

Surengiin's Journal #5

Throne War

Day 41992 (2 Jan 2006)

The days go by, and things start to take on a bit more order. Dermott has been placed under arrest, and is currently bound and gagged in the dungeons, under heavy sedation. Corwin has not yet reappeared. There has been no word from Mikhail. Manellous is still unconscious. And there is still no word of Bethany. Leonardo has disappeared again; no doubt put to work by Benedict, under whom he was apprenticed, the last I heard.

Dermott's trial is on hold; until Castle Amber and the surrounding areas have been cleaned up and placed in something resembling a working state, he can wait.

The Elders seem to hold no grudge against me in the previous affair that I can determine, which simply stuns me. I am placed under no restraints, nor am I even asked to stay. They seem to have forgotten me altogether, really. I have mainly assigned myself to work crews helping with the cleanup.

But of Bethany, there is still no sign. This worries me. I couldn't find her in the Abyss. The fiery image of her was seen during the battle here in Amber, but there is no sign of her now. I worry what may have become of her.

And so I find Frederick. Of the cousins, he seems the last one here not sent elsewhere, kidnapped, or insane. I ask politely if he will help me search for Bethany, and he agrees, much to my surprise. Perhaps he too has some fondness for her.

Frederick reveals to me that the fiery being was indeed the body of Bethany, under a spell of Brand's. And I know that her mind was in a construct body, and taken to Brand, who had her held somewhere, not the Abyss. So that narrows things a bit.

I know Liir well enough to guess he has taken her body to Oz. I have no fear for the fate of the body; it is of Amber. I am more worried about Bethany's mind. Construct bodies, as I have seen from Aseric, can fail. We agree to search for this half of her first.

Trump fails to work; it seems that the contact is to her body, which is untenanted, not to her soul. If Brand took Bethany, I reason, perhaps she is in one of the Shadows he, or his family, controls. Frederick finds this a reasonable deduction, so while Frederick speaks to Mandor, in order to retrieve some effects of his, I Trump Jasra.

I politely ask Jasra if Bethany might be in one of her Shadows, or in Kashfa... I let her know that her husband placed Bethany somewhere, and we wish to find her, but don't wish to trespass. My courtesy is perhaps enough, for she agrees to check.

Throughout this we are preparing to leave on a Shadow ride. We retrieve horses, and gather supplies. Frederick seems impressed that Kaze is still alive and well. Seeing her next to his more ordinary mount drives home again that she is a superb beast.

An hour's time is enough to contact Jasra again and confirm that Bethany is not in any Shadow she controls. Or at

least, so she claims, and right now I have no reason to doubt this. I spoke with a tone of contrition to her, letting her believe I still was under the sway of her Fountain.

After this, Frederick agrees to lead us through Shadow to track Bethany's soul, or mind, whichever you chose to call it. And so, having called a truce with an untrustworthy cousin, I am on the road again. But I feel it is only the right thing to do. I can't leave Bethany to whatever fate awaits. She never did anything to me, to any of us, to deserve a dark end.

"An opportunity

A chance to make amends for what went wrong
Another twist of fate...

... Though rivers and mountains between us
Together as one we will be

I'll never stop searching

To find you my friend once again"

- *Power Quest (Part 1)*

Power Quest

Day 42029 (2 Jan 2006)

I have been on the road with Frederick for quite some time now. This is probably the most time I have ever spent in his presence since the day I met him. During our time traveling, I have come to learn several things. One is that he does talk, far too much in my estimation. I thought so before; now that belief is only reinforced.

Along the way, Frederick claims he is the son of Dalt. This explains something to me of his uncouth behavior in the past. He really does have very little decorum. *Not that I have been a paragon of etiquette in the past myself*, I mentally chide myself. He spars well, but not as well as I. He is a good deal stronger than I am, though. It doesn't surprise me.

I try to be as polite as possible to him. I do let slip along our conversation that Dermott is Luke's son. Frederick is able to deduce that this make him Brand's grandson without any prompting from me.

Along the way I also learn that Frederick has begun to learn the art of Trump. He has several cards made, including one of me. We have time in the evenings when the horses have to rest, and in that time, I help him complete his Trump deck, including even people he has not met, and a few I have that I cannot even identify. I have decided that when this is over, I will do the same for all the other cousins. I am heartily tired of being their Trump-taxi. Better to just get the Trump making over with. Completing Frederick's deck does not take that long really. He has been diligently working on it himself, and so I make several cards of myself, remembering that I promised one to Gilva, and to Benedict. I will get the cards to them, eventually. Along with Kov and Archon, most likely. Merlin I know already has one.

I also discover, much to my dismay, that Clairvidere will not shapeshift, and it no longer will grow cold with Trump power. Apparently the puncture by Werewindle has damaged it to the point it must be repaired. Wonderful. I don't know anyone other than Merlin who might do such a thing. I am not weaponless, as I still have the normal katana in my sash, almost as an afterthought. And I can call upon Trumps without it, but it is quite an inconvenience. I have become so accustomed to Clairvidere being there when I need it.

“So many thoughts consume me
Who dimmed that glowing light
That once burned so bright in me
Is this a radical phase
A problematical age
That keeps me running
From all that I used to be
Is there a way to return
Is there a way to unlearn
That carnal knowledge
That’s chipping away at my soul
I’ve been gone too long
Will I ever find my way home?”

- *Missing Person*
Michael W. Smith

Day 42037 (2 Jan 2006)

We finally reach a Shadow where the sky is a clashing rainbow swirl. We must be close to Chaos, I judge. It has been a long ride. The ground beneath us is parched as a dry riverbed, and the color of old blood. Great chunks of granite-like rock seem to glide through the ground like icebergs. They make a disturbing rumble, punctuated by intermittent cracking noises. In the distance is a great tower, on a mountain of rock that appears solid and stationary.

About this time I notice a group of flying ape-like creatures, in the distance. They accompany a green-skinned figure that appears to be riding a broomstick. Some of the ape-things are apparently carrying a great chunk of green crystal. Liir. Well, at least having come here, he has saved us the trouble of tracking him down.

I tell Frederick that if he cannot keep up with me, I will Trump him through at the castle walls, but that I must intercept Liir. He nods. And I race.

Kaze is as swift as the wind, but we are running along the ground, dodging around the broken earth plowed up by passing granite boulders. Liir and his monkey servants are airborne. I reach the castle walls mere seconds before Liir, and Trump Frederick through immediately. Luckily Frederick is waiting for the contact, as his steed was never a match for Kaze.

Liir stops before me, and demands I get out of his way. I ask politely what he is up to, and he claims he is there to get Bethany, and reunite her with her true body. He says Brand gave Bethany to him.

I say that Bethany was not Brand’s to give, but Liir dismisses my words. I am somewhat amused at the fact he so flippantly dismisses me, simply because I am female. Years ago, I would have gotten quite angry. Now I just look at him and realize how young and clueless he is. But he is not to be talked out of his plan. He orders his monkey servants to attack, as he darts inside the castle.

The monkeys first drop the crystal, which is in fact a great sarcophagus of emerald, inside which is Bethany’s body, dressed as Dorothy from Oz. I easily sidestep the falling crystal, and try to simply use Trump to send the beasts into the Abyss... And fail miserably! This place is Trump-blocked. I then reach into my sleeve for Clairvidere... Damn, I forgot. It isn’t functional.

Frederick has already drawn his sword, and hacked into one by the time I draw my more mundane katana. Between the two of us, we make short work of them, Frederick killing seven while I only dispatched six, being handicapped by an inferior blade against the supernatural beasts. But still, it took only a few minutes.

After that we look over the situation. Liir is hunting for the soul-half of Bethany, and I suggest we simply let him. We have the body of her, and he needs that as well, I gather. So we can let him do the work, and simply subdue him when he emerges. Frederick has no objections, so we haul the crystal sarcophagus into the shade of the castle entrance and wait.

We examine the crystal, but can see no way to open it. Frederick even tries to cut into it with his blade, but makes no real progress in the matter. I don’t even try, as my only functional blade is merely a mundane one. I don’t want to dull or break that one as well.

I spend a moment or two looking about the castle entrance. Although it appeared to be a small tower, on the outside, inside it appears as a large manor, with a huge courtyard and gardens. Quite a place.

Waiting is definitely the way to go, I think. Otherwise we could miss Liir leaving as we search for him. At least we only see the one entrance, and now have possession of something Liir wants. I sit myself on one end of the crystal coffin and wait. I suggest to Frederick that as one of the generals leading Brand’s forces, Liir may be wanted in Amber as well, and it wouldn’t hurt to bring him back with us. Frederick agrees, though he doesn’t seem to care or really be enthusiastic about the plan. I simply think Liir is quite mad, and unless we do something, he will hound Bethany, and us, relentlessly.

That and it did irk me a bit that he dismissed me out of hand simply for my gender. I would like to disabuse him of the notion. Not do any permanent harm, just teach him a little lesson. So I ask Frederick to let me take care of Liir, and not to step in unless it looks like I need help. He agrees.

My resolve, for once, is rewarded. After a half an hour or so, I hear Liir running towards us. He bursts pell-mell into the entrance court, carrying a rather upset and unwell looking Bethany in his arms. He seems elated by his victory, and is calling Bethany ‘Dorothy’.

“Bethany!” I exclaim, as I walk carefully towards Liir.

“Surengiin, thank goodness!”

As Bethany replies, I simply strike out at Liir, with the flat of my katana. He tries to dodge, badly, especially considering he has burdened himself carrying Bethany. I hit the mark, and Liir slumps to the ground, unconscious. I carefully catch Bethany, setting her on her own feet. Frederick has stayed out of the way during this time, as I asked him to. He did his part bringing us here through his Shadow-shifting.

Bethany seems mentally intact, although the construct body she inhabits seems to be slowly dying. She is concerned about making it back into her own body in time. I am concerned as well. Neither Frederick nor I know how to affect the shift. And so we decide amongst us that the best course is to get back to Amber with all speed, and ask Fiona for assistance. I let them know that I can transport all of us quickly to Amber, once Frederick has led us out of the Trump-blocked area of Shadow we are in.

And so it happens. By this time Frederick’s mount has caught up with us, and it is immediately apparent to me it is

not capable of hauling the great crystal block, that Frederick and I together only with effort moved. And so I ask Frederick to lead his mount, carrying Bethany and a bound and unconscious Liir (who has a broken jaw from my blow), while I lead Kaze, who can slowly drag the block of crystal containing Bethany's true body. We carefully and steadily make our way from this place so near to Chaos, until I can open a Trump Gate, to Amber.

The effort is exhausting. I am ready to collapse by the time they are all through and I can let the gate close behind me. But we are all in Amber, and so far nothing has gone horribly wrong, yet.

Tired as I am, Frederick and Bethany are looking to me for action. Can't they speak for themselves? Or are they all too cowed and afraid to do it? I sigh, and pull together what reserves of energy I have left. I leave them waiting in the courtyard, while I pick my way through the castle under reconstruction. I first let the guard captain know that I have captured the one who led the magical flying fire creatures in battle against Amber. They retrieve Liir's limp form, and he is taken off to the dungeons to await trial along with Dermott.

I then set out to find Fiona, with Frederick following behind. Bethany waits next to her body, seemingly unwilling to step away from it, as if it might disappear suddenly. I suppose I can understand that.

Fiona is in the process of cleaning out her quarters, which were not undamaged. When I ask her politely if she will help put Bethany back in her correct body, she agrees, though she seems a bit tired and put out. She asks me to bring them upstairs. I then tell Fiona that it may not be possible or wise for me to do so, as Bethany's body is encased in a heavy block of crystal and the floor might not take the weight in the given circumstances. Fiona's look of frustration gives me warning, but she seems to have an idea. She pulls out her Trump cards and steps aside for a few moments.

When she is finished she turns back to us, saying that Mandor has agreed to let us use his facilities in Chaos to return Bethany to her true form. And sure enough, in a moment I find myself in Trump contact with Mandor, transported to Chaos.

With some effort, we get the great block of crystal to Mandor's lab.

"Surengiin, good to see you again. Merlin was asking about you recently... And Lord Kov and Gilva would like to speak to you at your soonest convenience."

I nod acknowledgement. *Ah yes, I think to myself, debriefing. They want to know what has happened.* It has been quite a while since I last left here, by local time, I gather. "I will do so. And has the Lady Dara regained consciousness?"

"No, she is still in a coma." Mandor's reply shows his displeasure, but at least he seems to be handling the situation better now.

"I am sorry to hear that." I reply simply.

By this time Fiona has joined us as well, and Mandor sets to work after a brief consultation with her. His strange magic with steel spheres is still something I don't understand, but it does work, quite well. He first cracks and dissolves away the emerald crystal sarcophagus, and then with the spinning spheres creating an arcing flash of light and a crack of thunder, all goes dark.

