

Surengiin's Journal #6

Trump Ascendant

"I believe there is a
Distance I have wandered
To touch upon the years of
Reaching out and reaching in
Holding out, holding in...
...Would you try to understand
I know this love is passing time
Passing through like liquid
I am drunk in my desire...
But I love the way you smile at me
I love the way your hands reach out and hold me near...
I believe...
...This is heaven to no one else but me
And I'll defend it as long as
I can be left here to linger in silence
If I choose to"

- *Elsewhere*
Sarah McLachlan

Day 4417 (3 Apr 2006)

We left behind that island paradise this morning. Last night on the beach had been our goodbye to that place. As we rode, I could tell he was now intent to move with purpose.

"Merlin, there is someone I need to speak to before we go much further."

"Oh? Who would that be?"

"Sand."

The look he gives me clearly indicates he expects more information.

"She is tied to the Hall as I am. If I can convince her to back us, or at least leave us alone, that's one potential problem dispensed with."

Merlin nods. "I'll be rallying the troops. Catch up when you can."

"And how am I to do that?" He's got everyone holed up beyond Corwin's Pattern. I can't follow there on my own...

"Trump me."

"You'd answer?" I can't believe he'd be that foolish as to leave himself open to Trump contact or attack.

"If it's you, certainly."

Oh yes, he's got Ghostwheel filtering his Trump calls. I shouldn't worry about him so much, I tell myself. He survived quite a long time on the throne before all this. Wait. Worry about him? What's wrong with me?

And so I leave him with Kaze and step aside into the Hall. And from there, I call Sand.

"Hello again, Surengiin."

"Aunt Sand. Do you have time for lunch?"

She invites me in, and once again I sit in her little cottage in Corialane.

"So what brings you to visit me today?" Sand immediately begins fussing about in the kitchen, making tea. Of her brother Delwin I see no sign.

"Well, something rather important..." I ponder how to begin. I don't want to upset her. If anything, I'd like her

support. She was my mentor, and I got over any childish animosity I might have once felt towards her long ago.

She hands me a cup of tea, and we move into a sunny nook. She seems content to let me find my voice, and doesn't press the conversation.

"The Hall has come under attack several times recently."

"Yes, you really have been sloppy lately. You must be more careful about whom you let in."

What? I think I am blushing again, involuntarily. How could this be my fault? "The attacks from the Abyss were not due to my letting anyone in. And sometimes despite my wishes people do find their way in on their own."

"That's the nature of the Hall. But I meant Frederick."

"Frederick?" I don't recall letting Frederick in anytime in the recent past. I wouldn't now, not since he forged his Blood Pattern. He's never been trustworthy, and now he's crazy, on top of that.

"Yes, you let Frederick in and it caused all sorts of mess."

"I did? I don't recall doing anything like that."

Sand waves her hand, and in a nearby mirror, I see a scene replay. Of me, in the Hall, with Frederick. And he manifests his Blood Pattern. I expel him, to save the Hall, but not without cost. Mirrors are damaged.

Oh god, that must have been... "the clone." I mutter, under my breath. "She's an idiot." I realize that this really is my fault. "I'm an idiot." I gave the clone access to the Hall, to maintain the deception, but not the full knowledge of what happened in the Logrus. I was afraid it would shatter the Shadow Copy's mind like it did mine.

"You're dabbling in cloning now?"

"Well, it's really not a clone, it's a Shadow Copy. I've just spent enough time around the high-tech cousins I suppose the term stuck."

"Close enough."

"I found her, used her, to provide a distraction to the Courts, so I could move freely given the present situation."

"That's the problem with clones and constructs. They tend to develop minds of their own."

"I'll have to eliminate her, now. She's proven too dangerous."

Sand shrugs.

"But that brings me back to the point of my visit. I have been planning on giving the Hall a more permanent guardian."

"A servant of the Hall?"

"More like an avatar. The Pattern has the Unicorn, and the Logrus has the Serpent. It seemed time that the Hall had something equivalent."

"What precisely did you have in mind?"

"There's already a Trump construct of some power. It's already stood down both the Unicorn and the Serpent."

"Yes, when it wasn't running with its tail between its legs, so to speak. Merlin's toy."

So, she knows about Ghost's existence already? Well, I suppose she must, as ultimately, the Hall is the source of Trump Power in the universe. Something that pulls so much from it must have drawn her attention, I reason.

"It seemed to me the ideal candidate."

"Perhaps. If this plan of yours works at all."

"Granted. But if it does... following the logic through, The Hall would have an immortal and eternally vigilant

guardian, but would also have a metaphysical, if not purely physical, heart in a fixed location.”

“You think the Hall would cease to move?” Sand raises an eyebrow over the rim of her teacup.

“In a manner, yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, the construct is a rather large and immovable thing. Tying the Hall to it, logically, would anchor it.”

“Really? Are you positive?”

“As much as I can me. Much as the Logrus moves, and yet has a location, so the Hall would likely still move, but have one point of access that did not. At least, that’s the theory.”

Sand shrugs noncommittally.

And now the part I expect will upset her. Be careful, Surengiin! “Naturally this access point, like any other Point of Power in the universe, would attract a Court in time.”

Sand sets down her teacup and gives me an unreadable look.

“I’d like to offer you a position in this Court.” There. Hopefully she’ll see I’m not trying to take her base of power from her.

“Oh, how kind. You’ll change the Hall, then let me be your chambermaid.”

Oh god, she’s angry. I don’t want her for my enemy. “I did not come here meaning to insult you, I came meaning to consult you... I was thinking more as a Court advisor. If you wanted to be at the Court.” I try to be as apologetic in tone as I can. “I wanted your advice. Not to upset you.”

Sand smiles. I can’t tell if she is angry or not. “If your venture works at all, I have no objections. But first you’d have to figure out how to accomplish it. How would you bring the Hall to that construct?”

“Well, the working theory would be that I would take a piece of the construct into and through the Hall, while a piece of the Hall, perhaps a small mirror, was taken through and into the construct’s heart.”

“Mutual co-location?” Sand seems to consider for a while. “That just might work.”

“I hope so.”

“How can you know?”

“I can’t. Some things you just have to try.”

“You’re young. You learn by trying.”

“That’s why I wanted to let you know ahead of time. It seems likely to me that the nature of Trump Itself might be changed, albeit subtly, by this endeavor.”

“What about Brand? Are you prepared to fight him as well? He’s reputed to be something of a living Trump.”

“Him.” I sigh.

“You’ve met him before?”

“Several times. And never come out the better for the encounter. He’s part of the impetus of this venture. Since the Serpent consumed him, things have been... very active in Chaos. He evicted Merlin, and instated a child of the Serpent Itself to the throne. But, thankfully, since he became ‘one with the Logrus’ his grasp of Trump doesn’t seem as powerful as it once was.”

“That’s the nature of Chaos. But I hope you’re right about that.”

“So do I. But his possible interference is certainly something I haven’t forgotten about.”

“Not just possible. Probable.”

I nod. The tea is finished, and it seems time for me to depart.

“Well, go forth and try, with my blessing.”

“Thank you.”

“And when you’re ready for the final ritual, let me know.”

“Ritual?”

“The wedding. As the closest thing to a priest of the Power you are setting yourselves to represent, I thought you’d like me to officiate.”

Wedding? She knows? “You know about that?”

Sand chuckles. “Have you forgotten that you are attuned to the Hall as closely as I?”

Of course, she can see where I am, whenever she likes. As I can her, though I have never intruded upon *her* privacy. Part of me wants to be offended, that she would peek in on me like that, but the greater part is just resigned to it. I just nod in acknowledgement. “I’ll talk to Merlin about it.”

We part then, as close to friends as I think we can be, all things considered. I am much relieved that she won’t try to interfere with our venture.

And the conversation was enlightening to me as well. That sick feeling of losing touch with the Hall... that must have been Frederick’s attack. Although the Hall seems quite intact now. Returning there, I then set myself my next task. To find, and remove, that pesky copy. I won’t need the blind much longer anyhow. Things are moving now.

But I cannot find her. The mirror shows only blackness when I attempt to seek her out. And then I see Dermott. He is speaking to Manellous, about how the Surengiin they were talking to was a clone, and he needs to seek out the real me, and Merlin. Joy. So the clone is dead, and we are hunted again. And Dara III will be along for the trip. Oh no. That is the last thing we need.

Trumping Merlin brings me promptly back to his side. He’s at a war camp of some sort. We’re in a rather large tent. I can hear the sounds of an army outside.

“Well, that was quick.” He comments. “You were barely gone half an hour.”

“Not everything has to be complicated.”

“And how is Lady Sand?”

“She won’t stand in our way.”

“Good.”

“In fact she volunteered to preside at our wedding.”

“Did she now.”

“Yeah, I said I’d mention it to you.”

Merlin nods and dismisses the conversation. The wedding has been tossed into my hands. He’s handling the coronation.

