture me again.

“I was there...”

“Did you ask him about it?”

“No, I’m still a *bit* upset about the whole thing, and I didn’t wish to... press the issue.”

“Yes, but I met someone who looked just like you once... She went around destroying kingdoms as well.”

“Yes, I met her. Killed her in fact.”

“Yes, but then I met another, and another.”

“Point taken. But the one in my world disappeared without a trace. I hunted him for years. A mere *shadow* wouldn’t have that sort of abilities...”

He shrugs. “Perhaps.”

“So... you are an Amberite, hiding in Chaos, how amusing.” Hmm. My temper betrays me again, I shouldn’t have said that. But his evasions bother me so much! But why? He’s no different than the other Amberites in that regard...

“I wouldn’t say hiding.” He seems to have let my poor comment slide by.

I shrug. “As you say.” I have an idea. “Do you know someone named Methos? Blond, with a mustache, thin and tall?”

He seems to consider for a moment. “Someone by that description, though not of that name.”

“He wanted me to say hello to someone.”

“Oh? Whom would that be?”

“My father...” I feel this insubstantial tug, something strange I can’t identify.

He shrugs, perhaps gives the tiniest smile. What does he know? Is *he* my father? It all makes sense now... Order in chaos, the four of swords, justice, judgment... Perhaps I can try another tact. If I can get a bit of recognition on a personal front, I’ll know it’s true. Out of nowhere, I say my mother’s name. “Sashiko.” He only raises an eyebrow. No other reaction. I follow up... “Do you know someone of that name?”

“Possibly.”

I am so frustrated. And he knows it too. Why won’t he actually answer any of my questions directly? “All I want is a straight answer.” I’m bothered, this conversation is just going in circles!

His reply is smooth. “All I want is a straight question.”

A straight... What?!? He knows I’m trying to figure out if he’s my father. And he won’t answer unless I give him the direct question he wants. Damn him. Another dominance play. It seems I don’t have a choice. “Fine.” I don’t want to say it, but this is what is required... “Are you my father?”

He seems to smile very slightly with his victory. He made me say it outright, and ask the embarrassing question. In return his answer is unhesitating. “Yes.”

Fine... At least it is answered. But as he says it, something tugs, something insubstantial I can’t place. It snaps, some bond, and I lurch slightly and black out.

Conscious is regained suddenly and I find myself lying on a white bier, in a featureless white room, in a white kimono. There is a white folded parchment with a white wax seal on a smaller platform next to the bier. Damn it, Sand, has this all been an illusion? A test? I open the letter.

“Congratulations. You passed.” The signature is a chop that looks like a hand mirror. Sand? The Hall itself? In either case, the humor is unappreciated. So whatever test this was is done. Fine. Was everything I’ve seen true? False? Real? Illusion? I have no way to know.

I look around. No exit, no mirror. Well, if I have truly graduated, then I should be able to create my own exit. I focus my will to summon a mirror, and one appears almost instantly. Excellent. I step into the mirror...and emerge into the same white room...What the heck?

Wait. Think. I summoned transportation, and specified no destination. I again summon a mirror, but this time with the

added desire that the mirror show me the Courts of Chaos. The image appears, crystal clear. So this time, I step though and the Courts spread out around me. This is real.

I quickly make my way to HendrakeWays without delay. A page meets me, and welcomes me home. I order dinner, and go take a long hot bath and sauna. After a peaceful soak, I get back to find my quarters have been undisturbed in my absence. The servants have left a big porterhouse steak, cooked well done, a carafe of coffee, and a whole New York cheesecake, just as I like them. Finally, something pleasant, that isn't ruined by any interruptions...

Except my own thoughts. Was that conversation with the Justicar of Chaos real? Is he really my father? Or was it all some sort of illusion?

The steak suddenly doesn't taste very good anymore. I can't let this go until it is settled once and for all. I'm going to have to contact the Justicar again. Perhaps I can arrange this in such a way as to avoid unnecessary embarrassment. He seemed, at least in my dream-voyage, to be one that appreciates... no, insists upon, I correct myself, straightforwardness. So be it. I compose a note...

Brother of B.,

I would like to speak with you. Please meet me at quarter-turn red sky at the cafe outside the Palace of Justice. If you prefer other arrangements, contact me.

Surengiin of Hendrake

Once the note is complete, I seal it with my chop. I consider whether I should send this, or simply make a Trump of him and contact him directly. But such a contact, if unexpected can be quite alarming. Best perhaps to send the note and meet in a more conventional way. So I summon a page, and have the sealed letter sent to the Justicar of Chaos...