When my eyes are no longer dazzled, I can see a corpse on the floor, and Bethany's gingham-dressed body free and breathing.

The eyes open, and Bethany sits up and speaks, "Thank you."

I give a silent inner sigh of relief. One task completed. No major backfires or disasters. *Yet, I remind myself.*

"Congratulations, you're now mostly intact." Mandor quips.

"Mostly?" Bethany seems rather alarmed at the thought she might not yet be whole.

"As much as you were before," is Mandor's chuckled reply.

"Ah."

"Well," I interject, "My thanks to you, Lord Mandor, Lady Fiona. Is there any other present task required of me?"

Fiona and Mandor look at me for a moment, before each shakes their head and dismisses me.

"Then by your leave, it seems I have business to attend to. I will return to Amber as soon as I may. Good day."

Fiona nods, and suggests Bethany return with her to Amber. As I find a servant to lead me out of MandorWays, I see them Trump for Amber. I'm not sure if Frederick went with them or not; I don't doubt he himself will have tales to tell Mandor and the rest of House Sawall. Or is it Helgram? I can't remember.

As for me, I have to report to House Hendrake. I wonder how they will take the news of what has happened. It is likely they won't be pleased it took so long for me to report back to them. I stayed in Amber for several days, awaiting trial, and that equals several weeks here. I followed that with a month or more on the road to find Bethany, based on my personal concern. I had sent a note to Merlin indicating the crisis was ended, but it didn't occur to me that a more detailed report would be demanded. Stupid. I should know better. I've spent far too long away from military disciplines.

I just hope I'll have a chance to rest for a few hours before I am brought before the King and my House to report on my actions. I am so exhausted...

"set sail to the sun set no second guessing
far east style with the spirit of wild west
the "quote-unquote" code stands the test of
time for the chosen ones to find the best of
noble minds that ever graced the face of
a hemisphere with no fear, fly over
the blue yonder
where the sky meets the sea
and eye meets no eye
and boy meets world
and became a man to serve the world to
save the day, the night, and the girl too"

- *Battlecry*
Nujabes/Shing02

Day 42038 (9 Jan 2006)

I am thankful that SurengiinWays is still running on a timescale faster than even Chaos. I manage to slip away to the manor house there and get a few hours sleep, and return and

report to House Hendrake without a significant loss of time in the Courts.

I am shown directly in Lord Kov's study when I arrive, which I don't consider to be a good sign. He's been waiting to hear from me, I suppose. I'm shown to a seat where a snifter of brandy awaits. Kov himself enters shortly after I am left in the office. I rise and bow immediately.

"Surengiin..." Kov waves me casually to a seat. "I've heard you've had some interesting experiences."

I sit. I still am not comfortable with the lack of formality in military command around here. "Yes... The issue of the missing Amberites has been resolved."

"And how was that?"

"The Elders were freed from imprisonment in the Abyss. Brand himself was claimed by the Serpent as its Champion, and subsumed or consumed... I'm not sure exactly on that point as I didn't witness it personally."

"So essentially you're saying Brand isn't part of the equation anymore?"

"That's what I gather."

"Is there anything else I need to know about?"

"The matter of the bodyguard... I took care of the imposter posing as a Hendrake guard."

"We've heard Castle Amber is a bit the worse for wear."

"Yes, in the midst of Brand's assault, the Serpent of Chaos manifested itself there."

"Again? We're beginning to feel unloved, the Serpent manifests there more often than here."

Kov's quip is meant to be funny, I know, but somehow I can't bring myself to laugh. I just shrug.

"There's... Hmm... that takes care of the Serpent angle. Have you spoken to King Merlin yet?"

Merlin again? Why is everyone so interested in me talking to him?

"No, I came here first. I sent a message, but no real details."

"That's fine. Now that things are regaining some semblance of normalcy here though, I'm sure he'll want to hear from you. Of course, Dara hasn't regained consciousness yet."

"Yes, Manellous was the Vessel of the Serpent, at that point, as far as I know."

"Yes, we are aware of that, but Mandor doesn't seem to have acknowledged the fact. He said something about finding the truth for himself, in an 'aesthetically pleasing manner'."

Kov's comment sent a chill up my spine.

"I'm not familiar with the language he used," Kov continued, "but he said something like a 'piece de la resistance' and 'magnum opus'."

I didn't know what that meant either, but I can tell it means great pain and suffering for Manellous. I shrug. "It isn't my concern. The last I heard, Manellous was unconscious in Amber."

"If he's smart, he'll stay there." A warning for him, or me?

"Is there anything else you need to know?"

"Is there anything else you *think* I need to know?"

Kov's fishing for more information. Why doesn't he just ask me straight questions? Maybe he thinks he'll get more this way. I rack my brain for a moment. What else could I tell him

that doesn't touch on my actions and the Jewel? I really don't want that mentioned. "Dalt marched on Amber again."

"Again, I would think he'd get tired of that by now." Kov seems to dismiss the comment offhand.

"The whole thing went by quite quickly," my own recollections of what happened are all a bit... I'm not going to talk about it. I wasn't there for most of the dramatic bits anyhow.

"So, how are you holding up, you look tired?"

Do I? "I could use a vacation." I'm not going to discuss my personal tribulations. I don't need to relive that.

Silence for a moment. The interview seems to be reaching a close. "Shall I make an appointment with Gilva?"

"That would be good, she would be glad to see you again. Said something to me about another night on the town."

A night on the town with Gilva usually involves a drunken bar fight, if I remember correctly. Not my type of entertainment. I can just shrug, bow, and excuse myself.

From there I head on to the Palace. I suppose I should get checking in with Merlin over with. Passing my name on to the herald, I see that he has a good deal of business awaiting him, and I fully expect to wait hours, if not to be told to check back in a day or two. Much to my surprise, I am pulled aside within minutes, and sent into Merlin's private study. It seems he's been waiting for me to return as well.

I simply stand there waiting, until Merlin finally appears. I bow, but he doesn't even seem to acknowledge it. He doesn't quite slam the door behind him.

"Still alive, I see." Merlin's comment is flippant. I can't tell if he's upset at my return or not.

"In a manner of speaking." I decide I ought to be cautious. As informal as he is, I find him hard to read.

"So did you say 'hi' to the Serpent for me?" His question sounds sarcastic and crass.

What? So he knows the Serpent manifested itself in Amber. "No, I was elsewhere at the time."

Merlin sits at his desk propping his feet up on a pile of books. "So regale me with tales of daring-do."

Daring? "There wasn't much of that going on."

"Just tell me what the hell happened, then."

"Well, Brand stormed Amber. He had Dalt's army burning through Forest Arden, and a magical force led by Lir coming from Rebma. I think he knew Manellous was the Vessel of the Serpent, because he sent him into Amber as well, where the Serpent manifested itself in the Castle. The whole thing was calculated to flush out the Unicorn. When it appeared in the Castle, Brand was there, and caught it in a magical prison. But as it turned out, it was neither trapped, nor the real Unicorn. It was someone else shapeshifted in order to catch Brand by surprise."

"Who?"

"I didn't really see. A tall dark fellow. I was a bit distracted, having Werewindle in my liver at the time." This last came out perhaps a bit snippier than I meant it to. "Anyhow, while Brand was being dealt with by others, I got the heck out of there, and Mikhail and I entered the Abyss and set the trapped Elders free while Brand was distracted. They rode in and finished off his defeat. I found out later that the Serpent apparently appeared shortly after I left, and claimed Brand as its Champion. Consumed him and disappeared."

Merlin seems rather upset at the last of the tale. We sit in silence for a few moments. I don't really know what else to say.

"Sorry about your mom." It is probably exactly the wrong thing to say. But I am trying to be nice. To show sympathy.

"Yeah..."

"If it matters, Manellous was possessed by the Serpent at the time."

"Yeah, I've heard," Merlin is absolutely upset now. I shouldn't have said anything. "So I'm gonna give Manellous a by for now, but my step-brother Mandor on the other hand is quite put out. More for having him interrupt his carefully put together dinner party than anything else, I think."

"Yeah well, I'm washing my hands of that...Mandor can do whatever he wants."

"Oh, it isn't your fault. No one is blaming you." Silence again. "Was there anything else?"

"Well, yes and no... Did you get Werewindle?"

"Yes I received it."

"Yeah, I was afraid that Luke would take it personally if I returned it directly to him. Probably try to kill me."

"Well he doesn't take kindly to folk who try to kill his old man."

"I didn't, but I doubt he'd believe that."

Merlin shrugs. "I returned it to whom it was intended."

"Thank you for that." The silence again. How do I ask Merlin for a favor now? Especially now that he's upset? Clairvidere was broken, and he's probably the only one who could fix it. "Unfortunately, having Werewindle in my gut had some side effects I wasn't anticipating."

Merlin raises an eyebrow. "*Other* than extreme blood loss, ruptured organs, and the like?"

"Yes..." I don't want to ask, but there isn't any way around it. "You recall this?" I let my sleeve fall back, revealing Clairvidere.

"Of course."

"It's broken."

"Broken? You *broke* it?"

"Werewindle broke it, as far as I can tell."

"You broke it."

"I..."

Merlin interrupts me. "Would you like me to fix it?"

I can't tell how he feels about the whole thing. I am for some reason I can't put my finger on, embarrassed by this whole situation. "You don't have too...I was just wondering if it *could* be fixed."

"*Do you want me to fix it?*" Merlin is demanding a direct answer.

"Yes... Please?" I try to be polite about it. And humble.

"Ok, then." Merlin gets up and begins to clear off his desk, replacing books upon shelves. He calls a servant and asks for a tablecloth. A tablecloth?

"It doesn't have to be now, I know you must be busy."

"Now is fine."

The servant appears shortly, and Merlin throws the cloth over his newly cleared desk. Then dismisses the servant, and locks the study door behind.

"Alright, strip and lay down."

I am mortified and embarrassed. Despite myself, I find I am blushing fiercely.

"Look, you want me to fix it, or not?"

"It was only pierced here, and here," I indicate the scarred spots on my abdomen and back.

"And suddenly you're an expert on repairing magical artifacts?"

I am defeated by my own request. I try to summon some reply, but Merlin's pique beats me to it.

"Would you prefer I grope around under your clothes? I might enjoy it more, but you wouldn't."

"No," but again I am cut off.

"Or would you prefer a bed rather than the desk?" I can see some humor in his responses. At least he isn't completely upset with me.

At this point I have no choice. I just turn around a start removing my kimono. I'm blushing so badly I can't believe it. I had thought myself past caring. *I mean really*, I tell myself, *this is just like a medical procedure. Just ignore it and get it over with.*

I comply with Merlin's wishes and lay down on the desk. I can see for myself that the area around the scars is tarnished, no longer chrome-bright with Trump energy. And the darker spots have spread outward since yesterday. I suppose it isn't a simple fix.

I try to ignore Merlin as he examines Clairvidere in detail, outwards from the damaged section.

"Roll over." He orders me to turn, and I comply, so he can see the damage on my back. "Nice ass."

I just ignore the comment. I try to focus on some small smoldering anger at the comment, just to keep from blushing.

After a while Merlin seems to have reached a conclusion. "All I need now," he begins, "is some feathers, a mink glove, and some massage oil," he says it with false seriousness.

"Not funny." My response is deadpan. The tiny anger didn't last, but I've at least managed to get myself into an uncaring frame of mind. Distracting myself mentally from the situation altogether.

"It was to me." Merlin rifles around with a few things on the shelves, but I'm not really paying much attention. "Roll back over." Eventually, he settles on adjusting a large ring, golden with some sort of wheel-like design on it, upon his finger. A magical device of his own? No doubt.

Lines of energy radiate from the ring, focusing into a point, and Merlin begins carefully retracing the lines of Clairvidere, starting at the outer edges of the dulled areas, and working back inward.

I just try not to watch, and eventually achieve something like a state of blank meditation. Just staying still and quiet so as not to disturb the work. It isn't easy, at first. The redrawn lines seem at first to itch and it is only the calm of the meditative trance that defeats the urge to twitch. When he finally completes the repair, after nearly an hour, I can feel the whole thing almost shiver, as lines of Trump energy reestablish themselves. It is once more a cold shadow on my skin.

"Well, that's done." Merlin steps back and stretches a bit, tossing my kimono back to me. "So is it working now?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm glad it was good for you."

I just ignore the quip and get dressed again. It was uncalled for. "So, what do I owe you for this favor?" I'm almost afraid to ask, but I need to know the price.

"Don't worry about it."

“Come on, nothing’s free.”

Finally Merlin seems to have had enough fun at my expense. “Look, if you ever decide you want to go out or something, let me know, but I’m done with that. You’ve made it clear you aren’t interested. So... anything else, want a drink?”