I shrug. “So what now?”

“Time to move. I need to get the troops assembled.”

“How can I help?”

“Go get Hendrake together. I want them on the parade grounds in two days.”

I consider for a moment. “That I can do. Where precisely did you leave them?” If he wants me to retrieve them from Shadow...

“About four tents down.”

“Ah.”

“You know, giant banner with the Hendrake livery on it.”

“Oh thank you, *dear* I might not have recognized it.” What is with him today? That was uncalled for.

“No problem, *sweetheart*.”

He knows I hate that crap. “Feeling masochistic today, are we?”

“Always.” He waves me to get on with it.

Departing, and a bit upset, I can see the camp is even larger than I expected. About a minute after getting outside into the sun, I realize he baited me on purpose. He got my hackles up because I’m about to dive into a shark’s den of familial entanglements. And they still expect me to be the cold, repressed bitch I was five years ago. I could almost thank Merlin, for that.

The Hendrake central command area isn’t difficult to locate. Clearing my throat as I enter, I get an immediate response.

“Just put it on the table and go.” The voice belongs to Archon, who seems intent on a set of maps on a table before him.

“Certainly, brother.”

Archon whirls, and the surprise on his face is quickly replaced with joy. He sweeps me up in a great bear hug, spinning me completely around before setting me down again.

Caught unawares, all I can do is let him.

“Surengiin! You’re alive! How are you?”

“So it seems. Better now that I can breath again.”

“Come on. I didn’t squeeze you that hard.”

I actually have to crack a smile. “No, but good to see you too Archon.”

“Gilva’ll be glad to see you. What’s been going on?”

“Lots. But Merlin sent me to get the troops together. He wants the Hendrakes on the parade grounds and ready to move in two days.”

“You?”

“Yeah, you think he’s going to lead the troops himself? That’s for us to do.”

“Finally! It’s about time. So from where do we approach? The west?”

“What?”

“Or are we flanking to the south?”

My blank look stops him for a moment.

“Down the main thoroughfare?”

Suddenly it dawns on me. No one has told him. “We aren’t invading Chaos, Archon.”

“Then the plan has changed.”

“Yes, we’ll be moving to heavily mountainous terrain. Maybe I’d better go get Gilva and we’ll go over all this together.”

“Sure. Good idea.”

“Where is she, now?”

“Two down, three to the west.”

I nod, and turn to go.

“Oh, and congratulations.”

Congratulations? What? “Huh? For what?”

“Finally bedding Merlin.”

What! How did he hear about that? “And where would you have heard a thing like that.” I try to make my comment bland and unconcerned.

“Ghostwheel is a real gossip.”

Ghostwheel. Oh, great. It’s spreading tales now. Lovely. I just shrug and give a sigh. “Whatever. Back in a few.” Just what I need. We’re about to enshrine him as the avatar of a

Universal Power, and he can’t keep a secret. This really doesn’t bode well.

I find Gilva gathering up more messages and maps in her tent. When she sees me, her face lights up. “Surengiin! So, how is he?”

“Huh?”

“Merlin.”

“He’s fine... He’s back in the...” I start to point back towards the center of camp.

“No, I mean in bed.” The look of mischief on her face is unconcealed.

What? She wants me to tell her about... “I’m not discussing that.”

“Oh come on, all the juicy details.”

“No.” Besides, I add silently to myself, didn’t you sleep with him yourself, once upon a time?

“You’re no fun.”

“I never have been, from your perspective. But anyhow, Merlin sent me to inform you Hendrake needs to be assembled on the parade grounds in two days.”

“Good!”

“I’ve already told Archon, so let’s go over plans...” we make our way back to the main pavilion, where Archon has cleared the maps of Chaos from the table. Somewhere he’s found blank parchment.

“Where do we start the attack?” Gilva queries. She seems as quick to begin as Archon was.

“We aren’t attacking.”

“Oh, no. This isn’t going to be a defensive war, is it? How boring.”

“Defensive, yes. But I don’t think you’ll find it too boring.”

“Oh, come on, holing up somewhere else.”

“Not holing up. This Shadow will be the center of the new Court.”

“New court? Merlin is going to seize some little backwater?” Gilva seems dismayed. Archon doesn’t seem thrilled either.

“No... Court, as in Third Universal Power. The plan is to wall up Ghostwheel’s Shadow and raise a Trump Throne.” Didn’t anyone tell them? I thought Merlin consulted with them before he agreed to this? Wait... He never told me *who* he consulted with. Or did he? I remember a conversation a couple years ago at the resort... Corwin, Kov, Dalt, Luke... Gilva and Archon weren’t on his list.

Both their jaws drop for a moment, before Gilva gets a wicked grin. “That’s more like it! This sounds like it might be fun after all! *Everyone* is going to want a piece of this action!”

Archon nods.

I’ve never been as actively enthusiastic about war as they’ve been. But at least they know what is going on, now. But time to start the briefing in earnest now. “We’ll mainly be dealing with mountainous terrain,” I begin. Finding some pencils, I begin to sketch out a rough map of Ghostwheel’s Shadow on the paper, as best I recall it. Having a memory for Trump helps, as I first viewed the Shadow through that lens.

And so the hours of that day pass away with the three of us engaged in discussion of tactical situations that become increasingly unlikely, but theoretically possible. Over and over, we review any and every potential scenario for defense that we can think of.

Somewhere along the way, I realize it is long past time for supper, and send for some. And when I hear the tent flap open, and the smell of food wafts in, I speak without looking. "Just put it on the table."

After a split second of silence, Merlin's voice and the sound of something being dropped to the table at my elbow makes me start. "Fine."

I catch sight of something out of the corner of my eye... Oh lord... He didn't, did he?

"Get your mind out of the gutter," quips Merlin, "you're awful."

As I risk a glance to my left, to find a plate of sausage there. Archon and Gilva snicker. I think I'm blushing again. I know Merlin did that on purpose, just to annoy me. It's an awful habit he has.

Merlin then turns his attention to the charts on the table before us. He picks up a stylus, and corrects one small section of a ridgeline that I hadn't gotten a good look at. Other than that, he just nods, apparently in satisfaction at the plans thus far.

"So has Ghostwheel told *everyone* what's been going on lately?" I make the comment pointedly. There isn't any need to elaborate, really. I think Merlin understands my concern. If Ghostwheel gossips, all of us are potentially endangered.

"He hasn't told the rank and file," comments Archon snidely.

I just roll my eyes. "It doesn't bode well for our future security, if he doesn't know when to keep quiet."

Merlin lifts an unreadable gaze to me. "How far along were these plans when you arrived?" The question is simple, but direct.

"They weren't even started." And as I answer, I realize his point. Ghost told Archon and Gilva about Merlin and I sleeping together, but apparently hadn't mentioned the marriage... and definitely hadn't said anything about the plans for Shambala. Maybe Ghost can keep secrets better than I thought. I am embarrassed by my presumptions. "Point taken."

Gilva and Archon pretend not to notice this brief exchange. But Merlin isn't willing to let it go, yet, it seems...

"If you mean about us sleeping together, not that many people." Merlin replied in a sniping tone, "Just Gilva, Archon, Kov, Tessa, my father, Luke, Coral, Dalt, oh and Martin..." Merlin counts away the names on his fingers; trying to think of anyone he's missed. He looks like he's enjoying amusing himself at my expense. Embarrassing me is like a sport for him.

I just roll my eyes. "I said point taken. Enough already. We've a lot more work to do if we're going to be ready to move in two... make that a day and a half." I turn back to the maps, purposely dismissing him by my posture and tone. I can see him shift his stance out of the corner of my eye. He isn't happy with me. Oh well, that's what he gets for getting my back up.

"Fine, I'll look for a progress report in the morning." And with that, Merlin stalks away.

After a few moments of silence, Gilva snickers again. "You two act like an old married couple already." I can tell she's teasing me. She, like everyone, seems to find great enjoyment jibing me about my sex life.

"Married? That isn't until the coronation." I reply flatly.

And I am rewarded by seeing Gilva and Archon's jaws drop for the second time, in one day.

But time waits for no man, and so I bring the two of them back around to the matters at hand. "Shouldn't we bring Kov in on these plans? Who else will be leading forces?"

I am trying not to think about the fact that he left angry with me.

"I poured it on and I poured it out
I tried to show you just how much I care
I'm tired of words and I'm too hoarse to shout
But you've been cold to me so long
I'm crying icicles instead of tears...
...You'll never find your gold on a sandy beach...
...I can't lie
I can't tell you that I'm something I'm not
No matter how I try
I'll never be able to give you something
Something that I just haven't got
I want you, I need you
But there ain't no way
I'm ever gonna love you
Now don't be sad
'Cause two out of three ain't bad"

- *Two Out of Three Ain't Bad*
Meatloaf

Day 4418 (17 Apr 2006)

I spent the rest of the night and well past dawn working on the plans. Gilva, Archon, Kov and the others came and went. But I at last felt like I was accomplishing something. And so I worked on. Merlin didn't bother stopping in again. And honestly by the end of it all, I was too exhausted to care that I may have irked him. Things look like they are finally taking shape, and it pleased me.