"Down at your dark lab
you threw some tarot cards
Reading the fiery truth
alchemist you were right
the vision's alive..."

- *The Devil and the Savant*
EDGUY

Day 41944 (18 July 2005)

By red-sky I am more than ready. I don't really *want* to confront the Justicar again, but I know that I have to if I ever want this issue to be truly settled. I settle myself in the café to wait and order something that appears non-toxic.

As I drink, I notice that a note has appeared on the table at my left elbow. I don't think I'll ever get used to that. It has only two words upon it. "My office." So, he has agreed to meet me, but doesn't want to appear in public. Fine.

I can remember the way to his office well enough, and I am unchallenged in my approach to it, so I suppose I am expected. The Justicar is sitting at his desk, with a carafe of coffee before him, and a steaming mug in his hand.

"I wondered what had happened to you yesterday."

Ah, well that's one question answered then. "Yes, I contacted you primarily to discover if I was really here."

"Maybe you need a vacation if you can't tell fantasy from reality."

I just sigh. "No, I..." How to explain it succinctly? "I was bespelled by Sand. Her specialty is dream magic that is so real it apparently infringes upon reality itself. I came mainly to see if it *was* reality in this case."

The Justicar shrugs. "Perhaps that is understandable then." He shifts in his chair slightly. Impatience? "Is there anything else I can help you with then?"

"Is there anything else you feel I should know about?"

The Justicar shrugs. "Nothing that I am aware of. What's going on in Amber these days?"

I ponder the last few years... "Not too much since the Jewel was recovered again. The usual, I suppose."

"Is it true that Random is king now? I'm a bit *out of touch* out here."

"Yes... Random is king of Amber now. His son Martin is king of Rebma."

"Moiré died? How odd."

"Not really. She was quite aged as I understand. I was at her funeral, in fact. It seems those of Rebma aren't quite as immortal as those of Amber."

"Immortal doesn't mean you don't die."

"I understand that. Are you saying Moiré didn't die of natural causes?"

The Justicar shrugs. "I wouldn't know. I wasn't there."

"The verdict was death of old age."

"Perhaps." The Justicar just shrugs again. "And what have you been up to lately?"

I ponder a moment. "Nothing terribly interesting. Self-improvement."

"Oh? Of what sort?"

Oh dear. How much do I really want to tell him? "Well... Since my last rather unfortunate encounter in the matter of the retrieval of the Jewel, I have felt I needed... more practice in the martial field."

"If you think you will win, victory is already yours." He says it like an instructor teaching a lesson.

"I would have espoused that doctrine myself before. But I was taught a... lesson of perspective in that encounter."

"Who beat you?"

My, he is straightforward. "Bleys."

"Mm."

I feel like I need to say something. "I took him for a fop... I won't make that mistake again." I know I am turning red with embarrassment just discussing this. Why am I talking to him about this at all?

"He is a fop. But he is also much more." He seems to look me over for a brief moment. Assessing? "Would you like me to train you?"

"You're better than Benedict?" I ask with hesitation. I don't mean it as an insult. I'm embarrassed to accept, even though I didn't really ask. It's been almost a century since I had an instructor of any sort in the martial arts. My prowess was the one source of pride I had in my life.

The Justicar chuckles. "I gave my *little* brother *his* first lessons."

I nod. "I would be grateful for instruction. I don't wish to be so... unprepared in a future encounter." To accept is

humiliating to me, but I know I need it. I'm sure I must be as red as the upholstery.

"Good. Then contact me when you are ready to begin."

His tone is dismissive.

"Uh, one other thing?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Might I have your name?"

"Finndo, my dear."

"And how would you prefer I contact you in future?"

"You can draw Trump."

"Very well." I bow respectfully and depart. This meeting with my father did not go exactly as I envisioned... But so much in my life has gone differently than planned, especially lately.

As I depart, more questions pop into my head unbidden, too late to ask him about, until the next encounter. How do I know he is really my father? I want to believe it is true, mainly because the divination seemed to point so strongly to it. And the magic of the Hall and Sand was keyed so to my finding him. Circumstantially, it seems airtight. But he was never around in my childhood. It could be he is just claiming the title. These thoughts get me nowhere. Even asking him about it would be futile. No answer would satisfy, only chafe old wounds. Best to let it go. I have a sensei again, and for now that will be enough.