Done with that, huh? No more attempts at dates, or passes? “Uhm, ok?” I guess I can be gracious, especially since he did fix Clairvidere, and didn’t lay a hand on me in the process.

“Like some brandy?” Popular drink here in Chaos, brandy. Don’t know how they make it, and it’s got quite a bite compared to sake, but whatever. I just take the glass and he waves me to a chair. Merlin continues our strange attempt at conversation. “So what are you doing now?”

“Well,” I consider a moment, “unless they going to call me to trial in Amber I’m kind of at odd ends...”

“No, I don’t think so. That’s over with. Dermott was found guilty on all counts and sentenced to freedom. Kind of harsh, I thought. He was left holding bags...”

Sentenced to freedom? What is that supposed to mean? That he has to live with what he’s done? Yeah, I doubt that weighs much on his mind.

“I suppose I might go back and work on the rebuilding a while. Castle Amber is quite a mess.”

“You’d be surprised how fast it will go. I had to do some similar fixing up around here once. The place was back to itself in practically no time.”

The silence stretches again between us.

“Well, I suppose I am just waiting for the other shoe to drop, you could say.”

“In regards to what?” Merlin replies.

“Not sure, exactly. I guess I am just so used to bad things happening to me out of the blue, that I just anticipate it, nowadays.”

“So hitting on you was a bad thing.”

What? Is he insulted again? “No, I...”

“So you liked it?”

“You aren’t understanding what I’m trying to say.”

“No, I’m just messing with you.” Merlin’s amusement shows.

“I just don’t understand it,” I try to explain.

“It seemed fairly straightforward to me.”

“It wasn’t to me.”

“What, you thought I was trying to woo you, wed you, and make you my queen?”

“No.” Honestly, no. He isn’t that stupid. I would be a politically suicidal choice. And besides, that would have been a more straightforward thing.

“Then what *did* you think?”

That you were trying to seduce me, betray me, and strip me of what little honor and virtue might be left to me, as wretched as I am, just for an evening’s amusement? And probably set me up for some blackmail and public humiliation to boot? “I didn’t know what to think. It seems there is a cultural divide between us.”

“Oh, you came from some excessively formal Shadow, didn’t you?”

I never thought so. “Yeah I guess so.”

“Well, let’s just say our mores here are a bit more sophisticated.”

It seems our conversation has finally taken on a more friendly tone. At least we seem to have reached some level of truce. “I am kind of surprised though, that you haven’t found yourself some political bride already.”

“Why should I, it would only weaken my position. Whatever family I allied to would fall in with me, but all its enemies against me. At least this way, I can dangle hope of a marriage, and they all line up to be my friends.”

“Yes, but without a wife and a dynasty, you are a lone phenomena, easy to replace.”

“That’s a matter of opinion...”

The drinks keep pouring, and we continue to talk politics for a time, but he doesn’t seem upset by it. He almost seems to enjoy having someone to talk to.

“It’s just that... Well, the whole idea of having a life outside of duty is still sort of a foreign concept to me.” I admit.

“It didn’t used to be to me. But these days it seems I really don’t get much of a chance for a life outside the throne room.” Merlin seems to be rather melancholy, for a moment. “Everyone wants to either suck up to me or use me. Hell, my mother and my stepbrother have been trying to use me from day one. You just don’t care.” Merlin finally admits.

I just shrug.

“I’ve been romantically linked to everyone from Gilva to the chambermaid, you were just the latest of the rumors. At least you were cute.” Merlin admits.

“Yeah, well, it just left me feeling a bit... used?”

“But while the other houses were distracted by you, it left me free to pursue other necessities.” Merlin shrugs.

“Glad I could be of some use.”

“Hey, I’m being straight with you.”

“That’s why I’m not upset.”

“Let’s just say I’m stalling for time.”

“When you are immortal, stalling for time isn’t exactly a tenable long-term plan.”

“Yeah, but once I get the alliances I want in order, then I’ll be in a better position. It isn’t a long-term plan, just the immediate one.”

“Speaking of plans,” A thought intruded on my mind at that moment, “Did you realize that the ‘bodyguard’ I had for a while was set up by Ghostwheel? He wanted to look out for me because in his words ‘dad likes you’.”

“Ghost...” Merlin shakes his head. I can’t tell what he thinks of the matter.

“Anyhow,” I try to bring this rather long conversation to a somewhat graceful end. “If you need a hand with anything, you know I’ll try to help. I owe you one.”

“Don’t worry about it...”

“And I need just a little more silence,

and I just need a little more time...

...Leave me be, I don’t want to argue

I’d just get confused and I’d come all undone

If I agree, well, it’s just to appease you

Cause I don’t remember what we’re fighting for

Time here, all but means nothing,

just shadows that move across the wall”

- *Time*

Sarah McLachlan

Day 42039 (16 Jan 2006)

By the next morning, I am still at loose ends. No one has contacted me, nothing has happened.

And Mikhail's absence suddenly weighs on me. I have neither seen nor heard from him since he disappeared with Corwin during the rescue. I am both curious and somewhat concerned. It seems to me that he indicated that repairing Corwin's Pattern would be the path to curing Corwin's madness. Or perhaps I just think he said that... In any case it makes sense. So perhaps he is there. I just hope Corwin's madness wasn't Mikhail's undoing.

Trumping to Corwin's Pattern, I can see that it is somehow different than it was. The great tree is still there. The Pattern is still there. But somehow it just feels different, in a way I can't quite put my finger on. And there is no sign of anyone present.

"Mikhail?" I call several times, and receive no response... I am about to give up and depart when...

"Yes?" Mikhail's voice comes from above; from the branches of the great tree. Why is it always the way here?

"There you are!"

"Kinda."

"Kind of? Are you a Pattern-Ghost?"

"No. I'm Mikhail. More than a ghost, but not what I used to be. I guess you could say I'm the avatar of this Pattern now."

"Well, after you disappeared with Corwin, I hadn't heard from you, so I thought I ought to check on you. I'm glad you're more or less okay."

"That's nice. I guess you could say I am to this Pattern now what the Unicorn is to the other Pattern. No, that's not right. It's really hard to explain. I'm not really sure. I'm me, but I'm not me. I'm also it..." Mikhail indicates the Pattern.

"That's alright. I just wanted to know what had happened. I take it Corwin is doing better?"

"Better. But like me, he isn't quite the same anymore either. Oh, a brief warning... Brand isn't dead. He's in something like the same situation to the Logrus that we are here."

"Yes. I heard. We?"

"Me, it... I'm still working on keeping it straight myself."

"Well, I owe you thanks for helping me," I nod to Mikhail, "so if you need anything..."

"We will, don't worry. I'd offer to let you walk me... man that sounds weird... But I'm not sure that would work very well."

"That's alright. I really don't think it's the best idea right now anyhow. But I'll keep in touch."

Well. It seems I no longer have a bodyguard. Mikhail has another charge now; the Pattern of Corwin. Or he *is* the Pattern of Corwin... Whatever. But in any case, I doubt I will see him much in future, unless whatever is happening somehow directly plays into Corwin's interests.

From Corwin's Pattern, I decide I ought to check in back at Amber, at least to see what other repercussions have been developing. But upon my arrival, Amber seems relatively tranquil, for the moment.

The rebuilding proceeds at a quick pace, and my assistance, unskilled as it would be, is entirely unnecessary. I have no messages waiting, and no one seeks my presence. The

court gossips only have one new thing to report; that Kaladon has gotten himself apprenticed to Bleys. Poor bastard. He never did learn what Bleys was like. Oh well, it isn't my concern.

But not wishing to see Bleys, or in fact any of the Elders in particular at this time, I go through my mental 'laundry list' of the things I should do, but haven't had time. The most glaring thing is that I had asked my father about martial training, just before I got caught up in the Brand issue. I should check in with him.

The Courts click along, and once the day winds to a close I find it not too difficult to get in to see my father. It is only a matter of waiting until his Justicar's duties permit an appointment, which as it turns out, will be tomorrow.

"My age you cannot me certain
This spell cannot be broken
Visions of eternal youth
We share one face together
Associates forever
Only you know the truth
Mirror mirror on the wall
Who's the master of them all?"
- *Mirror mirror*
Halloween

Day 42040 (16 Jan 2006)

Finndo is as primally perfect as ever.

"I heard you've been busy. At least you're still alive, so that says something."

"Yes. Well, I returned here for two reasons. Firstly," I pull out a Trump of myself, "I believe I owe you one of these." I laid the card on Finndo's desk.

He picked up the card without comment.

"The second being that I asked you about the possibility of martial training, before all the recent disturbance began. And I wished to make it known that I am still interested in such, schedule permitting."

Finndo nods. "Very well. Follow me, then..."
Time can be so relative...

"You consider me the young apprentice
Caught between the Scylla and Charybdis,
Hypnotized by you if I should linger
Staring at the ring around your finger
I have only come here seeking knowledge,
Things they would not teach me of in college"
- *Wrapped Around Your Finger*
The Police

Day 42229 (16 Jan 2006)

Months have passed as I trained out in Shadow. My father is a hard taskmaster, but his methods are not so different than those which I might have chosen for myself. He is simply more focused than I might have been. And I have certainly been undistracted.

I remained in the Shadow, proceeding under Finndo's direction, while he came and went, in order to maintain his own duties in the Courts. In a way it felt good to once again

practice military discipline. During the nights, I could sit in the quiet, enjoying the feeling of honest exhaustion with no worries.

And in those evenings I finished rebuilding my secondary Trump deck, as well as made extra Trump of myself. It has become obvious to me that I relied too much on Clairvidere in the past. Having it broken, however temporarily, was a wake-up call.

But this morning, after breakfast, Finndo let it be known I was dismissed. The current regimen I could continue on my own, and his instruction was, at present, superfluous.

With his dismissal, I returned to the Courts. It seemed the time in Shadow there was the same as in Chaos. Six months, more or less, had passed. I remembered that I had not spoken to Gilva in some time, as well.

I found that Gilva was still the head of the Praetorian Guard. Merlin's declaration of Martial Law had not been lifted. Some of the missing members of Chaos' Court had returned, but most had not. Many of the families who had expressed opposition to Merlin's rule had also fallen into line as well. And those that had not, had suffered many accidents...

"Tragic ones, like falling on a knife fourteen times." Gilva quipped. "And Dara is still unconscious."

I nod. There is really nothing for me to say in response, so I remain silent.

"And she's apparently about six months pregnant."

"I see." I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. The Serpent must have had something in mind, after all. But this isn't good.

"At least Merlin's finally showing some backbone, though." Gilva comments.

I just shrug noncommittally. "I suppose." I pull out a Trump of myself then. "Oh, I think I owe you one of these, from a while back. Finally had a chance to get caught up. I'm not really involved in anything at present, so if you need a hand with anything..."

"Thanks." Gilva nods. But as our conversation wraps up, it seems there is nothing much further for us to say. I'm not the partying sort, and would only hold Gilva back during a night on the town, so I say my goodbyes.

What on earth do I do now? No one seems to need or particularly want me around. But on the up side, no one is currently trying to kill me, or destroy the universe, either. There's no much left that I feel a definite need to do. Just deliver a few more Trumps.

I leave one of my Trumps for both Kov and Archon. Seeing as they are still both involved in their duties as Merlin's enforcers and spies, I simply leave the cards in notes for them. They'll get them eventually.

And that leaves one card left to deliver. I promised a card to Benedict once, quite a while ago. Not someone I particularly want to talk to, but a promise is a promise. And so I head once more into the Hall of Mirrors to find him.

He is not in Amber, which doesn't surprise me. He is leading a force, somewhere out in Shadow. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with Amber at all. Ah, yes. I have heard about him that he spends the bulk of his time eternally honing his skills.

I almost reach out to Trump him, but stop. I don't have to contact him so directly. My own skills could certainly use

practice. This could be an opportunity. The force he faces is doomed to fall. But if I joined it, well, I couldn't beat him, but I could see how long I could draw it out. Practice makes perfect, after all. With Finndo, I practiced physical skills. Here I would practice strategy and tactics. And so I return to SurengiinWays, and collect Kaze, and my gear.

"Centuries pass, dust in the wind
I shall remain, sinning in sin
The metal I am, the iron you feel
The song of the dead, the chorus of steel"
- *I Am The Sword*
Motorhead

Day 42253 (16 Jan 2006)

The past few weeks have weighed on my mind heavily. The matter of Dara's impending birth haunts me. It reminds me of the mythic tales of Oberon's origins. This child is more than a being in and of itself; it is also a powerful symbol. And I fear that this symbol will be held up by those who would oppose Merlin.