And so in the too-bright light of late morning, I delivered the plans to Merlin. He accepted them with a nod, but little other acknowledgement. For my own part I did not care to press him. I simply left the papers and went to find the quartermaster. I needed sleep.

It wasn't hard to requisition a pavilion of my own; one was given to me in the central area of the camp, near the other command tents. I was just silently and inwardly grateful that there was no assumption that I would be sharing Merlin's quarters. But it was afternoon by the time things were arranged.

The plain cot seemed terribly inviting; and so I slept. If and when something goes wrong, I'm sure they'll wake me up and tell me all about it... Something *has* to go wrong.

"Something's wrong, shut the light
Heavy thoughts tonight...
Dreams of war, dreams of liars
Dreams of dragon's fire...
Sleep with one eye open
Gripping your pillow tight
Exit light, Enter night
Take my hand, We're off to never-never land
...don't say a word
And never mind that noise you heard

It's just the beasts under your bed
In your closet, in your head"
- *Enter Sandman*
Metallica

Day 44119 (17 Apr 2006)

When I awake, it is dark outside, but the still darkness is that of pre-dawn. The last day before we move out. I check in with the command tent, and find Archon on duty. He pours over maps, of locations I do not immediately recognize. Swampy terrain maneuvers.

"Where are these?"

"Hmm? Oh, outside the ring mountains. Back-up plans."

I nod and look over his plans for a while, but in the end I leave him to his work. My presence is completely superfluous. He didn't ask me to stay, so I don't. I decide, as the first pale rays of dawn color the sky, that I ought to at least tour the camp and see the troops. It's something I hadn't done yet, and seeing in person what has only been represented to me on paper is something I feel I have to do. I trust my own eyes more than the reports of others.

The massed Hendrake forces are almost ready to march, as they should be. Things seem in order. The troops seem anxious to be on their way, but I can tell they aren't aware of the whole situation. Some obviously believe we are still marching on Chaos in Merlin's name. A few of the Minor Houses of Chaos have joined the Hendrake forces; all the better.

I continue around the perimeter, and see heavy cavalry maneuvers being performed. When I spot the commander, all is clear to me. It is Dalt. These are the remainders of the troops he led against Amber not so long ago, against Julian's rangers. Although they appear to have been reinforced by now, and in good form. Their drills are not so beyond the pale as to be of particular interest to me, so I move on. I really have no desire to attract Dalt's attention. Let him drill.

Further around I see banners with the heraldry of Rebma on them. Ah yes, Merlin told me that Martin was here, and he apparently brought part of the Rebman armed forces with him. At least these men seem comfortable enough on dry land; though I have no doubt their greatest prowess is in naval battles.

Completing the circuit of the camp I find infantry troops doing hand-to-hand training, led by Luke. He is easy to spot, with his bright red hair. Something deep inside me twitches and urges me to caution. I've never had good fortune when dealing with any of the redheads. But he's Merlin's friend, and I can only hope that Merlin's judgment is sound in this instance.

Finally, I end up back at the center. Merlin's tent is still closed; it's well past dawn, but he's apparently not up yet. Ah well, at least that means I won't be interrupting anything. I still need to discuss a few things with him. I decide that I can be nice, and procure some breakfast.

Entering the tent, I find him still fast asleep, and simply sit myself down to wait. It doesn't take long. The smell of coffee and bacon, and the noise I made entering rouses him before more than a few moments have passed.

"Morning dear," Merlin yawns.

"Don't call me dear."

"Fine, *honey*." Even half-awake, he still manages to pull off a nonchalant riposte at my expense... "To what do I owe the pleasure of breakfast in bed?"

"Breakfast is on the table," I can ignore the jibe, but I have no intention of delivering a tray of food to his bedside! "not in bed."

Merlin just gets up, stretches in a rather catlike way, picks up the entire tray, and ambles back to his bed, leaving me sitting at the table with nothing but the toast I had in my hand. I can already see how this day is shaping up... And it seemed to be going so well until now!

"So to what do I owe the pleasure of breakfast in bed?" he reiterates.

"Well, I've reviewed the troops, and all seems in order."

"Good."

"But I'm wondering what we ought to do about Brand." I consider swiping back the tray, but dismiss the thought. I'll get myself breakfast later. I'm not going to climb into his bed just for the sake of some bacon and orange juice.

"Mm," he starts with his mouth full, "Hope he's too busy with the Chaos throne to bother with little old us?"

"I somehow don't think that's likely. He is something of a self-proclaimed Trump god, and though I hope he's distracted, I wouldn't count on it. We ought to do something to turn his mind away from us."

"Like a full-scale invasion of Chaos?" Merlin gives me a small grin.

I had been about to say something, and then it all clicked. "You already have this planned." He had all these plans moving already, and didn't bother to tell me. How am I supposed to be of help to him, if I'm always running behind on current information?

"Well, before you brought this idea of a Trump Throne to me, I was already planning on taking back Chaos, so why throw away a perfectly good plan?"

"I see. And you didn't see fit to tell me about this?" It really irks me that he claims I'm going to be his queen and partner, but he doesn't tell me what he's up to!

"You didn't ask."

"Ah well. Since you always seem to be at least two weeks ahead of me then, is there anything *else* you've already got moving that I might need or want to know about?" The venom had crept back into my voice. I had intended to be nice today, but it hurts that he is constantly sniping at me. How am I supposed to know to ask about something that I have no knowledge of? Does he expect me to read his mind or something?

"Not that I can think of at the moment."

"I see."

Merlin looks up from the orange juice carafe he was pouring. "Are we fighting?" I can't read the expression on his face.

I can't tell if he's being serious, or baiting me again. I don't know how to respond. Part of me is quickly becoming furious with this man. Part is just confused. "I..." whatever I was going to say to him has gone clean out of my head. "didn't think so."

We eat in an uncomfortable silence for a while, as I gather my thoughts. Merlin puts down the orange juice altogether, and fishes out a bottle of wine from nearby, pouring himself a glass of that instead.

“Merlin, I just feel useless when I find myself uninformed of things like this.” I am embarrassed even to have to say it.

“Well, if you’d rather be out leading the troops I’m sure I could arrange something.”

His continued nonchalance is getting under my skin. “Merlin, once this begins, I had imagined we’d both be rather busy, oh, you know, reshaping the universe?”

“Probably.”

I just exhale and raise my hands in surrender. “Fine. Since you’re always so far ahead of the curve on planning, is there anything *useful* I could be doing right now? Something *you’d* like me to do?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. But in the mean time, I’m just left waiting for the next terrible thing to happen, that will somehow end up being my fault.”

Merlin just glares at me with a look of scorn. “Well, I suppose you could try to instigate Amber to march on Chaos. That would provide quite a distraction from our plans. Or Chaos against Amber. Whichever.”

“Doubtful. Since the last time I dropped in to Chaos I was probably there less than a minute before Brand locked on and tossed me into the Logrus.”

“If you think so,” he has put on that unreadable expression again.

Is he disappointed? I can’t tell. If so, at what? My inability to pull off this coup for him, or my unwillingness to be a sacrificial lamb for him? I don’t know if I should be angry or not. I feel useless and frustrated. He isn’t being helpful.

I just get up and depart, intending to join Hendrake’s morning maneuvers. Maybe it will burn off some of this aggressive energy welling up...

And then it hits me. I had something to tell him, and I totally forgot. He had me so upset, I didn’t even tell him what I wanted to...

I do an about face and march right back in, only to find him with the orange juice half-way to his lips again. He promptly abandons it once more for alcohol when he sees me.

“Oh, by the way,” I try to keep my tone neutral...

“Yes.”

“Before I go off and instigate Amber against Chaos as you requested...”

“I’d like to think it was a suggestion, not a request.”

“Right. There’s an effective difference?”

“I’d like to think so, you’re my fiancée, not my slave...”

And that is not what I expected him to say. Oh-kay. Right. Something just makes me uneasy about it, and I can’t place what. And once again my train of thought is completely derailed. “Fine. What did I come here to say again?”

“I have no idea, I’m sure.”

“Oh yes. I thought I’d let you know that Manellous and his daughter-wife Dara the Third...”

“That’s just wrong.”

“Yeah, I know I’ve tried to just stop thinking about it... Anyhow... They’ve been sent out to hunt us down.”

“Manellous is in charge?”

“Technically, but I think it’s Dara who’s really pulling the strings...”

“Yes, but as I understand it my,”

“Younger half-sister” I interject.

“For lack of a better term, yes, is not exactly...” Merlin seems to reach for a phrase, “*compus mentis*.”