As I return to HendrakeWays again, I find myself lost in the byWays and turns. Nothing here remains the same. I'll never get used to this. I want to hear about the news of the Court, to discover if there are any new plots afoot about to pounce upon me... But I can't even find my quarters! Nothing is the same here day to day except change.

I finally wander into a patio area, where I find Gilva relaxing with a snack. She nods a greeting, so I join her.

"Good to see you again," she begins. Well, she doesn't seem to be upset, at least.

I nod in response. "What's been up?"

"We were all wondering what happened to you after your fight with Bleys."

I'm sure I turned pink again. "Yeah... I wasn't sure I would be welcome back here after that. It didn't exactly end well. I'm afraid I embarrassed the House."

Gilva shakes her head. "Don't feel too bad about it. Most of us ended up like that during the Patternfall War. At least you lived."

"I suppose." I just look at the table, and absently trace the ironwork with a finger.

"Father was asking about you. I'm sure he'd like to see you again."

"Well, I'll have to go see him."

Conversation lulls again. I feel awkward just sitting here, so eventually I speak. "What's been happening around here lately?"

"Not much."

"How's Archon?"

"Same as always."

"Merlin married off yet?"

"No. Although I'm sure he'd like to hear from you as well. He still asks about you from time to time."

I wince. Gilva raises an eyebrow in amusement.

"He doesn't ask too often. He doesn't want to upset his mother."

I just shrug ruefully. "I was just wondering. I figured that his mother would have found him a political bride or something by now."

"Nah. The idea of a potential marriage is too valuable as a bargaining tool. Besides, he *likes* the attention he gets by playing the eligible bachelor."

I nod. "True. So how many girlfriends *has* his mother killed off now?"

"None." Gilva is deadpan. "That was just you."

Oh-Kay... Time to change subjects. Fast.

"Sooo... You want to go out and get a drink or something?"

"Sure. You want to actually drink somewhere decent, or you want a good fight?"

"Uh, decent... I prefer my violence to have a point. I don't much go in for random bloodshed."

Gilva shrugs in a manner that lets me know she is disappointed. "Whatever. You wanna get laid? I'm sure Archon can find someone your speed."

"Huh? No! Uh, no." Her attitude is blasé, but I really can't be so crass about it.

"Dinner?"

"Yes. That would be fine."

"I'll see if the family wants to join us. I know Kov was wanting to speak to you. Then we can go drinking."

"That'll be fine."

"Tonight then."

"Yes."

Gilva departs. I have to find a page to show me back to my quarters in the mean time. Damn shifting hallways. I manage to shower and change into something appropriate for dinner, though the Hendrake livery is so strange to me. And until the appointed hour I work on Trump. I get a sketch of my father drawn into Clairvidere... out of his robes of office, so as not to compromise his identity, should someone ever see it.

"Mephistopheles is not your name

But I know what you're up to just the same

I will listen hard to your tuition

And you will see it come to it's fruition..."

- *Wrapped Around Your Finger*

The Police

Day 41944 cont (1 Aug 2005)

Meet, greet, and eat with the Hendrakes. Ah, joy of joys. Gilva actually swings by my quarters to pick me up, which I appreciate. I don't have to wander the twisting passages of HendrakeWays to find anyone.

They head out into the city at large, and we end up in a nice little Italian-type bistro. All the staff there are *excessively* happy to see us. Service is a little *too* good. I get the feeling I've just stepped into a mafia movie. And I'm the mafia. I decide its better just not to comment, and to ignore it.

I also ignore Archon's too large gestures of gallantry, bowing and sweeping off his hat as he holds a seat for me. I just take the seat without acknowledgement. I don't want to encourage him. He is of course the one to start conversation...

"So, my lady Surengiin, let us get caught up. So much must have happened..."

"Not really..."

“Aw she’s so cute, so quiet!” Archon comments snidely to the side.

Tessa whispers a response “She’ll talk more if she drinks more.”

Archon immediately orders wine all around. How unsurprising.

“So what *have* you been up too these days?” Tessa begins the expected interrogation.

“Self-improvement, mainly. I’m feeling a bit...*out-of-practice* after that debacle in the arena.” I try to gloss over it quickly.

“I hope you will make use of the family dueling grounds,” Kov comments.

“I will.”

“And how are you progressing in terms of the Powers? Have you assayed the Logrus yet?” Tessa interjects.

“No. My skills lie elsewhere.”

“We could have Suhuy himself teach you if you wish.”