He must act to co-opt this symbol for himself, somehow. Perhaps by adopting the child as his son. Less dangerous than to leave it in the hands of his mother and stepbrother. He himself admitted they sought to use him. And I am sure they must be less than pleased that he has declined to be their puppet. And now this new child. A child with a direct mandate for kingship by being the offspring of their divinity's vessel...

Part of me hopes that Merlin's beloved mother Dara perishes in childbirth. It would make things so much easier for Merlin. But I don't believe it will happen. I instead feel that the birth will be the marker for her recovery from her comatose state. And perhaps the beginning of a new cycle of madness, betrayals and scheming.

For Brand is not dead. And if this child is meant for something by the Serpent, then it may very well send It's Champion back to make certain its wishes are fulfilled...

A dozen times I have started a letter. Some missive, some message to him to speak to him about this matter. But what could I say that he doesn't already know? Nothing. What right do I have, to try and give advice to a King? None. And so each time the unfinished letter goes into the fire.

I have tried, with little success, to simply focus on the present. I have had some small success here on the battlefields. I have managed to shore up the men here enough that they are at least holding out longer than they would have. This war, so close to an end when I arrived, still drags on.

And so I sit at a camp desk, with a bottle of plum wine before me. My Trump is sealed inside an envelope, attached to the bottle's neck. I will leave it here, for Benedict's men to find, once the fighting is over. A gift for him, and perhaps a tiny recompense for disrupting this game of go he plays with himself. It is nearly time for me to depart.

But where I will go next, I do not know. Back to Chaos? Why? There it is only the calm before another storm. A storm which does not concern me. If my help is desired, it will be sought out. Amber? There really is nothing for me there, and no one. Despite my actions to preserve the place, I really am not fond of it, or its inhabitants.

“But this guessing game has its own rules...
...and might makes right
The Sword of Damocles
is hanging above your head”
- *Sword of Damocles*
Lou Reed

Day 42253 (23 Jan 2006)

What should I do now? I feel the urge to go back to Chaos, but yet my more rational side says to stay as far away as possible. A storm is coming, and there would be no benefit for me to get caught up in it.

I cannot decide where to go yet, but I am sure it is good to be gone from here. Benedict's forces will be taking this camp within a day from now, I calculate. And so saddle Kaze, and pack the last of my belongings, send out the last orders and ready to depart. The camp tent I leave set up, my desk cleared except for the bottle of plum wine, with my Trump in an envelope around the neck.

I turn to look one last time before departing, and I see Corwin is there, seated in my camp chair, drinking the wine I left.

“Hello uncle.” I greet Corwin with equanimity and a raised eyebrow. I am curious what has brought him here, but have no desire to tarry overlong.

“You are Surengiin?” Corwin's words lay somewhere between a question and a statement.

“Yes.” Perhaps it really was a question. I recall that he was not very mentally aware the one instance I was in his presence before. My own familiarity with him is more extensive.

“I see you know who I am.” He doesn't quite seem surprised.

“Yes. It is good to see you are more rational than the last time I saw you.”

“Yeah, thanks for saving our collective bacon there. I heard you were involved in that...”

I wave away the comment, trying to think of some response.

Corwin beats me to it. “I'm not making a big deal out of it... But I've been out of commission for a while so I've been trying to get caught up on recent events, getting to know new relatives...” The tone of his comment implies there is something he wants to know.

“Well, I'm not much for storytelling, so if there is something you want an answer to, ask a direct question.” I am uncertain what he is interested in, and I don't care to speak at length without a direction.

Corwin seems almost surprised. I am unsure why.

“Ok, then what happened to my Pattern?” His question is aggressively forward. He seems to have decided to change tracks, at least mentally.

“Brand ordered it destroyed.”

Corwin's expression hints at exasperation. “Yes, that is the sort of thing he's wont to do, but I don't think he's got what it takes to do it himself. So who did he have do it?”

Ah, yes. I understand now. He's upset and seeking a target. I really don't have any reason or inclination to deny him what he seeks. “Dermott.”

“Ah ha. And how did Dermott manage that? The last I knew, he didn't have the ability even to walk it either. He's not related to me, after all.”

He accepts the answer. He doesn't even seem surprised, but he still is trying to figure it out. “Yes, well, there's something about bioengineering involved. Genetic manipulation, cloning, Dermott's into that sort of thing.”

“Any reason other than Brand's orders that he felt the need to do that?”

I have never been one to speculate about the reasoning of others, at least not out loud. I probably have more insight than most into Dermott's thinking, but I still wouldn't guess. “I'm not privy to Dermott's motivations. I wouldn't know. He's crazy. Absolutely insane.”

“I'll have to talk to him about that personally then.” Corwin keeps the tone of his conversation light, but I can tell he means to return in full measure to Dermott the pain and upset he himself suffered.

Despite myself, I grin a bit at that thought. It isn't like me, somehow, but I do.

“It took some convincing to get Random to let him go. But he owed me a favor or fifty million...” Corwin quips.

“I'm surprised he isn't dead already.” So he did already know Dermott was behind it. He just wanted confirmation, or witness testimony as some sort of justification. I was surprised to hear of Dermott's release after the whole affair in Amber. I didn't think that mercy was something the Elders of Amber would be capable of.

“Well, it would have been unseemly for me to get my hands on him in the castle dungeons.”

“I see.” Indeed. No mercy at all, just keeping up appearances. That is definitely more what I would expect.

“Well, you seem ready to depart, so I won't keep you. You don't seem interested in getting to know relatives.”

I realized then that I was still standing in the doorway with Kaze's bridle in my hands. I toss the reins around the tent cords to keep her from wandering, and enter the tent proper. “I don't mind your company at all, it is just that by my calculations, Benedict ought to be here by tomorrow morning at the latest.”

I don't know what he meant by his comment exactly. I wouldn't mind learning more about him, but I really wouldn't even know where to begin. Besides, I don't intend to remain here to be captured by Benedict's men at the last. Maybe he was just being snide.

Corwin smirks. “You don't need to rush. Benedict told me to tell you he's giving you a by this time. He said that last maneuver on the left flank was good in principle but badly executed. The cavalry was weak. That's why it folded so quickly.”

I blink in surprise. So he did know who I was. He spoke to Benedict before arriving here. And Benedict already knows I'm here. Interesting. “I see. Well, I had left that wine for him. Keep the card, I'll leave another. I had intended it as a recompense for interrupting his game of war.”

Corwin's look implies wicked humor as he pockets the card. “Yeah well if you want to interrupt Benedict masturbating, that's your business.”

What!?! Oh, ancestors, he didn't just say that, did he? He did! “I really didn't need that mental image.”

“Would you prefer if I said playing with himself?” He’s practically laughing.

Whatever. I just shrug off the whole thing without another word. I’ve learned not to let that sort of conversation get to me.

“So how’s Merlin doing?”

Well that was out of the blue. Why is *he* asking *me* about *his* son? “How should I know?”

“I’d heard you were one of his friends?”

Well, at least he didn’t say girlfriend, or lover. Although where would he have heard about my conversations with Merlin? Oh, wait, Mikhail helped him redraw his Pattern. It must have been from him. And at least Mikhail didn’t subscribe to the girlfriend rumor, so Corwin may not have heard it. A small blessing.

“I suppose I am. Last I was in Chaos he was finally showing some balls. Declared martial law, set assassins against some dissidents...”

Corwin shrugs off the comment with the tiniest bit of amusement. “Well, that was a pretty ballsy move, but there *have* been a *couple* times before that in which he’s shown some testicular fortitude. I guess you weren’t around for those.”

His comments don’t seem angry, which I suppose is a good thing for me. I probably shouldn’t have phrased things quite that way to Merlin’s father. It occurs to me how alike they look. Same hair, same eyes... No, not quite the same eyes. Corwin’s are harder, somehow.

“No, I suppose I wasn’t. Right now Chaos is just a shitstorm waiting to happen, so I’ve been keeping my distance since Dara was incapacitated.”

“Yes, well, that’s the nature of Chaos. But I’ll leave you to yourself.” Corwin rises to leave.

I realize he’s off now to find Dermott, and inflict whatever vengeance seems mete to him. There is only one thing I can think of to say, before he disappears. “You realize that Mikhail is a construct created by Dermott...”

“Yes, that’s why I’m going to leave him more or less in one piece.” With that, Corwin departs.

I understand. He won’t kill Dermott after all. This doesn’t bode well. Dermott did most of what he did because of perceived slights and suffering. This will only set off another cycle of insanity on Dermott’s part. I am not normally bloodthirsty, but the universe as a whole might be better off if he didn’t survive his encounter with Corwin.

What happened to Corwin between the unmaking and remaking of his Pattern is beyond my comprehension. He may feel leaving Dermott alive is being merciful. Although the thought of an Elder Amberite being merciful is almost an oxymoron. Perhaps he is behaving so on account of Mikhail, though I am not certain at all.

“This constant apprehension
Still giving me away
The lessons I’ve forgotten
In spite of all I’ve learned
Now, I find myself in question...
...I want to runaway...
I want to know the truth...
I want to know the answers...
I want to shut the door

Surengiin’s Journal #5 – Throne War

And open up my mind...

...This constant apprehension
Won’t seem to go away
All my talk of starting over
These words were never true
Now, I find myself in question
Point the finger at me again
Guilty by association”

- *Rnw@y*
Linkin Park

Day 42253 cont.(30 Jan 2006)

As I am once again about to leave this place, I get a Trump contact. Who? It is Kaladon...

“What brings you to call?” I try to be nice, after all, I’ve got nothing against Kaladon. He’s never even been rude to me...

“I was uhm, I was running into uncle Corwin, and he gave me permission to...have his Trump. But they seem to be in short supply...” Kaladon seems apologetic for asking. “Frederick gave me your Trump...”

Not unexpected. I bring him through, though he seems reluctant to ‘bother me’. Am I so frightening to him? I suppose I am a bit intimidating.

I insist he takes a whole deck, one I made intending to give it away anyhow. He seems reluctant. He asks what he would owe me for it. At least he isn’t so naïve as to think he can get something for nothing. But I really don’t want anything in particular. I just let him know I may ask for help in the future.

He tells me he’s been improving himself. That’s good at least. He was confused by his conversation with Corwin, though. He said he couldn’t figure out what Corwin wanted to know, even though he told Corwin everything he himself knew about the Brand affair.

“Did you *ask* him what he wanted to know?”

“Uhm, no?”

“You’re such a child.” I am beginning to lose patience. How is it I become everyone’s tutor and babysitter?

“Yes, but I’m trying to learn.”

“Then listen. Knowledge is power. Corwin got you to tell him everything you knew, and you didn’t even ask him why. *Ask* in future.”

“So I should keep secrets?”

“They keep secrets. I keep secrets. Just guard yourself. Guard your words, just like you would guard yourself with a blade. And *never trust family*. If they’ve been nice to you, its because they want something.”

And then I feel another Trump contact. Who now?

Manellous. Manellous begins another long story, shorter than usual for him, the point of which is that he is seeking information about Ghostwheel. Although I know Kaladon can only hear my side of the conversation, I try to demonstrate my point for him. I give out no information without asking a returning question. And I give out only literally what was asked of me, no more.

Manny complains that Dermott is so much better than he at shapeshifting. And I simply tell him to practice, then.

Eventually, I invite Manellous to join us as well. I introduce him to Kaladon, and briefly look through Manny’s

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Trump deck, filling in a few cards he's missing from my now dwindling supply. I have less than half a deck left, my personal cards aside. I slide in one of Ghostwheel while I'm at it.

As Manellous and Kaladon begin to talk, they quickly find common ground in a mutual dislike, even hatred, of Dermott. Both of them are such children. But I just pour them both wine, and step out with the look of a good hostess getting something.

Kaze is tied outside, and still waiting. It's been hours since Corwin arrived. Time for me to go. Let the kids get caught by Benedict's men, if he is still advancing. He might not be anymore, I don't care.

I start to ride out vaguely towards Amber. Too much company for one day, I think. Perhaps a quiet evening...

But after I've barely been riding a couple hours, there is another Trump contact. What is it today?

It is Manellous and Kaladon, again. Manellous seems to have forgotten that he is supposedly Bethany's bodyguard. He left her with Dermott, now she's missing, and he needs help finding her. I assure him I'll help, and cut off contact.

Let's get this over with... I go to the Hall of Mirrors, and pull both of them through. From there, I try to scry Bethany's location, but the mirrors all go black. Oh, no. Not the Abyss again.

"She's in the Abyss." I tell them, as I clear the blackness.

"How did she get there?" Manellous asks...

"*YOU LEFT HER WITH DERMOTT, FOOL!*" I can't help but shout back. "Remember who his grandsire is, what he can do?"

Manellous looks slightly cowed, and Kaladon confused. He wasn't around for most of the Brand Affair, as I recall.