“That hardly matters; neither is Brand, and it didn’t stop him from being quite effective in interfering with the rest of the universe.”

“True enough.”

“In fact, I think I was at my most effective when I was completely off my rocker.” I don’t know what led me to say it, but it was probably true.

Merlin just raises an eyebrow. “Well then, if you think it is going to be an issue you could...” he begins.

I just walk out, waving “just thought I’d let you know. Later.” I’m not even going to let him finish that one. I’m not going after that serpent-spawn child and her incompetent husband. Nope. He can deal with it himself if he wants.

But, the idea occurs to me, I can work on intelligence... Back in my own tent, I pull Clairvidere off my arm, and set it upon the table as a silver scrying bowl.

And for some reason the first thought that comes to my mind is the memory that Merlin intimated that he knew who my parents were, those years ago. I don’t know if it’s true or not. But if he does know, I shouldn’t be behind the curve again. I’ve met my father, Finndo. But it has been implied more than once that my mother was not the Shadow woman I once thought was my dam. I should know. And so I set my mind to scry my mother.

The image is slow in coming. When the mirror finally clears, I see only a cemetery. The image focuses on a headstone. I can’t make out the name in its entirety, it is covered in ivy and weather-worn. I can only read the surname, which appears to be ‘Karm’. I can make nothing more from it. The cemetery, by the looks of the landscape and terrain, is either in Amber, or very close to it.

I decide then to change my tactic; I turn the divination to the closest living relative on my mother’s side. The image fades and is replaced by a thin man with brown eyes, and red hair. His features are sharp and intelligent. I do not recognize the fellow. I’ve never seen him before, and he does not feature in my Trump deck, even in the images augmented by Ghostwheel. I can only tell that he is in Amber City, somewhere.

It fills me with trepidation. The auburn in my hair is all too clear in origin now; if this is the line from which I come. Between the auburn and grey of Finndo, and the red of this young ‘Karm’, I am only relieved my own locks are not as red as Bleys or Fiona... Or Brand, I remind myself. Why is it always redheads that cause me so much worry?

But I lay that aside. I do not see any further gain in this scrying. I have living relatives on my mother’s side. And they are of Amber, not of Shadow. They are not, thankfully, of the royal family. My family tree is not a knotted bush. A small relief. But nothing of further value currently, unless I wish to somehow use them and my father as a distraction. I can consider this option, hold it in reserve.

About this time, word trickles through camp that Martin had some sort of falling out with Bethany. Not surprising. I’m only surprised he actually kept her around as long as he did; actually spawning two children? That was the amazing part. Wait... I call forth her image in my scrying bowl. Bethany is somewhere in a forest, dragging an unconscious Liir by the hair. Well, at least it seems she’s doing something about her

problems for a change... But of her children I see no sign. Martin similarly, is alone. Hmm... An idea.

I scry out Bethany and Martin's children. Predictably, Bethany has left them in some soft and pliant Shadow where she thinks they can't be found. Somewhere that they will be coddled. I don't like the idea of a future generation turning out like Bethany, and it might perhaps just work out that I could have some leverage over the both of them...

The children are easily enough plucked from the 'safety' of Bethany's care. And then I find another place; one not too far from Ghost's Shadow, that won't be too affected by the transition to come. One where they can be fostered in a Court, and taught the things an heir to a throne should learn. Fencing. Statecraft. How *not* to be a simpering wuss like their mother. And there I leave them, at least until our own Court is stable enough. I may decide later to raise them openly in our Court, as hostages against Amber and Rebma's good behavior.

But meanwhile, I think it may be time to check in on my cousins. Leonardo is on the throne in Chaos, apparently he has been made regent. But if he is regent that means Tuesday has escaped that duty... Tuesday I find in Amber, apparently being held for experimentation by Fiona. Frederick is in the same situation. Kaladon is apparently near to Amber, and trying to Trump me, but my Trump calls are forwarded to the deceased Shadow of myself; I don't even feel myself bothered by the call.

And then I reach Manellous. He is still with Dara, so I skate over him quickly. I don't doubt the serpent-child has the ability to detect prolonged scrying.

And finally I turn my mind to Dermott. What a surprise! Dermott is at Corwin's Pattern. The image of him clears just as I see Mikhail disappear. Dermott seems peeved.

"Hey," Dermott pokes at the Pattern, getting burnt fingers for his trouble, "come back here! I'm not done with you yet! What was that about a third universal power?" Beyond him I see reddish light, and turn my attention to it; a squad of fiery beings, Abyssal plasma creatures, awaits his orders.

Damn! Perhaps I should tell Corwin... No. He might go off to 'deal' with Dermott, and the last thing I want is an incapacitated Corwin in the Abyss again, not now. But Merlin should know. And so I scoop up the scrying bowl, allowing the contact to momentarily lapse, as I wander back to the command tent.

I find Merlin elbow deep in paperwork. The look on his face is not pleased when I barge in, but he buries it quickly.

I set the bowl right in front of him, waving over its surface to recall the scrying. "Look who's knocking," I quip.

"Well, I see Dermott... and Manellous," Merlin sighs, and then an eyebrow raises.

Wait... Manellous?

"And who is that?" Merlin points to the third figure at the foot of the Pattern.

"Dara the Third." I identify the figure for him with a nod. Dermott is scolding the Pattern, as if it will bring back Mikhail for him.

"Great."

"And the things behind them are Abyssal plasma creatures..."

"Wonderful. Oh, this should be interesting..."

Following Merlin's gaze, I see that Mikhail has reappeared. Dermott wants his help, it seems. A flash of

energy renders the rather upset and impatient forms of Manellous and Dara unconscious. Dermott then picks up Dara and approaches the Pattern's beginning. He can't, he isn't, he is!

"You can't walk this Pattern father, you aren't of the Blood."

"You told me I could walk it anytime Mikhail."

The Pattern avatar seems to consider for a while. "So I did. But are you sure this is a good idea?"

"No, but I have to try and fix her."

Dermott proceeds to walk Corwin's Pattern. How he can must be related to his ties to Mikhail, is all I can figure.

"I don't like the looks of this," I comment to Merlin.

"And what would you have me do about it?" he asks.

"Well since you're always two weeks ahead of me, I figured you'd have already addressed this." My response is curt.

"Well guess what, congratulations, you just caught up!"

I am momentarily surprised. But my mind is turning quickly. "Can we get Mikhail to bring them directly here? We could end this cleanly, by the sword." Why Dara still survives I don't understand at all. But as he carries her to the center she still breathes.

"I prefer to give them their rope, and see if they will hang themselves by it." Merlin is as reluctant to act as ever.

But if the serpent child gains power over Corwin's Pattern, we're out of places to gather strength; nowhere is safe. It makes me very nervous. "As you wish." Let the choice be on Merlin's head.

"There." Dermott pants with exhaustion. He has reached the center, and both he and his charge are still breathing.

Mikhail waits for him to catch his breath. "Now what?"

"Well, is she fixed?"

"How do you mean?"

"That whole genetic memory thing..."

"Oh that, yes, I erased it."

"Good."

And then Dara vanishes, right from Dermott's arms. "Hey!"

"She'll wake up not knowing who she is or how she got to where she is."

"Where is she?" Dermott demands.

"I think that will stay my little secret," Mikhail replies. "It would spoil all the fun to tell you."

"Damn it, I..." Dermott hesitates. "Oh shit! I feel sane again. Static. Damn you, now I've got this damned Pattern imprint too!" Dermott seems quite upset by it.

Myself, I am just amused. Dermott brought this on himself. I'm just worried he'll try to damage the Pattern again, or do something else brash. Instead he turns and wills himself back to the Pattern's beginning.

"Well, at least I can get Manellous fixed as well. I owe him that much for messing up his life."

"He can't traverse this Pattern," Mikhail denies Dermott. "He won't survive."

"Then how can I fix him?" Dermott considers for a moment. "Wait. I can send him to the other Pattern. Help me."

Mikhail considers for a time, then relents. The three of them vanish in a flash of light. And only the plasma creatures remain. They stand impassive, seeming to await orders. After a few minutes, no one returns.

I have an idea.

"Hey Merlin, look what they left sitting around for us. I'll bet Luke could order those things to march. He's of the Blood for it. They'd make a hell of a distraction for Amber."

"Who would we send to command them?"

"They need someone? Why not just order the march on Amber and let them go?"

"But how would Amber know it was from Chaos?"

"Those things trashed Amber Castle once already on Brand's commands. Everyone there will recognize what they are."

"Good point." Merlin rises and leaves the tent as I continue to observe the squad of plasma beings.

Luke appears at the center of the Pattern after a moment, and orders them to march. The plasma things obey, as I hoped they would. As they begin to move, they are enveloped in circles of light that seem to whisk them away. Ghostwheel. Merlin returns a few moments after.

"They're on their way."