“I am of the blood of Amber. I don’t think it is possible for me to assay the Logrus.”

“Merlin did, and he’s Amber-blooded.” She replies.

“Merlin is half-Amberite, as I recall.”

“And you aren’t?” She implies that I have given insult. And that I am claiming to be the product of incest, perhaps...

“I mean to say that Merlin’s mother is of the Courts,” I respond, in as close to an apologetic manner as I can bring myself to muster. This is becoming annoying. “While mine was merely a human.”

“Oh? Are you sure?” Quips Tessa...

“Yes.”

“Absolutely?”

“Yes.”

“Without doubt.”

“Yes.” This is *definitely* becoming annoying. Her implications are unwelcome.

“Well,” says Archon, “It’s good that you can be so *certain* about something.”

“The person I knew as my mother, that I was told was my mother, was human.” I am forced to admit that much, just not to appear the complete fool, though I am still made to look incompetent by the admission.

“Ah, well there’s the rub.” Tessa replies. “But we can ask Mandor to look into it. He could test to see which of the Houses of Chaos you are most closely related to by blood. And if you have the potential to attempt the Logrus.”

I’m sure my discomfort at the prospect showed. “Oh, could he? How?”

Archon replies “He claims to have DNA from you and all your Amberite cousins from Dermott.”

Damn! That is possible. I just shrug. “As you wish.”

“Oh,” says Tessa, “And Merlin, I think, will want to talk to you once he knows you are back.”

They all seem quite amused at the sour look I give to that comment.

“Surely he doesn’t bother you that much.”

“Not him, his mother.”

“Ah, the insane one.”

I try to change the subject. “So, anything interesting going on in this end of the universe lately? Anything I should know about?”

“Not really. You know if you want to settle down here, we could find you a nice husband.”

My look of complete unamusement seems to have no impact. I shake my head. “I’ve already been married.”

Archon jumps in, “Hardly an impediment. We can *take care* of that for you.”

“He’s already quite dead, thank you.” I reply pointedly. I really don’t feel the need to speak in double entendres.

“Well then it isn’t an issue. You know I hear House Minobee breeds exceptionally attractive young men.” He gives me a half-leering look.

“Don’t try to marry me into any House you want as an ally.” I quip. “My husbands have a history of ending up dead.”

Tessa just grins. “Well, you’ll fit right in, then. After all... ‘Till death do us part.’ Amazing how in the Chaos tongue the words for ‘death’ and ‘convenience’ are so close...”

“Uh, yes...”

“I mean, nowadays some couples are actually using vows that go ‘as long as this love shall last’. I *much* prefer the traditional ones, don’t you?”

“Love in marriage, what a quaint and naïve idea.” I reply quickly. I’ve had enough of this conversational topic. Change of subject time again. I’d forgotten how *wonderful* it can be to have dinner with family... “Any other news?”

“Oh,” Kov seems to remember something. “Archon, did you bring the papers? We’ve gotten something for you. I felt it was time we gave you more permanent living arrangements here.”

Archon eventually produces some paperwork from his cloak. They hand the paperwork to me, assuring that once I sign, everything will be arranged. I read both copies over carefully. It is a deed, for ownership of a Shadow to be called henceforth ‘SurengiinWays’.

“Oh, I really don’t need this,” I protest. “I travel so much.”

“Nonsense. Perhaps if you have a home here, you might visit more often.” Tessa replies.

“I don’t want to put anyone out.”

“Oh, the previous tenant put *himself* out.” Archon quips.

“Besides,” adds Kov, “It isn’t much really. A ‘fixer-upper’ Shadow, you might say.”

“And how does one... ‘fix up’ a world, perchance?” I ask...

“By imposing you will upon it, of course...” Archon replies with the tone that implies it is an elementary thing any child should know. “Ah, but you haven’t assayed the Logrus so you might not be so adept.” Oh lovely, another slight.

It seems they really want me to sign, so I do. It pleases them greatly, which only serves to make me fear what the surprise is that awaits me. I feel a metaphorical blade hanging over my head.

“Excellent. Perhaps we’ll get you a tour after dinner.”

I shrug.

“And the family artisans can help you fix it up a bit,” Tessa adds “since you haven’t taken the Logrus yourself.”

Another dig about that. Ah, family.

Dinner eventually tapers off, and I say goodnight to Kov, Archon, and Tessa. Gilva proceeds to take me through the rounds of some of the seedier bars. I partake of some of the harshest liquor I’ve ever had the misfortune to drink. Gilva eventually starts a fight, and I depart. Let her have her fun.