I just sigh. I try to scry on Dermott, but get the same result. "As I see it, you have three options. You can find Dermott and beat him up until he lets Bethany go or tells you where she is, you can retrieve the Jewel of Judgment and dive into the Abyss, or..."

"What's the third option?" Manellous asks tentatively, "I don't think they'd let me near the Jewel. Vessel of the Serpent, yeah."

"You find someone else to do one of the other things for you."

"That's why we came looking for you..."

"I see." I am quite skeptical about all this. "Well, I suppose I can hold a mirror on Dermott and wait for him to emerge from his hiding spot."

When I turn a mirror once again to Dermott, this time it responds immediately. He is in a mansion somewhere, near a swimming pool. And then I see Bethany emerge from another room.

I pull Bethany into the Hall immediately. I'm getting really tired of all this babysitting. Bethany is terminally naïve. They immediately start arguing with each other, Bethany and Manellous. Kaladon just stands there, watching them argue and looking helpless. This is pointless.

I open a mirror to the Rebma throne room, where I toss the lot of them out, at the foot of Martin's throne. There. Bethany is home. Manellous is with her. Mission accomplished. Done. Enough of it already.

I return to Kaze and begin to ride again. But now my thoughts are disturbed. Missing persons. Chaos. The whole

Surengiin's Journal #5 – Throne War

matter with Dara's impending birth just can't leave my thoughts. I worry that Brand will return. Again.

I give up. Back to Chaos, no more wasted time. Almost immediately, I see Gilva.

"There you are!" Gilva seems quite upset... "Is he with you?"

"Who?"

"The king!"

"No. He's gone?"

"Yes. I had hoped he was with you. This is bad. His bedchamber is a disaster. There's smoke damage, and everything's torn up..."

"Shit." Well this is bad.

"Do you know anyone who could do that?"

"Brand."

"Anyone else?"

"Not that I can think of. But with Dara..."

Gilva just stands there looking worried. "Dara has been in a coma now, and pregnant, for two years. Why is this related?"

"Two years?"

"Yeah, you've been gone..."

"Look. I know what this is about. With Dara about to give birth to a child with a divine mandate, it makes sense someone would try to get rid of him now."

"This is bad. We can't keep it under wraps long."

"Well, does Hendrake still have martial law? Or did that change while I was gone?"

"Yes, at least we still have that. But it won't do for long."

"Look, I know how to get whomever is behind this to come out, but the problem is I don't know if I could deal with them once they're here. I can bring them forward, but you probably won't like it..."

"How?"

"Take it to the source of the problem. Seize the child. By force."

"Interesting. Well, it'll take a while to arrange things, assemble troops, if we're going to storm Sawall."

"Do you think storming the house is the best idea? Or a surgical strike?"

"What do you think?"

"My plans don't seem to work that well. I leave it to those with superior tactical judgment."

"Well if we strike, whom would you suggest taking?"

"Uh, you, me... Who else would you recommend? Archon?"

"Hmm. Let me contact a few people. I'll be in touch shortly." And with that Gilva takes off with intent.

I'd never thought of myself as bloodthirsty, but somehow this seems like the right sort of action, for a change. Gilva probably won't like what I plan to do. Kill the child. But I think it necessary. We'll just have to see what happens.

Trump contact. Again. What *is* with this today. I've had about enough. Should I even answer this time? It's probably Manellous again. Or... It could be Brand. If he still spies on me, this could be his attempt to stop me.

Gilva is nowhere to be seen. Well, if it *is* Brand, at least he won't stop her and the rest of the House. They can act on this without me. I've set the balls rolling. Perhaps that's enough.

So I answer.

Merlin! He is looking disheveled, and wild-eyed. He is somewhere dark, and non-descript. I reach out my hand to him, but he shakes his head.

"Look I can't talk long. I need your help. Someone's made an attempt on my life. He looked rainbow-like."

"Brand."

"Yeah, but I think Hendrake's been compromised. Someone had to let him in."

"Brand doesn't need let in."

"Still. I can't talk long. Brand may find me. I need you to get together all your cousins. Take them to my study, and I'll contact you again. Wait. You contact me. Trump six times in thirty seconds, then stop. Then I'll contact you. That way I'll know it's you. You'll know its me."

"Alright."

And Merlin is gone. Something's rotten in the state of Denmark. It doesn't make sense, somehow. Get together all the cousins? But Frederick, and Dermott, and Manellous, are completely untrustworthy... But then he thinks Hendrake is too. What happened to him? I've never seen him so... distressed? Mister *I have my ways*. Mister *I have all the Powers of the Universe at my command*?

What if it isn't him? It must be a trick. Brand in disguise. Yes? No? The last time I thought someone was Brand in disguise, it wasn't. But that doesn't mean it couldn't be this time. And why would Merlin call me? Friend perhaps, but he knows all too well my absolutely dismal track record when it comes to actually helping...

But what if it is Merlin? What if what he said was true? I may have already planted the seeds of doom by telling Gilva that we need to seize the child. What if Merlin really needs my help? I don't want to see him killed, or deposed. He seemed a decent ruler...

And so with no sign of Gilva about, I head for the Hall of Mirrors. I just hope that if I don't return, that she will lead the charge and seize the child. I don't believe Hendrake has been compromised. Not really. At least, not Gilva.

The others are not hard to find, and dragging them into the Hall of Mirrors doesn't seem to take any effort at all. I guess when I'm determined...

They are all upset. They all start talking at once. Dermott tries to leave, but can't. I don't want to let him.

"Enough!" I've had it with babysitting. Time for them to grow up. "I brought you here for a reason."

"Surengiin, there's something..." Bethany begins, but I don't pay her any mind.

"No more arguing. This is now a military operation."

"Surengiin!" Bethany shouts. "There is something you need to know!"

"What?!?!!" I turn on her with real anger in my eyes.

Bethany looks panicked. "Dermott has a piece of Brand's personality in his head!"

That's it? "What else is new? Now listen up, Merlin's gone."

But I am interrupted again. "What is this about?" Kaladon demands.

I've had it. "Look, I'm acting under orders."

"Who's orders?"

"This is on a need to know basis. You don't need to know everything. But we have to work together."

And with that, I dump the lot of us into Merlin's study. I don't know if this is the right thing to do or not. I hope it is. I hope I'm not being played for a fool again. But I have to take that chance. If Merlin really needs help, I won't walk away.

I do as Merlin asked, and Trump six times, then wait. He responds, and I bring him through. He looks as disheveled as before, but more settled in mind, at least. He waves that spoked ring over the door, sealing it. When he does the windows as well, I begin to get worried.

And then... Merlin shapeshifts. And it isn't Merlin after all. It's Brand. *Damn it, I should have trusted my instincts*. I knew something was wrong. I shouldn't have second-guessed myself.

Brand speaks, but it isn't *just* Brand speaking. In his voice I hear the echoes of the Serpent's madness. "Some of you know me, you've worked with me before. Others of you have refused to see my vision, and I offer you a chance at redemption. The pretender to my throne has been removed. And now my son, that you brought forth," he speaks to Manellous there, "will rule. But not yet. He needs a Regent. For eighteen years, until he reaches his majority."

Brand looks over the lot of us. "And that is why you are here. To help decide who will be Regent. Here, inside the Logrus. You will decide, or I will decide. The first one of you to leave the Cave of the Logrus alive will be the Regent of our child. Of course, perhaps only one of you will leave. Perhaps none of you will. Perhaps I will consume you. Perhaps you will go mad. Perhaps you will all kill one another. For only one will leave. The rest will go down into darkness and destruction. The rest of you I will consume."

The looks of the others are stunned. It hasn't sunken in yet. They don't realize what has happened. I've doomed us all. Again. They'll realize soon. And if they're smart, they'll gang up on me first. But they won't.

Bethany speaks up. "I don't want to be Regent. You can have it. I'm not going." She just stays sitting in the chair.

The others are trying to figure out what has happened. Tuesday agrees with Bethany.

"Out there all around you is the Logrus. Assay it if you can. Or try to stop the others from doing so. Even if you don't want to be Regent, only one of you will live. I will consume the rest. Live or die, welcome to my little Throne War." Brand says, as he disappears.

"I'm not fighting." Bethany says. She stays stubbornly seated.

Manellous just shrugs, "I'm home. Done this once already. Bring the pain!" and he rises to open the study door. Tuesday promptly sends a dagger into the doorframe.

Dermott begins to shapeshift, into Brand, as he once was. He begins to browbeat Bethany. Reminding her of her children. Trying to get her to fight.

Will I fight? Can I not fight? I believe Brand, the Serpent, when he says he will consume us, if he can. I carefully touch the tattoo on my sleeve. It answers my call, partly. I realize that Trump is blocked here. In the Logrus. But Clairvidere will still shapeshift. I suppose that makes sense here.

Will I kill them all? I could, I know. But will I? I don't want to, do I? It all seems hilarious somehow, in its pointlessness. I begin to laugh, drawing all their attention. They stare at me, as I begin to laugh. I can't stop laughing, for a while.

This is all my fault, again. I fell for it, because I have a weakness. *A weakness for Merlin*. I hear it in my mind like a voice. Is it real? Does it matter? *You like Merlin. You wouldn't have done this for anyone else. You wouldn't have believed enough. Or cared enough.*

What is this voice? I don't know. Maybe just an echo in my head. Maybe Brand again, or still. Was I ever *not* his puppet? I must admit, I shouldn't have been so quick to try and help Merlin. I feel like I owe him. But I don't *like* him. He's a royal pain, literally. But the best option for the throne, given the other contenders.

I see the corners of the room begin to come apart. The Logrus won't let us just remain. So we move or die. The Logrus is change, so we must change, or die. One thing I have learned, is that sometimes you just have to go with the situation, and endure. I can do that. Fighting against a Power is a pointless exercise. I will have to see if I can adapt.

Hmm... Alright Brand, I'll play your game, this time. But maybe not the way you want me to. I have an idea, but it all hinges on my being able to talk the others into helping me; something I've always been dismal at doing.

"Now does it scare you that I'm able to discern
What to love and what to burn
I'll add your fuel to the fire now
Stand back, brother take your hand back
Leave it and I might crack
More than a smile or two you see
Don't judge what you don't understand
You can't deny what has been given to me"

- *Fear*
Disturbed

Day 42254 (6 Feb 2006)

Dawn hasn't come, but it's a new day anyhow, at least in my mind. And I can't let this spiral any more out of control than it has already gotten.

"Please, everyone... I think I know a way we can all walk out of here."

They all look at me. They haven't realized yet that I've betrayed them all. I explain my mental gestalt theory. The collective one will leave, and I will serve to keep their minds buffered so they can sort out themselves after. That the one that will leave will be all of us, and that afterward they can depart as they would. The room continues to dissolve around us as I plead with them.

Surprisingly, most agree. All except Manellous. Him I beg. I assure him he can have the Regency. I will not try to stop him. And then I turn to Dermott, who has changed himself to the shape of Brand. And 'Brand' is thrilled at the mere suggestion. Dermott is the first to take my hand.

I feel all the mental connections fall into place, one by one, as they take hands. And then walls go up. Not my walls. Dermott, as Brand, manifests a greater mental strength than any I would have expected possible. I expected myself to be the strongest mind; I had merged with Dermott before and overwhelmed him. But not this time!

"What have you done! Why did you cut them off from me?"

"I'm helping you survive, isn't that what you wanted?" The voice is Brand's, but not with the Serpent's cacophony.

"Every time I have an idea that might stand up to you... You aren't even the real Brand!"

"Do you have anything constructive to say?"

I just go quiet.

"My cat's-paw. Twice in an hour you've brought them all to me. You'll be justly rewarded, my most loyal of servants."

I can't stop myself from laughing again. It always comes back around to Brand. Why is that so?

Because you are a weak woman and seek to place yourself at the side of a stronger man. This echoing voice from within has taken on the tone and timber of Dermott.

"I see you are already taking the first steps towards the enlightenment I offer."

It's all so useless. Every time I try to resist, I am overwhelmed. I suppose the ultimate lesson is to go with the flow. When I fight the current I am defeated. Time to swim with it!

Let them blame me, I brought them to double damnation!

"Surengiin, are you ready to take the next step towards enlightenment?"

"Bring it!"

"Excellent." Brand/Dermott's voice echoes in my mind.

I open my mind to mentally embrace him. I'm tired of fighting. Brand already knows all my secrets; he's already read my life.

He pours into me the knowledge of the shifting of forms. And the walls of surety crumble around me. And I am the gleaming form of the old dragon of Xangzhu, with the throne in its claws. Chrome bright, like Clairvidere's mark, I am the dragon.

That's what you always wanted, the throne, to embrace it, the man on it...