I just grin. "A productive day for us, yes?"

"Dinner?" is Merlin's only reply, holding out a hand to me...

"Very well." I can be gracious to him. I've accomplished quite a bit today despite the sniping. I rise and clear the papers from the table as he orders food brought.

Once we've settled to eat, conversation seems to come easier than it did this morning. "Merlin, a few years back, before we went to Maui, you implied you knew who my parents were."

"Mm-hm."

"Do you really know?"

"Yes."

"How could you?"

"Father."

I can't tell if he's being petulant, or just focusing on his food, or both. "How would your father know?"

"Your father."

"He *told* you?" I can't imagine Finndo letting out any secret about his past.

"I was the king. Like he was going to say no?"

I sigh quietly. "But how did you even know to ask him?"

Merlin just waves his hand slightly; drawing my attention to the large spoked ring he wears there. "This."

"And that is?"

"Spikard."

"What's a spikard?"

"Magical artifact."

"I see." How on earth did a magical artifact grant him this knowledge? But then again, it might be linked to Trumps. He *did* use that ring, as I recall, repairing Clairvidere after Werewindle damaged it. I consider for a moment.

"Well, not exactly just that," Merlin finally relents. "Ghost did most of the legwork."

"He did?"

"Yeah, after I mentioned that I thought you were cute the first time, he took it upon himself to dig up your whole pedigree."

Now that I can believe. Ghostwheel is enthusiastic about some things, and being a magical Trump computer, I don't put divination and deduction beyond his abilities. "When exactly was this?"

"You remember that first time with Mandor's crystal things..."

"Yes, after that court dinner in Chaos."

"Then."

"I see. You were after me even back then."

Merlin makes no answer.

"That was what, thirty-five, forty years ago?"

Merlin shrugs.

"Or was it longer, your time?"

"Shorter."

"Hm. Well that explains why everyone was telling me how they were so pleased to finally meet me. You'd been talking about me." It also occurs to me that he knew who my parents were long before I did.

Merlin just digs into the next course, completely ignoring me.

"You know, that made me feel like I had a target the size of a barn painted on my back."

"Now you know how I feel every day. Comes with having a crown."

"And what did I ever do to you?" The comment is a snipe, I know. But it's a little one, not meant in seriousness.

"Smote me with your beauty?" At that point he seizes my hand and kisses it, in an overblown gesture of chivalry.

I just frown slightly. There's no winning with him. I just sigh and say nothing further until dessert. There is one other matter, but waiting a while might make it easier to begin.

"Merlin..."

He looks up at me, but says nothing.

"Do you have any terrible objections to me destroying the Font of Power?"

"Well, Luke would be more than a bit peeved." He thinks for a moment. "No, as long as you don't kill Jasra."

"I hadn't intended to. Unless she is tied somehow to the Font in a way that it would harm her."

"Not that I know of."

"Or your brother."

Merlin thinks for a moment. "Well, going cold turkey won't be pleasant for him..." he looks up at me, "or for you I imagine."

Ah yes... He knows I've been through the Font before. Thinking about it makes me distinctly uncomfortable. "That's been dealt with." Mikhail purged me of those obsessive, self-destructive urges. I recall his explanation; that he separated out that part. But it's still there, isn't it? What if it returns?

"If you say so." Merlin doesn't seem convinced of my resolve.

Perhaps because I'm not so convinced myself. "It's part of Brand's power base. I'm not wanting to destroy it just to be petty. Anything that weakens his hold on Trump is a bonus for us."

"If you think so."

I just shrug. "It's a possibility."

We finish eating in silence, and the table is cleared again. It has grown late, and tomorrow is going to be a hell of a day, I know. "Good night, Merlin." I rise, and turn to leave.

And find Merlin's arms snaking around my waist. "Don't go."

"Merlin." It's true that over the past few years, there haven't been many nights when we haven't shared a bed...

Even on nights when we didn't have sex. But that was at a vacation resort. Not a war camp.

He starts to kiss my neck then. "Missed you last night."

"Merlin." I am not amused.

He sighs. "What now?"

"We are in a tent, surrounded by people..."

"All of whom already know we are lovers."

"I have no intention..."

"What, afraid I'll make you scream so loud you'll keep them awake?"

I'm blushing, and I can't manage to stop myself. I don't scream! And I don't appreciate his implications.

"Still a prude, Surrey?" he's chuckling, but not stopping.

"Tomorrow is going to be one hell of a rough day."

"Exactly." He holds me tighter.

"I'd have thought a good night's sleep would be in order."

"Hell, I can't sleep tonight."

And something occurs to me, just then. I was afraid to leave the camp earlier. Afraid something would happen to derail our plans. We are on the verge of something important; the biggest thing I've ever attempted to do, and possibly the largest thing he's ever attempted as well. Maybe he's afraid too... Afraid to let me out of his sight; afraid that something will happen to destroy all we've planned. That one of us would be attacked, kidnapped, betrayed, injured... That it will all fall apart. I can understand that. I'm paranoid as well.

"All right Merle," I relent under the weight of my revelation. "I'll stay." I cover his hands with mine, though, to still them. "Honestly, I don't know if I'd be able to sleep tonight either." I'm too nervous about tomorrow myself.

And I realize that I can't feel the ring on his finger. He hasn't removed it; rather it feels like some sort of little bubble of force simply prevents me from touching it, despite the fact our fingers have interlaced. It makes me uneasy, though I can't decide why. Magical artifact, sure. Of what type? I know so little about this man, even after all these years. And why have I never noticed this before?

He leaves my side then, to tie the tent flaps shut, and I turn with a sigh, and douse the lamps. And then he pulls me over to his bed, kissing me in earnest.

"Merle..." I stop his hands from pulling off my clothing, just yet, "We ought to at least try to get some sleep."

Merlin snorts derisively. "Too wound up. Better idea."

"What, to be exhausted in the morning?"

"Nah. Tantric energy building."

When his hands find the first and second chakra points on my back I realize he's serious. Whoever invented this technique, energy building through strictly disciplined sexual frustration, must have been insane. But it works. At least I won't be *tired* in the morning.

"Here I am in silence,

Looking round without a clue.

I find myself along again.

All alone with you.

I can see behind your eyes,

The things that I don't know.

If you hide away from me,

How can our love grow? ...

I know I could break you down,

But what good would it do?

I could surely never know

That what you say is true.

Here I am in silence,

It's a game I have to play.

You and I in silence.

With nothing else to say.

I wanna know, What you're thinking.

There are some things you can't hide.

I wanna know, What you're feeling.

Tell me what's on your mind."

- *What's on Your Mind*
Information Society

Day 44120 (24 Apr 2006)

By morning well, as I thought, I wasn't tired. In fact, I had to admit to myself that I felt pretty damned good, and more in tune with Merlin, at least on some level, than I ever have. Which was probably for the best.

And when I went out and gave the order for the troops to march, everything seemed to be going rather smoothly. Something in the back of my mind said things were going *too* well. But for the life of me, I could find no fault with any aspect of the operation thus far, so there was nothing to do but get underway with all speed. The longer we postponed this, the more likely we were to meet interference. The surgical strike is often more effective than a long-planned campaign. Second-guessing myself never improved the outcome of any of my endeavors.

And so while Merlin's armies, and my armies, I reminded myself, began the process of moving, I took Merlin into the Hall. I didn't know if he had ever been there before, but I had told him something of its nature during our planning session in Maui, and he didn't seem at all surprised. I briefly feared some interruption at this point, but there was none.

And when I led him along the corridors to the far fringes of the Hall, to where I would find what I needed to give him, he reached into a pocket and pulled out something, that he tossed to me.

"Ghostwheel's link," he commented, as I caught the thing.

It was a ring, which seemed to be made of platinum and had gold filaments layered and intricately interwoven throughout it, interspersed with tiny diamonds, or some other crystal. The crystals seemed linked by the filaments, like constellations in the night sky. Or a circuit board, I reminded myself. For such a practical thing, it was quite lovely.

I nodded as I slipped the thing upon my finger, and finally found what I sought. A small mirror, just the size to hold in one hand, in a frame of silver and gold. I willed the thing free of the wall, and passed it to Merlin. "And the link to the Hall."

The moment seemed to hang. I felt some trepidation. I think he felt it too. From this point onward, there would be no turning back. We would succeed, or die trying. Neither of us had any illusion that this wasn't dangerous. Finally we both let out the breath we were holding; I didn't realize I was holding it. And with more determination than I knew I possessed, I deliberately and firmly set my hand, with Ghostwheel's ring, upon the glass.

“Ghost, let him through.” My voice was steady, despite my feelings. *So it begins*, I thought to myself.

And the mirror cleared, showing the edge of the maze that was Ghostwheel’s workings. Merlin squared his shoulders, and stepped through. When the glass of the mirror he held touched the glass of the larger mirror, the connection was made. We were committed now. We would meet in the middle; each of us carrying a portion of one through the other would force the blending of Ghost and the Hall.