Back at HendrakeWays, I'm lost again. The alcohol buzz doesn't help either. I finally get a page, and convince him, or it, whatever, to show me to SurengiinWays. I may as well see what it is I've bought with my chop.

I arrive to find a barren red plain that stretches as far as the eye can see. It is covered by a thin film of black dust, that blows idly in a hot, dry wind. A vast, smooth crater stretches across the horizon. In the center is the blasted remains of a black marble temple. Something clicks. DermottWays! This is the remains of that place! But I thought it had dissolved into Primal Chaos! I guess Mandor and Dara didn't do so thorough a job after all.

I give a sigh, and almost end up coughing on the acrid, parched air. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with this, but I'll come up with something. How am I supposed to live here? I leave 'SurengiinWays' and get a guide back to my now temporary quarters.

"I dream of rain,
I dream of gardens in the desert sand...
...where shadows play
In the shape of a man's desires..."
- *Desert Rose*
Sting

Day 41945 (1 Aug 2005)

By the next morning, I have decided that 'SurengiinWays' is something I should attempt to fix myself, rather than give over to others. I'm just not sure how to 'apply my will' to the place. I only know so far that time flows there *very* fast in relation to everywhere else. So if I plant trees there and leave, they should be well-grown by the time I return. If I can get some water in there somehow... And the soil isn't too toxic. Ah well, more things to consider for later.

I finish off the first Trump drawing of Finndo as I eat breakfast. I contemplate testing it; but I really am not ready to head off to the dueling grounds just yet. I contemplate giving Merlin a call as well, but I am *definitely* not ready for that. Let him wait. He's far too friendly towards me for my liking. Its positively unsettling.

And then I get a feeling. An odd feeling; like something tugging at some invisible cord attached to my awareness. Like an indefinable vibration, or the ghost of a Trump contact. Does this have something to do with the Hall?

I sit and meditate on the feeling, and gradually the contact seems to steady slightly. An image forms from the ghostly vibrations, and I see Dermott and a demon, walking the Hall of Mirrors. Him? Again? How does he keep getting into the Hall?

I open my eyes, and step to a mirror in my quarters, summoning a portal to the Hall...but I stop. Just because they are there, does that mean I need to act? I myself traveled several times through the Hall without Sand and Delwin's interference. Perhaps this is just a side-effect of my attunement that I know they are there. I decide that for now I will just watch them, to make sure they perpetrate no mischief.

They wander here and there, gazing at reflections. I quickly realize that the demon is, in fact, Manellous. He is apparently a shape-shifter as well. A Chaos cousin. Not

surprising. He is also still with Dermott, so he apparently hasn't learned his lesson.

As they walk, Manellous talks incessantly, like a child, questioning everything. He seems SO young. Dermott answers now and again, but in that infuriating way he has of not actually resolving anything with his answers. Typical. It drags on for some time. Dermott is almost ignoring Manellous, and it becomes apparent to me that the young Chaosite needs guidance; and will seek it from anyone who presents themselves.

Manellous gazes into a mirror again, and states that he believes they are being followed. His description sounds vaguely like Kaliese, which doesn't surprise me. Tall, long dark hair, crushed red velvet dress, a sword...If so, they have other problems that have nothing to do with me. If they are still unicorn-hunting, I really care not. I doubt Dermott could harm the unicorn anyhow. I warned him once. That is enough.

Manellous starts talking about the Abyss, apparently he sees it; and that a Jewel fell in? I doubt it. The mirrors show many things that are untrue and true and partly true. Let them think what they wish.

But eventually the prattle starts to get boring. Perhaps if I can give Manellous a little nudge, I can get him away from Dermott. It really would be for the best. So I stand and step through into the Hall, appearing behind them, at a slight distance.

"How DO you keep getting in here?" I draw their attention.

"You again!" Manellous practically shouts in surprise.

"Yes..." I just stay at my distance. I really don't want another fight.

Manellous goes off on a rant about our last encounter. I let him go on for a while. He's so obviously young and naive. After a while I have to interject.

"What are you, twenty?"

"I'm twenty-*one*," he replies indignantly. Ah, youth. I was right.

As he continues talking, I try to interject bits of warning or advice here or there, but I'm not sure if he even hears them. Or if he does, if any of it will sink in. He seems determined to spew out his entire life story and all his views in as few breathes as possible!