And the barriers drop, and I see the others. We are no longer merged, Brand/Dermott has released us. Frederick is seems to be awakening from sleep, a snake-man with scales and a forked tongue. Bethany is a pink cloud, Manny a demon. I've seen Manellous' demon-form before. Tuesday is a giant cat, a stalking predator. I can see how they are shaped by their personalities. One end of my great coils I let casually curl along Brand/Dermott's legs.

And then Frederick lashes out at Dermott/Brand with his blade, which still hung by his hip. Dermott/Brand's heart is pierced, and the gurgling form collapses slowly to the ground. The body slowly changes back into Dermott. And his blood flows out over the ground.

And the impulse grabs me in that moment. I reach over, and my great jaws snap off Manellous' head. Anyone who wants a position is the least fit to hold it. His skull I swallow, whole. He will not be permitted escape. And now only we without Logrus imprint remain to find our way out. His body crumples, his blood spurts across the shrinking flagstone floor of the crumbled room.

And I then slink away into the swirling Chaos. I will survive, regardless of what happens to the others. I don't care about them, as they have not threatened me or stood in the way of my goals. The cat and the cloud cautiously seem to follow me. Let them; if they get too close I may consume them as well.

After a time, I have made my way across undulating hills and floating debris. I seem no closer to an exit. It is an endless and ever-changing landscape.

And then there is an earthquake and the dim sourceless light fades. What has happened? I must know. And a smooth turn leads me back towards the disturbance. My convoy scatters; they do not follow.

Over a rise of black spongy skulls, I emerge to a view overlooking what was once the room we occupied. I see a huge symbol, some bastardized Pattern perhaps, drawn on the pedestal which is all that remains of the floor. It is drawn crudely, in huge gory slashes of blood. It glows, pulsing red, as if it has a heartbeat, against the dark flagstones...

What is this? A form is hunched in the center of this form. Frederick perhaps? No matter. It looks like him, on his knees, head hung low in exhaustion. A severed limb still gripped in one hand. Covered in a sheen of blood and ichor. He has dismembered the bodies of Manellous and Dermott to use as his components. Kaladon and Leonardo as well? I cannot tell.

Ah well, he's walling himself off. He thinks he can hold off the inevitable. He looks up then, and his eyes are blood. Like Jewel eyes, almost. Hehe.

He'll die walled up there. Fine by me. I turn to stalk away, sniffing for uncle Brand, I'll find a way out. Brand is the key. I'll find him. Hehe. Swim downstream.

The Dragon's gone a hunting through the silver and the glass...

But Frederick starts sprouting tentacles of blood and gristle. *He slurps and lurches toward Bethlehem to be borne....* What is this now? He has seen the cat that followed me, and turned his attention to her.

And I let my form sink into the ground in and burrow. Like a great worm of the desert sands I will stalk and kill them all. I can smell their blood. I can smell it. First Frederick, oh yes. First Frederick.

Tuesday has become Mandor, how interesting. Mandor is here now. Shall I consume him as well? Perhaps I will. How will a gourmand taste?

Frederick does not seem to notice as I slide under him. And then I launch upward, my maw open. I consume Frederick; I swallow the entirety of him. He tastes of blood, he is blood. But his mind is closed to me; he seems encased in a field. A pearl within an oyster. I cannot crack this.

But Frederick is a fool. He lowers his field, and he begins to pulse within me, and it brings pain. But I can now feel his mind. He seeks to absorb me, just as I seek to consume him. He and I are locked; consuming each other within and without. But I will be triumphant; I know this.

And then, I see the spheres. Distracted by Frederick, I have ignored Mandor. They spin, and surround my form, while I struggle from within and without. And the spheres surround me. I feel Frederick ripped from my flesh, all pain. And all goes black.

"Murder I am, you know it was me
I was the one, that you didn't see
I was the cut, down to your bone
I put you there under that stone...
...I, I am the blade, I am the promise unmade
I, I am the knife, I bring death to your life...
...I, I am the axe, to cut down heroes like rats

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I, I am the sword, I do the work of the Lord"

- *I Am The Sword*
Motorhead

"Hair like snow, eyes that gleam,
Things aren't always what they seem.
Teeth too long, hands too thin --
Always look beneath the skin!
For pretty words and pretty wiles
And pretty looks and pretty smiles --
Those folks where slain and scattered all,
Because they let their caution fall."

- *Snowbeast*
Mercedes Lackey

Day 42255? (13 Feb 2006)

The first thing I notice is a smell. Jasmine blossoms. Cool wind, slightly damp, as if after a rain. I hear birds, and rustling leaves. Opening my eyes, I see a blue sky, dappled through the leaves of a tree. Petals of cherry, and dogwood, and jasmine flowers flutter through the air, to the ground.

Rising, I find that I lie on a bier, padded with cotton. A formal kimono clothes me, in white. A cut crystal decanter of some dark liquid sits nearby. I don't recognize this place. I have only memories of madness and destruction. And then Mandor/Tuesday.

Merlin! He's gone! I have to take action, and can't wait. Brand will find me if I stay anywhere too long...

You always run from your problems. Or run to them. Dermott's voice echoes in my head still.

Am I still mad? Still in the Logrus?

Yes and no. You were always mad, and will always be mad.

Clairvidere answers my call, fully here, unlike in the Logrus, and the Hall of Mirrors opens for me as always. So I am out of the Logrus. A small comfort. What happened? I don't know. But I have to find Merlin. What happened to him? I hope he isn't dead.

Of course. There is no pleasure in the love of a dead man.

I try to shut away this voice, but to no avail.

Well, simple things first. I try to trump Ghostwheel, for I believe he could help me, but get no response. I try to scry Merlin, to contact him, but of course, it doesn't work either. If he lives, he is hiding himself quite effectively from Trump, which only makes sense. Then I have an idea. Frakir. I could try to home in on it. But scrying the artifact doesn't work either. Hmm. So much for that bright idea.

Creative, but it travels with him. If he is shielded, so is it.

What to do? Brand is a master of Trumps, and I don't want to attract his notice. Well, I suppose first things first. For now I have to cut myself off.

If the others believe I am dead, then I can operate more freely. But first I need a distraction. I search the mirrors, and quickly find a shadow copy, a duplicate of myself, down to a silver dragon tattoo. Taking her into the Hall, I stun her, and wipe her mind.

I implant my memories into her. All except a few. I wish her to believe that Clairvidere was never repaired, and now is completely nonfunctional, which matches her only mundane dull silver tattoo. I give her no memories of shapeshifting,

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instead changing them to reflect only the Logrus madness. Because this copy has no powers of this nature, she must have memories that match this state of being. I let her remember how to make and use Trump. If she can do so, fine, but I hope her anger and simmering rage will give her a swift death. I nudge her in that direction. I then place my Trump deck in her sash, equip her as I would equip myself, and send her back to the shadow where I was. Leave her to her fate. Or to my fate, as it were.

You're learning, girl. The Dermott voice sounds wickedly pleased at what I have done. *Using the tricks I taught you! You realize, that makes you no better than I, but then you never were.*

Be silent! Whatever madness wrought you!

I have always been here. You can't escape me.

The others are dead. Are they? I thought I was dead. I killed Manellous. Swallowed his skull. Frederick I swallowed whole. Didn't I? I suddenly have a nauseous feeling. Bile rising. Enough ruminating! I can find out if they live easily enough. Summoning them in the mirrors, I quickly scan for the others. I see them all, some unconscious, some awake, but all alive. So, not dead. How, I don't know. As quickly as possible, I end the scrying. I don't wish to be detected.

Did you really believe Brand when he said only one would leave?

Silence!

Ha ha ha ha...

Now, lets see. The next step is communications. I have given my duplicate as close a mental state to myself as possible. My aura, my memories. Now I must change my own, if I am to hide. I concentrate on the Hall. I will it to deny Trump contact to me. I wish no one to be able to contact me or scry me; as if I were dead. Perhaps Trump will thusly be diverted to my duplicate, so close.

My own form I change. Dermott/Brand gave me knowledge of how to change forms, and more. As for shape, something different enough from myself not to hint. Some average looking middle-aged woman, starting to show gray hairs. Subsume Clairvidere into my flesh, where it cannot be seen. And my aura... I mask my aura, and that of Clairvidere.

Alright, as best I can manage, I am now free to act. Or am I? Once before, Brand somehow forced me to act to his imperatives. And then another time he tricked me. How to avoid this in the future? I search within myself. Something isn't right. I can detect no imperatives. No hidden motives. No Brand in my head.

No, just me in your head. Just us. Always.

Now what? How to find Merlin? Where might he be?

If I were him, where would I hide?

You could be him...

That would be stupid. Whatever insight I might gain would be rendered useless by the likelihood I wouldn't remember it. And in that time, I could be hunted in his place. No, that wouldn't work. Although, better I am hunted than he...

Oh yes. Nobly sacrifice yourself for him. How droll.

Where could he be? The possibilities are endless. Literally. Corwin's Pattern? Too obvious. Amber? Too dangerous. That blue crystal cave? Now that has potential. He sent Manellous there to be held, so he knows of it. Or perhaps with Ghostwheel, his construct. Surely Ghost's home shadow

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has some defenses. And very few even know that Ghostwheel exists. It is a place to start.

I can get close to Ghost's shadow, since I have seen it before. That is a start. If I physically go to Ghostwheel, then perhaps I can find out something.

Or... Dare I think it? I could become Frakir, which would allow me to automatically track Merlin, if I remember the way Frakir worked correctly. But becoming such a low thing; I might not maintain my mental awareness.

Oh, yes, make yourself a thing of his.

And I cannot change the overall mass of my body. A giant cord is not a subtle thing. Create a thing of my blood? A Frakir clone that will find him by sympathy? Perhaps. Better. One step at a time. Close to Ghostwheel is one step closer to Merlin.

Of course, you'll screw this up, just like you screw up everything. You'll deliver him to Brand, cat's-paw.

Shut up. Just shut up.

“What ravages of spirit
conjured this temptuous rage
created you a monster
broken by the rules of love
and fate has led you through it
you do what you have to do”

- *Do What You Have To Do*

Sarah McLachlan

Day 42255 cont.(20 Feb 2006)

One more idea, before I go. I will try to scry where Merlin will be in the near future and go there; short circuit the whole chase. The Hall has shown future and past before... And I see an image of Leonardo riding on a horse. Hmm. That doesn't make any sense to me. Leonardo is where Merlin will be? Leonardo will find Merlin? Leonardo is Merlin in disguise? Not what I had hoped. Not helpful.

Trump Mastery, years of study...

Advanced Shapeshifting, an ordeal of insanity...

The look on Merlin's face when you betray him to Brand again? Priceless...

Hush! The original plan stands. But I will keep an eye on Leonardo from time to time. Now, to Ghostwheel, as close as I can manage.

I end up in an area of wooded hillside. I can see mountains in the distance. Rocky outcrops erupt from areas of tangled undergrowth. Smell of water and green things everywhere. I can tell that this sort of terrain will have numerous caves, ravines and crannies. A good hiding place. I remember Ghostwheel was in the mountains. High up, near the clouds, in a ring valley. A lot like my SurengiinWays, now that I think of it... A protected place.

It'll be a hard climb to those mountaintops... Are these even the right mountains? As close as I can get. A place to start, no sense in second-guessing now. Ah, just as well I don't have Kaze with me; the terrain here isn't suitable for horses.

The rest of the day spent in hard climbing. No sense in sending a creature of the blood out when terrain inhibits my ability to follow.

Why don't you just grow wings and fly up out of this tangle? You are always so dense. Always taking the hard way out.

Be quiet. I don't want to be a target. And I couldn't follow my tracker from the air anyway.

Oh, and scuttling along the ground, you're less of a target?

I hate you.

I know. You've always hated yourself.

By evening I am tired, but at least the voice has stopped, for a while. I find a cave, large enough to camp in without discomfort. And try to rest, although my mind is churning. What happened to me in the Logrus, really? I may never know...

"...I am your mind giving you someone to talk to

...If I smile and don't believe

Soon I know I'll wake from this dream

Don't try to fix me, I'm not broken

I'm the lie living for you so you can hide

Don't cry...

Suddenly I know I'm not sleeping

Hello I'm still here

All that's left of yesterday"

- *Hello*

Evanescence

Day 42256 (27 Feb 2006)

Morning brings an unpleasant surprise. One eye open, I see Clairvidere reflecting the creeping sunlight on my arm. And the hair falling before my eyes is dark, my normal color. In sleep my form has reverted to my true self. Damnation.

I take a deep breath, and try to relax. It doesn't matter. I'll be found or I won't. I have a distraction in place, I've taken all the precautions I can. Likely enough anyone who could find me past the Trump screening would see through such a disguise anyhow. No sense in worrying about what I can't control. As to what I can control... Time to check in on my duplicate. With Clairvidere formed to a scrying bowl, I seek her out.