When I pulled my hand away from the glass, I finally realized how hard this was really going to be. The mirror clouded over, but glowed with a white light. And a golden filament seemed to extend from it to the ring. It seemed as ephemeral as spider silk, but it gave significant resistance to my movements. And when I finally pulled it to where my hand was closer to another mirror than to the first, another filament shot out. I couldn’t say if it had gone from ring to mirror, or vice versa, but it hardly mattered. Another glowing mirror confirmed my suspicions.

And so I too set my shoulders squarely, and with a deep breath, began the long walk to the center of the Hall. I knew where I would end; that blank room in the center of the endless mirror maze. And I would reach it when the Hall had absorbed enough of Ghostwheel. Perhaps all of it.

The first few steps were not too difficult, but every mirror I passed went white, and another line of power added to the web. Before long I felt as if I was pushing an ever-growing boulder uphill. The torture of Sisyphus, I thought to myself. Every step forward required greater and greater effort. Like Gulliver, I was being dragged down by a multitude of tiny threads.

I forged onward, and time quickly ceased to have meaning. The entire world was confined to the next few feet; the next step, the next breath. Effort became strain. Strain became agony. Soon I closed my eyes. The white glow and gold threads had been rendered only a blur by the sweat running from my brow. After a time I had no idea how far I had come, or how far I had yet to go. There was only the dogged knowledge that if I stopped even for the briefest of seconds, I would never be able to overcome the inertia of these threads to move again. My choices were to continue, agony or no, or die.

Eventually even the burning of every muscle within me, especially that of the arm that bore the ring, began to fade. My world had contracted to a smaller space than that. There was only the Will to move.

Finally there was a point, I couldn’t say how long it had been, where the air itself seemed to resist. All that existed seemed to drag upon me, and my arm trembled. And then there was a cold shock. I opened my eyes, just in time to see my hand touch a mirror. I could hardly comprehend what was before me. I stood in the entry to the white room. My hand, bearing the ring, and surrounded by a blizzard of golden-white filaments, pressed against some sort of barrier. It seemed like the edge of reality itself. It rippled and reflected, yet was clear, and as I pushed through it, it seemed to burst like a soap bubble.

As this rippling surface broke, I saw Merlin facing me, his arm similarly outreached, wreathed in light. Where our hands met, the ring touched the small round mirror. The silence was so profound I wondered if I had gone deaf. And then there was

a blinding flash, and a wave of power erupted from that point, spreading outward like a tsunami wave, or a supernova. It washed over us, and outward, and in its wake, everything was somehow irrevocably changed, though nothing was different.

My own awareness floated, somehow separated from my body, and I idly wondered if I would die now, though it seemed of little consequence. I could *feel* the Hall, in a way I had never experienced before. Merlin and Ghostwheel as well, I could sense. We were all of us a part of this, that was Trump.

And I watched as Merlin and I both fell to our knees, and he collapsed to the floor. As we fell, I became aware that our right arms, that had borne the weight of creation, were entangled in a platinum chain.

Consciousness constricted, and as exhaustion washed over me, I saw what was caught between our hands. On the chain, in a setting of platinum and gold filigree, was a jewel. The size of an eyeball, perhaps, it looked like a blue diamond. And within it was infinite reflection, which seemed to move and shift the more I looked upon it. I realized then, that I knew the path in the Jewel, for it was a Jewel, like unto the Jewel of Judgment, or the Serpent’s Eye. I knew this path, for I had walked it, as Merlin had walked it, we had forged the reflected path. It was burned into our souls forever.

We had succeeded. And with that thought, a weight I didn’t even know I carried lifted from my chest. I hung the chain around my neck, dropping the Jewel under my collar, and let myself lie down upon the floor, where sleep quickly claimed me.

“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 44121 (24 Apr 2006)

When I awoke, I could still feel the Hall of Mirrors stretching out around me. It was an odd feeling, to be sure. The white room was no longer what it was. Walls that had been white were now mirrored, though the mirrors reflected nothing, at present. The floor and ceiling were covered in a pale mosaic of non-reflective mirrors, and silver and gold wires. It was still simple, still nearly white, but not the same. It had a feeling of mechanical precision about it, which had not been present before. I could feel Ghostwheel, somehow idling in some mechanical form of rest, but present.

And when Merlin finally opened his eyes, I knew that he felt it too. He looked haggard and worn. The realization struck me that he was a frailer creature than I. His eyes were shadowed with exhaustion, still. He would need more rest before we would both be ready to open our court.

But in some distance we heard a warhorn, and recognized the call of Hendrake. I knew that they had arrived at the outskirts of Shambala, and would reach the keep therein within a day. It was time to go forth and meet our new kingdom. So we rose, and half-leaning upon each other, stepped forth into the realm we had created. It was but the effort of a thought. As we did so, we deactivated Trump

throughout creation. Only we remained. It was our announcement to the universe of the beginning of our new reign. From now on, all Trump originated from us.

The castle and surrounding countryside had symmetry about it that spoke of perfection, but not sterility. All around us, the vistas spoke of light and openness. Wind whispered through trees that perfectly complemented the harshness of cliffs. I realized then what had not occurred to me before, when we had planned this. The realm *was* perfect, in a way. Perfect to the ideals of our Power. The precision was that of a fractal; a moving, living mathematical form. Perfectly ordered, yet with freedom of movement and growth. The balance of order and chaos.

Another sound then intruded on our awareness. Clapping. Turning, we saw Sand and Delwin, standing in the entryway to the keep, just behind us. I was happy; these two were the first I wanted to welcome them, and give them the first powers of the new Trump. It was only right, as she had initiated me into the Hall.

“Well done.” Sand said, smiling broadly.

I had the thought to embrace her, but then Delwin raised his hand. Upon it was a spoked ring, like the one Merlin wore. A flash of lightning erupted between the two rings.

The surge of power was both startling and excruciating. Merlin collapsed against me, unconscious almost instantly. But pain was an old acquaintance of mine, and I remained standing, though I could not move. I felt as if my heart was being crushed by a cage of blades; I couldn't breathe.

In that pain there was another feeling. My awareness, that had encompassed the breath of my realm, shrunk. I was once again only myself. That Power, that Creation, was leeching from myself, and Merlin, as if it were a receding tide. And I could distantly feel that tide settle upon Sand and Delwin.

I was stunned. Why were they doing this? It was unnecessary!

“Always remember, that there are bigger fish.” Sand's smile had gone as cold as ice. “We have no interest in your Court. Too obvious for our tastes. Rule it, if you can, in good health. Good luck defending it. Just learn that creation is not yours to own.”

Delwin ended the electrical assault, with a flick of his wrist. And in a blink, the pair was gone. No longer held upright by the lightning locking my muscles, my legs trembled, and threatened to collapse. I swallowed a great breath, though the muscles in my chest burned. My heart fluttered like a caged bird, each pulse sent pain knifing through it.

The weight of Merlin's limp form beginning to fall to the ground broke the stupor paralyzing my awareness. I caught him, and braced myself until I knew the two of us would not end up in a heap. He was still alive, still breathing, but neither of us was in good shape. My instincts told me to seek a place of relative safety, and then assess. When Hendrake arrived, much less anyone else, they couldn't see us like this. I lifted him in my arms, and immediately headed inside the keep proper.

I knew where the royal apartment would be; in the place that seemed right. Up the stairs, above the throne room. And there I laid him in the great bed. I pressed my ear against his chest, and listened. His heartbeat and breathing were both steady, though perhaps somewhat labored. I was no doctor,

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but I knew that being of Amber, if we were alive, we could heal. I didn't know if he was just unconscious, or comatose. I hoped it merely the former.

The ring, the Spikard that had been the key to our betrayal, still sat upon his finger. I tried to remove it, but could not do so. That bubble of force prevented me from touching it. I considered whether to cut off his finger, but decided against it, for now. The damage had been done.

When I stood again I felt the weight of the Jewel against my neck. Sand and Delwin had not taken it. When I concentrated upon it, I could feel the Power within it. I could still reach it. And I could still feel the Power of the Hall. They had not taken that away from me, from us, I supposed. But I felt it as one using it from without; I was no longer a part of it integrally.

It was a bitter feeling. Twice I had filled myself to overflowing with Power; I had felt like a part of creation itself. And twice that Power was stolen from me, by others that considered me no more than a reckless child. I felt an emptiness then, an ache that nothing could fill. Would we never be allowed to come into our own?

It was pointless to dwell upon it, just now. I could still feel the stabbing pain that accompanied each beat of my own heart. I needed rest, but couldn't bring myself to sleep. Merlin needed to be protected, though I was hardly in any shape to defend him. For a time I simply sat, near at hand, watching the daylight grow long. At last the evening sun dipped low in the sky, marking the end of the first day in Shambala.