I notice that Dermott has taken this opportunity to ignore Manellous completely and search the mirrors. Manellous doesn't even seem to notice when Dermott finally says, "Here we are. Follow if you want." And steps through a mirror. The Hall has let him leave; fine. It has its own agendas.

When Manellous finally realizes that he has been abandoned, he looks thunderstruck. Like a kicked puppy. He then turns to me, as if to ask me what to do. I just shrug.

"You can try to follow Dermott, if the Hall will let you. Or you can search for your own exit. Or..." I sigh, "I suppose I could try to send you somewhere."

Manellous stands there like a deer in the headlights. It is obvious that he isn't used to making his own decisions. He's a born follower. A terminal flaw in an Amberite. Too bad for him. He'll have to find his backbone if he wants to succeed.

In all his ranting and going on, I have gathered he doesn't know anything about his own origins, or even how he got to be in his demonic form. He also doesn't know how to change back. Wonderful. He asks for help, but I'm not sure how to

help him other than send him to someone else. Mandor? No. I wouldn't do that to anyone but my worst enemy. But I can't get anything from him. Not a surname, a house affiliation, nothing. Who could I send him to?

The Hall itself remains impassive. It offers me no suggestions. Since I have been initiated, it has ceased random presentation of images to me.

Ah, wait. Merlin. He can simply assign the kid a house or a teacher or whatnot, if he can't determine where he came from. And it will dispense with my obligation to say hello to him as well.

So I walk over to a suitable mirror, and summon forth Merlin's image with a wave of my hand. Merlin looks up, not quite startled...

"Merlin... Busy?"

"Never, for a beautiful lady."

I just roll my eyes. "I found one of your...court... wandering lost in here." I pull Manellous into the mirror's field of view. "He doesn't know his house, or even how to get out of his demonic form."

Manellous, for his part, hasn't stopped prattling on the whole time. When he notices Merlin in the mirror, he simply turns to include him in the field of people he prattles at.

Merlin sighs. "I suppose I could figure out who he belongs to. *But...* you owe me dinner!"

"Fine..." I relent. I can stand ONE dinner with him. "He isn't a demon servant. I think he's a lost cousin. He does have a human form."

Merlin soaks in the info and observes Manellous another moment. "And it isn't just dinner; it's a *date*," he stresses.

I frown. This is getting worse and worse. I have no intention of dating Merlin at all! But I can't leave this kid here alone, and I certainly can't have him tagging along with me. "Fine. If you take care of Manellous, ONE date. Shall I bring a squad of bodyguards to fend off your mother's assassins?"

Merlin chuckles. "No, I'm sure it will be fine."

I shove Manellous through the mirror into Merlin's office. As he stumbles through, Merlin is subjected to his verbal diatribe first-hand, and frowns.

As I wave my hand to break the connection, I hear him say "And you *better* wear something *dead sexy!*"

I just roll my eyes as his image fades. I hope he saw that.

In any case, since he never specified a time or location, I'm sure I can put off this 'date' a long time. I can contrive of many things to fill up all my time indefinitely, or be out of touch. After all, I have a Shadow to rebuild, training with my father... As I recall, DermottWays was closed to Trump Contact anyhow. Convenient that. But I know that I'll eventually meet up with him. He'll make sure of it. I just hope his interest in me has waned by then.

"Death is before me today
Like the recovery of a sick man,
Like the going forth into a garden after sickness
Death is before me today
Like the odor of myrrh,
Like sitting under a sail on a windy day.
Death is before me today
Like the course of the freset,
Like the return of a man from the war-galley to his house.

Death is before me today
As a man longs to see his house
When he has spent years in captivity."
- The Pyramid texts, 3000bc

Day 41959 (5 Sept 2005)

The days begin to pass, and it seems I may actually be permitted something of a routine, at least for a time. I begin my training with my father. And quickly learn just how... lacking... my abilities truly are. Though he prefers a huge broadsword, a crude weapon by any estimation, each movement he makes has a supernatural grace to it. He makes the butcher's tool into a thing of beauty and grace.

My training quickly devolves to basic methods. I am instructed in dance steps, and he insists that my fencing take place with a heavy broadsword, a thing of cold iron, if not indeed of lead. I end each day exhausted, bruised, and nearly overcome with depression, as I realize just how like a child I am made to feel.