And I find her with Frederick. They are haranguing Bethany, and she really seems to hate me! Good girl, Bethany, there might be hope for you yet. She fears me, I can tell, despite her anger. And then I am struck by the metaphysical bombshell... The three of us were tasked to find Merlin, leashed once more by Mandor's crystal parasites before we had left the grips of Tuesday/Mandor's madness.

Oh, tian xiao de! Not again! This is a bigger problem than my shapeshifting. With those damn transceivers, Mandor could trace me! Or Tuesday, whoever holds the leash this time. And worse yet, control or destroy me. Zao gao! I don't want to be Chaos' bounty hunter again!

Despite your duplicate's enthusiastic acceptance of the task.

I made her that way. Twisted and evil. All the better to get herself killed. The sooner she dies, the sooner folk stop looking to manipulate me.

Ha. You can't make evil, only distill what is already there. She is you, only lacking your weakness.

Hu che! Focus. What to do about it? I don't know how long I have. Not that much time has passed, so the parasites can't be too well established yet... Maybe I can rid myself of them. I couldn't shapeshift then. I can now.

Careful, mei mei...

Don't patronize me! If you insist on haranguing me, be useful, or be quiet!

Are you asking for my help?

...Can you help?

Give yourself over to me, and I can.

Oh no! Trickster. I will not give myself up. I saw what happened to Dermott when he lost himself in shapeshifting. I won't let that happen to me! I won't give in to you!

Unless you know who you are, you can't prevent losing yourself.

I know who I am.

Do you?

Focus, focus! Business at hand. The parasites. I have to free myself of them. Think. What have I learned since then? What do I know of them, what can I deduce? Parasites. They are like a virus. They attach to the nerves, and use my own nervous system like a network. They have a defense. If attacked, they immediately form a matrix, crystal daggers, that rupture cells violently, causing great damage, death.

That much seems sure, from what I gathered the first time, and what I've learned since. What does that leave me? It can't have colonized all my nerves yet. The parasites travel through the blood until they do. That seems likely. So...

Careful...

If I were to isolate the affected nerves, wall them off, and lure out the free-floating parasites, I could eject them.

Failsafe.

But if I don't touch the affected cells, don't attack them, the parasites won't feel threatened. The failsafe won't trigger.

You can't touch the free-floating ones directly.

If I transform part of my blood to nerve cells, then carefully attach them all in a mass with the others once they have sieved the loose ones from my bloodstream...

Possible, but dangerous.

So are the parasites themselves, if Tuesday or Mandor discover what I've done!

True. But to lose so much nerve tissue... You risk brain damage, or even death.

There are so many worse fates than death...

True. But are you willing to suffer, to lose your consciousness, to wander as a mindless beast? Touch the brain, never the same...

I am already not the same. I am already insane.

Then go ahead. Perhaps you will die and I will live in your place.

You are trying to frighten me. Perhaps it will work, and you will die. That's why you want to stop me, isn't it?

No.

I don't believe you.

I decide, then. I cannot be so subjected to the will of another. Time to make a stand, for myself. What I do here affects me, and no other. It will be for me. Whatever the consequences.

I gather my things together, and set up a more permanent camp in the small cave. I don't know how long this will take. Best to be settled, and safe.

Deep meditation and focus clears my head, and the incessant chatter of that Dermott-voice stills. Everything goes away. And I descend into the world of the beating heart, and the pumping blood. Of the dark world within. One careful shift after another. Time has no meaning, only focus. Blood and bone. Nerve and brain.

It lasts an eternity. I am no longer human, I know. When finally I wall off the last cells in a calcite cyst, I eject that thing, like a geode. And I slowly, carefully, begin to slide myself back to a comforting shape, a human form in which to rest.

And then there is the pain. Pain beyond any I have felt before. Sourceless pain, and weakness. And darkness enfolds me.

“The ice is thin come on dive in
underneath my lucid skin
the cold is lost, forgotten
Hours pass, days pass, time stands still
light gets dark, and darkness fills
my secret heart forbidden...”

- *Ice*
Sarah McLachlan

Day 42259 (27 Feb 2006)

Consciousness ebbs and flows in an ocean of pain. At last it seems, the ocean reaches a low tide, and my mind emerges. I am awake. I open one eye, and see only darkness. Am I blind?

What did you expect? Did you think the optic nerves would be untouched?

So. We are still here. And as the low tide of pain recedes further, I feel constricted. As if the roof was pressing upon me. And I feel cold. The pain takes the shape of freezing cold, and aching joints.

I open the other eye, and realize I am not blind. Moonlight creeps into my sanctuary, a pale finger of light hitting the bowl of water I left waiting by the cave entrance. The water ripples in a breeze that feels like razors across my skin. So it isn't cold enough to freeze water. The pain is real, but not the perceived source.

Overstressed and damaged nerves.
And low tide ends, and I sink again.

“Moon hangs around
A blade over my head
Reminds me what to do before I'm dead
Night consumes light
And all I dread
Reminds me what to do before I'm dead”

- *Before I'm Dead*
Kidney Thieves

Day 42261 (27 Feb 2006)

Awake again. This time not cold, but fire. And still the constriction. Has the cave fallen?

The cave hasn't changed, you have. Your wings are wedged against the roof.

Oh, well then... What? I crack my eyes open again, and find the morning sun filling the cave. The light hurts my eyes.

Surengiin's Journal #5 – Throne War

And were the sun touches my skin I feel like I am burning. Ignoring the sudden protests of cramped muscles, I turn my head, and look upward.

And I see wings. Dark, looming. I close my eyes again and rest my head once more on my arms in confusion. Have I become a beast after all?

Fool woman. Think! In shapeshifting, three stable forms. Human, Chaos, and Avatar.

But my avatar... That was the dragon...

And this is your demon form. Congratulations, most Amberites never discover theirs...

Demon form? Why?

You were near death. You had to reach a stable form. You took the one closest to what you were at that moment.

Ungh. Movement hurts, stillness hurts, breathing hurts. But I don't sink into the ocean of pain any longer. And then I realize there is another pain, from within.

Your body has been feeding upon itself for days, trying to repair the damage. Get up and eat, idiot woman!

Ergh. I hate to admit, but the inner voice is right. I try to take a mental inventory, but through the haze of agony I can't tell what state my body is really in. Finally it becomes apparent that I just have to try to move, in order to discover if I can.

And I can. Every movement like daggers, every touch against the ground a torment, but I can move. I crawl to the cave entrance, and out into the sunlight. And then I have to just lay, and rest, for a while, the sun searing me. Until I can force myself to move again. To eat, and to drink.

And eventually to stand, on shaky legs, for at least a few minutes before I have to collapse to the ground in exhaustion.

“and the animal awakens
and all I feel is black and white
the road is long, the memory slides
to the whole of my undoing
put aside, I put away
I push it back to get through each day”

- *Black & White*
Sarah McLachlan

Day 42262 (27 Feb 2006)

In the morning light, I lay upon a large boulder, basking in the sun. The pain is a constant companion now, gnawing at me, a dull thing. Brief, intense pains are easier to bear because they fade. This doesn't fade. It lingers, and although it isn't incapacitating, the effects are undeniable. Sleep is hard to find. I am beyond weak. I would weep, but I am too exhausted.

I still hold demon form; it is beyond my endurance to change it. But I have time to examine it now. Wings indeed. Great, sweeping wings. Feathered things, the breeze tugs at them listlessly, sending spasms of pain down my back. Terribly sensitive, I swear I can almost feel each individual feather.

Which only makes sense, if you are to be capable of flying with them.

Not anytime soon, I think. They are black, and show faint hints of auburn in them, when the light strikes just so... Like my hair. Except for the outermost edge, from the carpal joint down. There, the last row of feathers is silver-bright, and

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sharp. And the adjoining row is silver-edged against the black. Razor edges, on the wings.

What did you expect? The demon form is meant for attack and defense, for protection...

I expected... I don't know, scales? My avatar is a dragon, after all...

Feathers are scales, evolved. Birds came from lizards. You are halfway between human and dragon, now. Unlike those mammal-demons, with their bat wings, you are more primal, like me.

Perhaps true. My skin is still pale, but tough as marble. I have claws on my fingers and toes. But my eyes are still hazel, though more greenish and reptilian in appearance. And Clairvidere shines against the skin, like a compliment to the silver edge-feathers. The dragon I could become.

Merlin knew more than he realized.

Hush. I don't want to think about him.

But you will hunt him, still. Unleashed perhaps, but you are still drawn to him.

For a few more hours, I contemplate leaving, and try to take stock. I have already broken a finger in the hunt for food here. My bones are brittle from the calcium loss. When I caught the little creature, instinct moved me to eat it raw, bones and all. The blood lost made me weak, but that has mostly faded since yesterday.

The blood is easily replaced, the bone not so bad. I can be careful. But the nerves, that will take time. A long time, I fear. The pain is all from the nerves. Misfiring, hypersensitive nerves, among with dead spots where I feel nothing. Nerves lacking their proper connections. Everything is too hot, or too cold, too rough, too bright. My limbs feel constantly like they are 'asleep' and just waking. My body is uncoordinated and slow to respond to my wishes. I feel almost helpless. The wings are awkward, and I can't move them properly. How to use muscles you've never had before?

Take your own advice, practice!

I sigh. Time to move. I guess that I have been here almost a week, recovering. But I can't stay here forever. It hurts, but I can move. And I must move. The longer I stay, the longer I wait, the further I am from my own goals.

And there is no going back now. The other thing I have learned from divinations is that HendrakeWays has been destroyed. If any remain alive, they too are in hiding. I am alone and without a House.

"Bound at every limb by my shackles of fear
Sealed with lies through so many tears
Lost from within, pursuing the end
I fight for the chance to be lied to again
You will never be strong enough
You will never be good enough
You were never conceived in love
You will not rise above"

- Lies

Evanescence

Day 42262 cont.(6 Mar 2006)

Where to start on this long road? Honestly, my initial idea to create a creature of my blood in the form of Frakir still seems the best course. To cut myself, and hold the necessary

Surengiin's Journal #5 – Throne War

concentration for the creation, is quite difficult. Especially considering the circumstances. A small cut which in part feels like nothing, and at the same time it feels like the severing of my arm. But willpower prevails, in the end.

As the blood flows, I will it to take form. I call to my mind the essence of Frakir. What it looked like, how it moved, how it felt, the power it had, in that one time it rested around my own neck.

Yes, create another thing that almost killed you once.

Along with that, I will to it that I am its friend. A small red cord eventually lies coiled around my wrist, having formed from the line of blood oozing from my forearm.

When the jagged edge of pain from the operation has faded to a bearable level again, I then place this small thing upon the ground, with a firmly willed command.

Lead me to Merlin. I will it with all my might. Lead me to your Master. And I hope that I have managed to impart this creature like Frakir with something of Frakir's powers.

The cord sets out, slithering along the ground. It disappears into the tall grass as it goes, and I find just keeping up with it to be difficult. But I proceed. Every task worth completing has its difficulties.

And the seed of an idea has planted itself in my mind.

"The demon was an idea

The demon is awake

Scratch mark traced across the

Surface of your mind

This hour, now upon us

The hour, now arrived"

- *Unmarked Helicopters*

Soul Coughing

Day 42270 (6 Mar 2006)

A long road and a hard one, here through the greenwood. As I travel, the terrain changes around me. This Frakir-copy does indeed seem to be leading me through Shadow. But it leads me away from the mountains and from Ghostwheel. I hope it leads me true. And each night I try to sleep, fitfully, with the little cord wrapped around my wrist.

As close to Merlin as you're likely to get anytime soon.

I try to exercise as I go, stretching these great wings of mine, trying to bring them under control. Shifting back to my human form, the one time I tried, made me black out. Too much pain. I woke up still winged, still clawed, the little cord circling back and forth, waiting for me to rise and follow. Seems I'm stuck this way a bit longer. But if the pain and numbness aren't receding, at least I'm learning to deal with them better.

You aren't ready to give up being a monster yet. You're just wearing it on the outside now.

Yesterday Kaze appeared, and it was a relief to me. Riding is painful, but so is walking. And so I alternate, so that at least the stressed muscles are different. Sometimes I ride, and others I just walk, leaning against her solid flank a bit. I don't feel capable of rougher progress, whether that be at a jog or canter.

And over the past few days, the periodic scrying of my duplicate has taught me more things. The Serpent's child has been born. It is a girl. And Dara apparently perished in the

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birthing. It seems a small relief to me, though also ominous. I can't say why. Perhaps because even Dara's recovery would seem a pleasant normality that is now denied.

There's no such thing as normal anyway.

At one point I even lost contact with the duplicate. I tried to scry her, but got no response... Odd that. But I can't allow myself to be distracted from the track. I went on, even though I didn't know if the duplicate died, or simply went somewhere Trump blocked.