As pain gave way to exhaustion, I realized that sleep was not something I could avoid. Hendrake was still hours away, but I would simply have to hope nothing would happen before they arrived. If I still felt this bad in the morning, if Merlin still lay unconscious, then I could find a physician among the inner circle. But for now there was only sleep to soothe us both.

So I settled myself on the bed beside him, propped upright by pillows. I was between him and the door. And I pulled him up so that he lay against me, and I could place an arm around him. This way no one could enter and move against him without waking me, I reasoned.

I removed the Jewel from my neck, and placed it around Merlin's, tucking it under the collar of his shirt. Whatever protection it offered, he needed it more than I. I couldn't afford to lose him. He was all I had left. I couldn't rule alone. I never really wanted to rule at all; that was his ambition. I had only agreed to it, in order to get his help. And now he would still have his ambition, but I was denied mine. Again. Dragging up a blanket around the two of us, I fell asleep with that empty ache still pressing against my heart.

“I've been looking in the mirror for so long.

That I've come to believe my soul's on the other side.

All the little pieces falling, shatter.

Shards of me,

Too sharp to put back together.

Too small to matter,

But big enough to cut me into so many little pieces.

If I try to touch [him],

And I bleed...

I breathe no more.”

- *Breathe No More*

Day 44123 (1 May 2006)

My first awareness is of the smell of breakfast... Coffee, bacon, eggs. The second is that I am no longer in the royal apartments. I find I am in a bathrobe, lying on rather comfortable cot, floating a few feet off the floor. I'm in the kitchen, and Merlin is cooking. He's wearing a barbecue apron that says 'Kiss the Cook', and humming tunelessly. It all somehow feels terribly surreal.

When I sit up, he turns and says, "Breakfast?" and his tone is one of absolute contentment. It really makes no sense at all to me.

"How is it you woke up before me? That makes no sense." The pain in my chest is gone, but I still feel an empty pit in my stomach that has no discernable cause.

"Apparently you needed more rest than I did."

"I guess you didn't need to sleep off cardiac arrest. What are you so happy about?" How can he be happy after what happened?

He shrugs. "We... have a castle, a kingdom, and seem to have accomplished all our goals?" He says it like he can't understand why I'm not equally happy.

"But we didn't! Don't you remember what happened?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Sand and Delwin!"

Merlin tosses aside the apron, sits and starts eating a heaping plate of breakfast, giving a shrug of confusion.

"When we left the Hall, they appeared, and stole it..." I start to sob, and find I am unable to stop. I feel like I've fallen into the Abyss again. It's gone. Everything I worked for.

Merlin slows his chewing as he looks up at me, though he says nothing more. He seems surprised, but with a look that shows he doesn't quite know what to do.

I've never cried in front of anyone before, but I can't stop. To show such weakness only makes me feel worse. I try to explain what happened. But if Merlin understands, he makes no reply. He just keeps eating, as if he's trying to drown his confusion.

I just bury my face in my hands. After what seems like forever, I finally manage to pull in a great gulp of air and stop crying.

"Eggs?" Merlin asks, as if breakfast will somehow make this right. "Bagel?"

"Don't you understand? That level of Power, that oneness with Trump that we had when we finished our ordeal. They stole that from us." I sniffle as I try to get through to him.

"How could they do that?" he inquires in between sips of orange juice.

"Hoisted by your Spikard!" And the tears come again, despite my wishes to the contrary.

Merlin just raises an eyebrow. "And how would that be possible?"

"Delwin," In between gasping breaths, I try to convey what I saw. "He had a Spikard, and used it to channel through yours and..." honestly I don't understand how he did it. "And, you... were unconscious, and the lightning..." I clutch my chest reflexively, in the memory of pain.

Merlin remains impassive.

Wait. He was unconscious. And barely awake even when we first left the Hall. Could he honestly not have realized it? "You don't remember any of it?"

He shakes his head.

"Merlin you should get rid of that thing. It almost did us in!"

He looks at me unbelieving.

"I'm serious. Delwin turned it against us."

Merlin gives a sigh, and reaches to remove the ring, but it doesn't come off. He looks at it rather strangely, trying again.

"I tried to remove it when you were unconscious, but I couldn't. I thought about cutting off the finger, but decided not to."

"Uhm, I'm rather glad you didn't..." He looks rather disturbed. "That's not a good habit to get into; dismembering one's partners while they sleep. I'd hate to consider what else I might wake up missing one morning."

I can't believe he's trying to make light of this! "I'm serious! I was being nice, but now... You're a shapeshifter, get rid of that thing!"

He shakes his head in resignation and adjusts his finger, trying to slip off the ring again. He fails, as the Spikard adjusts itself to his finger regardless of his contortions.

Personally, I'm not convinced he's trying that hard. But I have to pick my battles with him. I just try to stop sniffing for a few minutes.

"Bacon?" He finally says. "Orange juice?"

One final deep breath and I think I finally have myself under control again. "Coffee?"

Merlin nods and brings me a mug.

I can't bring myself to eat, I feel sick to my stomach. But I try to choke down the coffee, and it turns out to be surprisingly good. "Thank you. I'm trying to get a grip. I just..." I couldn't explain what's going through my head right now, even if I tried. I cast about aimlessly for a thought. Finally I try to focus myself with a deep breath. The past can't be changed. All I can do is try to go on, to move forward. "How long was I out?"

"A day, more or less."

"A day from when you woke up..." I mentally note that there is apparently no way to know how long he was out before then.

Merlin nods.

"And what did you manage to get done in that time?" I ask in the politest tone I can muster. Nothing but honest curiosity.

Merlin just shrugs, and waves, indicating the food in the kitchen, and the cot I'm still sitting on.

"No business then?"

He raises an eyebrow again. "No. I had kind of thought this would be our honeymoon..."

"We're not technically married yet."

"Details."

"Besides, I thought Maui was the honeymoon."

Merlin rolls his eyes as if that was the last thing he considered Maui to be.

"And if we don't do something about the state of Trump in the universe soon, we'll have an army knocking on our door."

"Other than that one?" He smirks and gestures to the window.

I start to rise, but then sit back. "Is it our army?" I ask with a sigh, not even bothering to look.

"Yes."

"That isn't what I meant." I try to think for a minute. And the Jewel comes to mind. "Are you still wearing it?" I look up at him.

Merlin suddenly starts, and looks down at the hand with the Spikard on it; he moves his hand under his other sleeve.

"Not that. The Jewel."

He looks relieved for a second. "Oh, that. Yeah." He pulls it out from under his shirt. "Why?"

"Well, I wondered what we ought to do with it."

"Do with it?"

"Yes, I figured we ought to put it somewhere safe. I would rather no one else ever knew it existed. The other Jewel causes so much trouble."

"Ok." And with a flick of his wrist he tosses the Jewel out the window.

"Merlin!" I practically lunge up off the cot, coffee flying everywhere. But there's no sign of the Jewel anywhere outside.

"Relax. Ghost has it." He's smirking again.

I swear, that man is trying to give me another heart attack! "And we may never get it back! Sand and Delwin have a line on Ghostwheel now. Don't count on him doing your bidding alone anymore."

He sighs, with a look that says he still doesn't believe my story about Sand and Delwin. "Ghost, please give it back." Merlin holds out his hand, and the Jewel drops into it.

I just collapse into a chair, and place my head in one hand. He puts a fresh cup of coffee in front of me, and a plate heaped with food. But I still can't bring myself to eat anything. I feel like I have an ulcer forming. Why does he do this to me? Merlin has a concerned look on his face. I think he's afraid I'm going to start bawling again. I'm not.

"Look," Merlin says, almost apologetically. "Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it." He hangs the Jewel back around his neck.

I look at him dubiously. I want to say no, that I don't trust his judgment. That I want to at least know what he does with it. But the protests die in my throat.

"Merlin, I just don't want us inundated by a horde of angry Trump Artists. Perhaps we should begin sending out the initiations."

"Where did you want to start?"

"Well, other than a few that probably ought to be excluded, I suppose have Ghost start with the most powerful Trump Artists and work down from there..."

"Well, Brand would be off the list."

"Yes, Brand... As well as Suhuy, Dworkin, Frederick, and Corwin."

"My father?" Merlin seems confused.

"Yes, like the others I mentioned, he controls a major Power of his own."

"But he's my father!" Confusion has gone to protest.

"Tough. We can't allow those controlling major Powers access to the Hall."

"I want him at the wedding." Merlin is quite upset.

"Wedding?" Wait a minute. "We're not talking about the wedding."

He looks confused for a moment, then realization dawns. "You mean the Trump reattunement? But my father's not even a Trump Artist..."

"Yes, well I didn't know that, and I wanted to make sure we didn't have any miscommunications."

"I thought you meant wedding invitations."

"No. That's different."