The matter of SurengiinWays is not forgotten. Over breakfast, and supper, I sit and contemplate what to do with that barren wasteland. How I can accomplish anything is a real question... The Hendrake Logrus Masters are theoretically available to work for me, but at what price? But I know not how to shape the earth and bring water to a desert myself. I make some drawings of what I would like the place to look like, but I hold little hope it would ever reach that appearance.

But on this day, at breakfast, there is a knock. It is Gilva. She seems her usual sprightly self.

"Father wishes to ask if you need help with the renovations of SurengiinWays."

"Yes." I admit it freely. I have already come to the conclusion that I cannot do anything without the help of the Logrus Masters. And Gilva's presence indicates that Lord Kov wishes for me to 'move in' soon. My current quarters are only temporary.

Gilva nods. "We've made an appointment for you with the Logrus Masters for this evening... Oh, and I was talking with Merlin today."

I just raise an eyebrow. "Oh, were you?" Appointment already made? And why mention Merlin again?

"He was asking about you," Gilva continues.

"He was?" Somehow I'm not surprised. I wish he would forget about me. I can't figure out if he doesn't care about me and is just purposefully trying to get his mother angry, or if he is really trying in some weird way to court me. Either option is not appealing.

"He was asking how you were doing..."

"I've been busy."

"Well, I figured if the *King* was asking about *me* I'd want to know..."

I just clear my throat non-committally. "I was led to understand you were an item."

"That was a while ago," Gilva shrugs. Then she gets a sly look. "Besides I heard he asked you out."

"Where did you hear that?" I look incredulous.

"From Merlin..." She looks triumphant.

I roll my eyes.

"Just consider yourself warned. I'm not in high school. I don't want to get involved if you two can't just talk to each

other. I've known Merlin since we were children, I can tell him when to piss off."

I am appalled by the entire course of this conversation, and I know Gilva can tell. I can't even think what to say.

"Anyway," Gilva finally continues, "Logrus Masters, this evening."

I nod.

"Later..." Gilva shows herself out. I can tell she is disgusted by this whole interaction, but at me, or Merlin, I can't tell. High School? Something from Shadow Earth, if I recall correctly. An educational institution? I don't understand.

Regardless, I decide I can't have Merlin telling everyone we are 'going out'. I am NOT courting him. I have to speak to him, and settle this once and for all. Pulling out the Trumps is easy, but somehow willing myself to contact him isn't. But I do anyhow.

"Surengiin, excellent." Merlin is quick to answer Trump calls, I've noticed.

"Your Majesty..."

"And what brings you to call me?"

"Gilva tells me you were talking to her, and told her we were going on a date."

"Yes, well it had been a while since you agreed, and I hadn't heard from you..."

"I've been busy."

"For two weeks? I'd started to think you were avoiding me."

Hmm... I suppose I had been. "Time is relative. It hasn't been that long to me."

"Don't mention relatives."

I smirk a bit. At least he isn't terribly fond of all the politics either.

"In any case," I continue, "I hadn't meant for the agreement to be publicized."

Merlin shrugs. "So when do you want to go?"

I suppose I have to, so I decide to just get it over with. "You are the monarch. It seems your schedule is more limiting than mine. You choose."

"My schedule for this evening seems to have suddenly cleared."

"Fine. Where shall we meet?" I hope he at least has the courtesy to choose a non-public forum...

"I'll pick you up at half-past red."

"Pick me up? Shouldn't we meet via Trump or something?"

"Why?"

"I'm not fond of the idea our 'date' being public."

"No one is going to notice."

"You're a monarch. You don't *have* a private life."

Merlin gets a smug look. "Pattern, Logrus, Trump, with all the powers of the universe at my command, I can arrange privacy if I want it."

"Can you? How many others have those powers?"

"I've got my ways. I'll see you this evening, okay?"

"Alright," I relent. It seems everyone already knows anyhow...

In light of this new development, I realize I now have to move my appointment with the Hendrake Logrus Masters. When I inform Gilva, she seems surprised, but agrees to make the arrangements.

I then head out for a shortened fencing practice, and then return to shower, change, and assemble my thoughts. When the Hendrake Logrus Masters arrive, I have my sketches, and a few ideas to talk to them about.

Their questions span climate and weather, flora and fauna. Much more than I had thought about, myself. It takes hours, and their questions make me feel small, and naïve. They speak of shaping worlds, as a child might shape clay.

In the end, they take my sketches, and promise the basics to be done in one turning of the sky. I try not to let my utter amazement show, since to them this all seems par for course. I thank them, and they depart. No mention of payment passes between us. I wonder what favors I will now owe Lord Kov.