Isn't that what you wanted? For your duplicate to get herself killed?

But this trip did give me time to think some more. To what purpose is this journey? To what end? What do I want from all of this? Not to go back to Chaos. I've had enough of that. Then what?

You want Merlin. Face it.

The idea that was a seed is now a vine, choking out my thoughts. Forget Chaos, and Amber. I had Trump. And Trump needs a voice, and a throne.

And you need a king.

And then it happened. A wrenching feeling. Something very wrong; something in the Hall. Damn it, not now! What can I do? For a time, it seemed as though the Hall itself was out of touch, but then the feeling stabilized. Something had happened to stress the Hall, like the attack by Abyss energy when Brand had the Elders captured. What now? I try to see into the Hall, but all I see is red. Blood red.

Was it madness, or did Frederick forge a Pattern of Blood?

Do I go to the Hall? Do I try to fix what is wrong? To do so would risk losing my track on Merlin. And what could I do about it anyhow? The feeling I get is that the Hall is still there, albeit stressed or damaged. When Brand's Abyss energy attacked the Hall, it healed itself. Logically, it should heal itself again... And if I lose this track I may never find it again. As much apprehension as I feel about it, I think I need to leave the Hall to itself.

"Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.

Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain...

...Much of your pain is self-chosen.

It is the bitter potion by which the physician within you heals your sick self.

Therefore trust the physician, and drink his remedy in silence and tranquility"

- *Pain*

Kalil Gibran

Day 42271 (6 Mar 2006)

My blood-Frakir finally brings me to a place I recognize. To a great tree, growing at the foot of a Pattern. Corwin's Pattern. It crawls to the very beginning of the Pattern, and sizzles away to nothing.

So. Merlin walked his father's Pattern to escape pursuit. Clever. I can't follow his trail here; I can't walk this Pattern, even if I were so inclined. But I do have one avenue I can pursue here...

"Mikhail?" I call out to the Pattern. I know the construct, the sentience, which rules here.

"Yes, Surengiin?" The voice, predictably, comes from the tree. "What brings you here? Bethany was just here, she talked a lot, but didn't seem happy or really accomplish much of anything." Mikhail looks down from the branches. He doesn't seem at all surprised to see me with wings and claws. Even Kaze was a bit put out at first, until I calmed her, and she got used to my changed appearance.

I shrug, "Seems typical for her. I'm here to find Merlin."

"You and everybody else. Why are *you* looking for him?"

Hmm. I can tell, already, that Mikhail and this Pattern are protecting him. What to say? I'm not sure I want to reveal my whole plan, but I have to say something...

"To talk."

"About what?"

How much do I tell him? I decide that honesty is simpler. Besides, Mikhail has already been inside my mind; how much more personal could our relationship be? "To offer him an alternative to the Chaos Throne."

Mikhail smirks and raises an eyebrow. "And what would that be? Some little Shadow kingdom out somewhere?" He seems dismissive of the whole idea.

"Oh please, I know the difference between Shadow and Substance. I mean a *real* throne."

His smirk turns to honest curiosity, then. An almost feral look. "Where, then?"

"There are *three* Powers, there always have been. The Third Power hasn't had a throne, or a voice, before. I think it is time it had that."

"Here?" Mikhail seems a bit surprised.

"No." Why would he think I would offer dominion over what is Corwin's? I'm not that foolish.

"Isn't this place the Third Power?" It looks cagey and suspicious of me now.

"No."

"Then what? Explain!" Mikhail seems almost offended.

I wonder what he might be capable of doing now, if I really angered him. I don't really want to find out.

"This place is a Pattern." My first words bring a 'well duh' look from Mikhail. "A different Pattern, but still a Pattern. A different and separate manifestation of that same Power ruled by the Unicorn in Amber."

"Then you mean Trump?" He seems to have found enlightenment.

"Yes."

"Interesting." His ire seems to have subsided to curiosity again. He's thinking... Considering.

"So Merlin was here?" I prompt him.

"Yeah, he used this place as a jumping-off point. He's holed up with a few others." We waves dismissively at the Pattern etched in the rock.

"Others?"

"Yeah, a few friends, and most of House Hendrake."

"House Hendrake is alive? Thank the ancestors!" A weight lifts off my heart that I didn't even realize was there.

"Yeah, Let me check and see if he will speak with you."

And with that, Mikhail vanishes. I'm not sure I'll ever get used to that.

In the space of another breath, a figure appears in the center of the Pattern. Merlin?

"You wanted to speak with me? My! You look different."

Hmm. Keeping the Pattern between him and me, very prudent move. He knows I can't traverse it. But how did he appear in the center like that? Makes me suspicious. Is he a projection? A Pattern-ghost? Brand in disguise? I've been fooled before. Brand shouldn't be able to stand in the center of that Pattern, though.

"Hang on, how do I know you're really Merlin?"

Merlin looks frustrated. "Wanna have sex with me?"

Yes.

"Fuck off!" My terse reply is aimed both within and without.

"Well, then if we have our bona fides out of the way..."

Now he seems dismissive of the whole issue.

"That didn't prove anything. The last time we met, you helped me with a problem. When you had examined the issue, you said you needed three...material components to fix the problem... What were they?" We were alone that day, in his office... Only he should know.

Merlin grins wickedly. "A mink glove, massage oil, and a feather."

You would pick that titillating bit of data as your confirmation.

I frown a little. The inner voice had been quiet today, until now. "Correct."

"Alright, then what is all this about?"

"I came to make you an offer, and to offer a warning. The warning first, there's a Shadow double of me that's likely out to kill you."

Merlin rolls his eyes and shrugs.

"And now the offer. Forget the throne of Chaos. Let the Serpent have it. Forget Amber. Leave it to the Unicorn. There has always been a Third Power. Help me give it a voice. Help me forge a Third Eye, and raise up a Trump Throne. Between you, with Ghostwheel, and me, with the Hall of Mirrors, we could do it. And we would stand at the fulcrum of the universe, as a balancing point for both sides."

Merlin, as far as I can tell, goes through a whole gamut of emotions in a split second. Curiosity, confusion, disbelief, surprise. But in the end, the idea seems to intrigue him. He eventually gives me a mischievous grin.

"Let me just consult with the others on this...Wait here."

"I've got nothing else pressing to do at the moment."

And Merlin vanishes. I just hope and pray to the ancestors that I haven't screwed up again.

Of course you have. You've revealed your heart to him.

"She's crazy as anyone can be
That's what they say, what they say of me
Wanting love can make one do
It isn't my fault, heredity
Standin' on the outside, lookin' in
State of grace, state of sin
Standin' on the outside, lookin' in
I cannot feel a single thing"

- *On the Outside*

Sheryl Crow

All I can feel at this moment is a large pit in the bottom of my stomach. Will he accept? What if he doesn't? I have no intention of storming the gates of Chaos for him. I won't be a bulwark against the Serpent. I haven't the stamina, or the Will, for that. Not again.

But all I can do is wait. For an answer, for an idea, for something to hold onto in this time of uncertainty.

SomeONE to hold on to, you mean.

I feel like I am standing on the edge of a knife.

And then, Bethany arrives. She carries her two children on her back. "Hello, Surengiin." Her tone is cold and distant.

Fine by me. Let her be distant. Better than her inane prattling. I nod and step out of her way, waving her to proceed. She's running again, I can tell, either away from what she fears, or to Martin, or both.

"Martin?" she calls out towards the Pattern, as if it would do her much good.

Predictable. Some things never change.

I decide I'm not going to stay here. I'll go and wait for Merlin elsewhere; I'm sure he can find me if and when he wishes to. And so I find a teahouse, among the Trump images that Ghostwheel gave me, and go there.

And as I thought, Merlin awaits me.

Of course he's waiting. He's going to accept. You knew he would.

"I thought you'd be here earlier, but I guess you got distracted." Merlin seems amused at my arrival. "Bethany can be so annoying."

I shrug. "So have you considered my offer?"

"Yes, I did, for a couple weeks."

"And?"

"I accept."

That's it? That simple? No questions? No demands? Is this a trap? Too easy...

You got what you wanted. Don't turn from it now. Are you afraid?

I take a deep breath then, and try to decide where to begin... "Alright then, I guess it is time to figure out where to start."

Merlin nods, pouring tea for the two of us. "Ghostwheel's shadow seems the obvious choice."

"Yes. And I've been thinking about that. Once this goal is accomplished it is bound to attract attention."

"Unavoidable. Which is why we should out ourselves, just turn off all Trump In the universe. Declare ourselves on our own terms."

"Yeah I actually thought that was likely to be a side effect."

"I mean intentionally."

"Granted. But I meant before we do this, perhaps we should gather our defenses. Since you have at least a good portion of Hendrake with you, the gathering of a decent armed force is..."

"...Already done." Merlin states flatly.

"I see. I guess you've taken more time to arrange this than I realized."

"I've had all the time I wanted."

"Time is relative."

"Indeed...So, have you recovered from your little foray into the Logrus?"

Day 42271 cont.(27 Mar 2006)

How did he know about that? Oh, wait, I'm still in demon form. He must have guessed. "Partly."

"Who tossed you in there, is what I'd like to know." Merlin seems to acknowledge my thoughts.

Oh come on. He knows you well enough to realize you wouldn't assay the Logrus willingly.

"Brand."

"How unsurprising. I guess he tried to off you the same way he tried to off me."

"Yes, Brand tossed me in, Mandor plucked me out."

"Plucked you out? Interesting..."

"Long story. My recollections are a bit confused on the matter; not exactly trustworthy."

"That's the nature of the Logrus."

"Yes, well I seem to have gotten all the bad of it, and none of the good."

Merlin gets a confused look.

"But at least that means I am not unbalanced in terms of powers..."

"Huh?"

He doesn't understand. I may as well explain. He'll need to know the limits of my powers eventually anyhow. "I'm not Logrus attuned, despite my brief foray. I was removed too quickly, I suppose. I guess I have a more zen outlook on things than you do. I've been avoiding Pattern and Logrus intentionally. I have decided that I will take neither or both; not just one. And for matters of my personal free will, as you have both, I'd prefer neither..."

Merlin seems to consider, "I guess things would have been less complicated in the long run if I'd done things that way..." He shrugs.

"So..." I sigh, turning our conversation back to the matter at hand. "Where do we begin then?"

"Basically I figure we start by fortifying Ghostwheel. Begin with a little reshaping of the Shadow. Adding atmosphere would be the first thing, to make it more suitable to its future occupants. Currently there isn't any, above a certain altitude. Security measure."

"Ah." Good thing I didn't climb up there to try and speak to Ghostwheel personally. "What other occupants do you plan to bring into this?"

"Other than Hendrake, Dalt is with me. Rinaldo. Possibly my father, though he's a bit taken with his own realm at the moment."

"Dalt. Lovely. As long as he doesn't try to strangle me again for no reason."

Merlin seems to have a new thought. "Oh, any of your cousins you want brought in on this?"

I answer unhesitatingly, "No."

"Hm. We'll have to trade stories at some point; I'm a bit behind..."

I figure that there are a few things he should know about. "Amazing, you always seem to have the lead on me. Well your youngest half-sister has been born.... Dara the Third."

Merlin closes his eyes, I can't tell if due to a headache, or frustration. "Joy."

I continue, "And she declared herself married to Manellous."

"Ew-kay. That's twisted."

I shrug. "And HE turns out to be Mandor's son..."

"So that makes him my...nephew, step father..." Merlin seems instantly caught up in family tree calculations, that go on in a knotty fashion for a while.

I interrupt him. "We'll draw a flowchart sometime. There is one person I am curious about,"

Merlin looks up from his circular reasoning.

"Whether he's joined your merry cavalcade..."

"Who's that?"

"The Justicar." He doesn't know my relationship with him. I may be giving something away by asking, but I'd like to know his fate, just the same.

Merlin blinks. "Justicar? Of Chaos? No, he stayed behind. He's always been considered a neutral force. He had no reason to leave."

"Hmm." Interesting, I think to myself. So, my father is still in Chaos. Possibly a good thing, that.

Of course he is still there. He isn't going to leave his safe little nest; betray his identity.

He finishes his tea, and so do I.

"So... Lead on MacDuff," I quote, waving him to lead the way. I'm more than happy to let him go before me.

What, you think he hasn't already discerned your weakness?

"And cursed be he that first cries 'Hold, enough!'" Merlin completes without missing a beat. He rises, and I follow behind.

And we walk out the teahouse door and into Shadow.

"The world is not enough!

But it is such a perfect place to start...

...And if we're strong enough,

Together we can take the world apart...

...People like us

Know how to survive.

There's no point in living

If you can't feel alive."

- *The World is Not Enough*

Garbage