But red sky is upon me, and I know Merlin won't be long. I clean off some more, and consider what is to come. When I agreed to go out on this 'date', he demanded I wear something sexy... That isn't going to happen. The last thing I want is to encourage his prurient interests.

I decide that the casual kimono I tend to wear in my down-time around Chaos is the best choice for now. Despite Flora's comments in Amber, it is modest and nothing at all like a bathrobe. I tie up my hair in a practical, but severe bun. And then I wait. Indeed, I don't wait long.

True to form, instead of a Trump call, Merlin simply walks up to my door and knocks. He wears slacks and a jacket, Earth-type garb. At least that gives me some idea of where we are going.

"Ready to go?" He quips as he enters. "Awfully formal, isn't it?" Merlin isn't pleased by my choice of dress, I can tell.

I just look myself over quickly, "No, it's quite casual. Formal would involve at least 10 more layers..."

"Ugh."

"You get used to it."

"Not me... Shall we?" He holds out his arm.

"Yes." I ignore his arm, and he shrugs and holds open the door.

In the hall he lays a hand on my shoulder, and though my first inclination is to pull away, I don't. I just frown a bit, not wanting to be rude in an outright manner. He then speaks, to the air it seems...

"Ghost, let's go..."

A circle of light on the wall shifts and flows, running beneath us. Then is a flash of light, not unlike a Trump transport, we are elsewhere. A quick look around confirms it is an Earth-type Shadow. Ghost?

"Earth." Merlin confirms, "San Francisco. We won't stand out."

I shrug, and Merlin leads on, dropping the grip on my shoulder, for which I am thankful. I stay just close enough to him he doesn't feel like I'm trying to leave, but carefully not close enough that he can touch me without an effort. He leads me to a Hibachi restaurant, and we settle in for dinner.

The food is familiar, but the style of preparation is more theater than functional cooking. Merlin talks, and talks, obviously making an effort to be as charming as possible.

I can hardly believe my ears, though, when he begins to *apologize* for things. The way Chaos has treated me. All that old business from so long ago. Why is he apologizing? He tries to draw a line between what he does as a monarch, and what he does as a person. As if he could divorce himself from himself. It doesn't make any sense, and only makes him

seem... weak. Wishy-washy, to use an Earth phrase. Like he doesn't have any conviction of character. He is not impressing me, that is for certain.

But then I am distracted. Our chef has been dismissed, and replaced. The person who approaches... Dermott! Damn it all.

"It's time to leave," I tell Merlin.

"What?"

I point out Dermott. Merlin gets a terribly sour look on his face, and then Hell begins. Dermott admits he has business with me, but won't tell me what he is there about. Merlin won't end the 'date' on Dermott's account. And so Dermott cooks, Merlin eats, and I stew in anger. Finally with supper completed, Dermott seems to leave.

Merlin tries to continue this 'date', but I am unfamiliar with the process, other than that I am aware it is considered a courtship ritual. He says it is just about having fun, and eventually convinces me to go play darts with him at a pub.

Then Dermott appears again, replacing the bartender. I just sigh with resignation. Hell continues. I order a drink, vodka, and Merlin orders Jack Daniels. He seems about ready to give up as well.

Finally Merlin calls Dermott over commandingly. He orders Dermott to get it over with and tell us what business he has. He claims that this is his 'one night off for the year' and that Dermott is ruining it. I can't believe this is the only night Merlin escapes his monarchy for a year; he seems to follow me around more than that. I can believe Dermott has ruined the evening though.

Dermott finally admits he has a message for me. Merlin commands him to deliver it, and he does.

"Prince Bleys of Amber requests your immediate attention." Dermott says stiffly.

"Prince Bleys," I reply testily, "can shove off."

"But you might be interested in this... It concerns Brand and the fate of the universe."

"I don't care what this is about. I'm not involved. It doesn't concern me. I won't speak to him."

Dermott seems peeved, and Merlin looks like he is desperately trying to figure out a way to escape this situation, unsure if he should say something or not. Dermott consults a Trump of Bleys...

And the world spins and goes dark around me. One drink, damn it. Drugged. Son of a bitch.

"Screaming, deceiving, and bleeding for you
And you still won't hear me...
Don't want your hand this time, I'll save myself,
Maybe I'll wake up for once.
Not tormented daily, defeated by you,
Just when I thought I'd reached the bottom..."

- *Going Under*
Evanescence