"Ah. Very well..." He gets a distant look in his eye for a moment, and I wonder if Ghost has already begun. I assume it was listening to us.

After a moment I nudge him. "Underway?"

He nods.

"Anyway, as to the wedding, that was part of the coronation. How long do you need to get things in order?"

"Anytime." He shrugs, but I get the impression he still wants to take some time before the ceremony. As I recall it he never did like public occasions.

"Fine..." How long to give him? I really don't need more than another day. I've already arranged everything material related to the wedding. "Give me seven days. Does that work? And the invitations can include anyone other than Suhuy, Dworkin and Brand."

He nods, and brings the Jewel up to his eye. In a flash, all the recipients receive a Trump contact conveying the invitations. How I know this I'm not entirely sure; perhaps it is my own attunement to the Jewel. "Done."

I nod and just look miserably at the table. I still feel awful, like there's a gnawing emptiness in my soul. But I'm not going to try to explain that to him again. I don't think he believes me. He doesn't remember that feeling in the Hall, or the encounter with Sand and Delwin.

Merlin just pointedly pushes the plate right under my nose. "Eat."

After breakfast I return to the apartments to get dressed, and Merlin thankfully leaves me be. I still feel like crying, but I don't know why. Why doesn't he believe me? I end up just sitting at the window, watching the sunlight crawl across the gardens outside. I can see the flags of our Court fluttering beyond.

Finally around noon Merlin reappears, bearing a blanket and a basket. "Come on."

He takes my hand and leads me up to the top of the highest parapet of the castle. I end up staring out over the battlements while he lays out a picnic lunch. When he is done, he walks up behind me, wraps his arms around my waist, and sets his chin on my shoulder. "Nice view."

"Beautiful." The field of pennants and tents beyond the castle grounds proper somehow disturbs the peacefulness of the landscape though. I indicate them. "Shouldn't we let them in to get settled?"

"No." Merlin's tone speaks of absolute certainty.

"Why not?"

"We'll be surrounded by castle guards and courtiers, servants and sycophants, problems and paperwork." He shakes his head. "Spend this time with me."

For someone who so wants a kingdom, he seems terribly reluctant to begin business once he's been given one. He pulls me over to the lunch he's laid out, and we eat in silence. My thoughts are still turning to the possible difficulties inherent in our first public appearance. I feel terribly alone, even with him

sitting beside me. Like I'm the only one taking this situation seriously. I did all this for him and he doesn't seem to care.

His kiss catches me by surprise. He plucks the wineglass from my hand and my train of thought is completely derailed. Something in me snaps, and his touch offers an escape from the void threatening to swallow me. I need to forget, for a while.

When it's over, the darkness returns, but I can cope for now. At least one of us is happy. I have failed so often before, but I can give him the honeymoon he wants. Or at least I can try to. "Merle..."

"Hm?"

"Answer my questions today, and the rest of the week is yours. No business."

"Fine."

I leave him there then, disheveled and half-dressed. "Back shortly." I fasten my own undone garments and straighten up. I need to speak to Sand again, if she'll see me. I have to try and understand why she did this. That, and I'm not sure she'll still want to preside at the wedding. If not, I'll have to find someone else. I promised Merlin all business would be done today, and I intend to keep my word.

Sand does see me, surprisingly enough.

"Feeling better?"

"For the moment."

Sand shrugs elegantly. "Delwin was..."

"Feeling a bit slighted?"

"Perhaps. But what brings you to me today?"

"Given that you expressed your preference to stay behind the scenes, I wanted to ask if you still wished to preside at our wedding."

"Yes, I'd be happy to. When is the date?"

"Didn't you receive an invitation?"

"Yes, but it's more personal this way."

"Granted." I briefly go through the arrangements with her. "I just wanted to make sure of your feelings. I wasn't certain you would wish to present any appearance of authority, granted the circumstances."

"I hold no grudge against you. I gave you my blessing."

I consider for a moment before continuing. "Then why did you do it?"

"To make sure we kept our proper places. We have spent centuries in the background. Not aggressively pursuing power, just trying to preserve something of a balance. I will not allow myself to be placed in a situation where I am dependant upon the good graces of anyone, even someone like you that has offered such a generous share."

"So instead we are placed at the mercy of your good graces." My tone is careful; resignation. No hint of challenge. I have no doubt that Delwin is close at hand though I see no sign of him, and I will not anger the both of them. "Are we never to be allowed to come into our own?"

"I think you've come into your own quite nicely. How many others can say they've established a major Power?"

"Five."

"Five out of all infinity. That's pretty heady company."

She's deflecting my questions. I established the power with Merlin, yes. But I wasn't permitted to keep it, or at least not all of it. But I remind myself that she is now like unto Dworkin or Suhuy; dangerous. A tiny voice inside me cries out 'It should have been me!' but I stifle it.

Surengiin's Journal #6 – Trump Ascendant

"So, when are the two of you going to start having children?" Sand's question comes out of the blue.

Huh? What? "Lord knows."

"Ah, I'll ask Merlin then."

"That isn't what I meant. It's just an expression. We haven't discussed the matter."

"I see. Well, I'm sure you'll make a fine mother."

"If you say so..." I'm getting distinctly uncomfortable with this conversation.

"The third trimester is always the worst."

"I'll take your word for it."

Shortly after, I return to the castle of Shambala, and Merlin is waiting in a sitting room. Perhaps an hour has elapsed. The tension in the air has nothing to do with sex.

"Well?" His tone is rather exasperated, somewhat demanding.

"There isn't much I want to talk about."

"Ask." He gives an overdone wave for me to get it over with.

The matter of children comes to my mind, perhaps because of Sand's question. "Do you have any children? I want to know, before someone shows up claiming to be your heir."

"One that I know of."

"One."

"You've met her."

"Her?"

"Tuesday."

"Tuesday!" I am speechless. No wonder he didn't seem concerned when I told him she was regent of Chaos, she was his rightful heir! And back during the affair of Brand and the Abyss, he placed her in my company. He trusted me that much?

Merlin just nods dismissively. "You?"

"Me?"

"Kids?"

"No. None."

"Didn't think so. Next?"

"As to the Jewel... Damn. Calling it that makes me think of the Jewel of Judgment."

"Third Eye."

I am taken momentarily aback. "Yes, that's perfect."

"What about it?"

"Please don't get rid of it, at least not without letting me know where it's going..."

Merlin nods curtly.

"I suppose around your neck is the safest place I can think of for it, so I don't care if you just keep wearing it."

Merlin shrugs.

I'm not sure how to address the other matter on my mind, and it makes me hesitate.

"Well?"

"Merle," I sit down next to him, but I can't bring myself to look him in the eyes. I don't know why. "You don't believe me about Sand and Delwin, do you?"

He gets a disgusted look. "I never said that."

"You didn't have to." I interrupt the undoubtedly snarky comment I feel coming. "Wait. I..." How do I do this? "This is important. They turned that Spikard against us, against you, once. It may happen again. I want you to believe me. I..." Gods this is difficult. How can I open up to him when he

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doesn't believe me? Just get it over with! "I'm willing to share that memory with you. I don't understand how they did it, but maybe you can figure it out. Please..." my voice dies. I don't know how to express this.

"Then show me." Merlin waves to a mirror on the sidebar.

A mirror? Of course. I hadn't even thought of it. Am I so stupid? Wait. That will show him the events, but not the feeling of what was lost. Of what they really took from us, and how it felt to lose it. But, does he need that? Is it relevant to the Spikard? I want him to understand. It might be. I don't know.

I shake my head. "That won't convey all. I think you'd understand better if you felt it."

Merlin looks dubious.

"Look, this is it. After this, no more business. But this is important to the future safety of our kingdom." I am firm in my resolve. I at least know well enough how to put on the illusion of confidence for the troops, even if I don't feel it.

"Fine." He sighs as if he's giving up.

"Give me a moment to compose myself, please." I move to where I know he can reach me, and pat his knee reassuringly. "I don't care to convey the heart attack part. I'd hate to end up with you unconscious again." I try to keep my tone light, joking, though my mood is anything but.

I can't tell if the snort he gives is meant to be a laugh, or what.

I then close my eyes and recall those moments, from when we stepped from the Hall until Sand and Delwin departed as its new masters. I wall off the emotions that threaten to overwhelm me. Shut them away, so he doesn't touch them. I only want the experience, the ebb and flow of Power. The Spikard's betrayal. Finally I think I have it, and I nod; let Merlin know I'm prepared.

I expect a finger laid upon my forehead, or my neck, like when Mikhail touched my mind, or Brand. But Merlin has always been different. He cups my face in his hands and kisses me. The surprise makes it all the easier for his brain to lock over mine like a vise, and pluck the proffered memory like fruit. And just as quickly he is gone.

I had already figured out his mind was stronger than mine; when he turned Clairvidere against me years ago, I couldn't countermand him. Now I know it to be true absolutely.

But he took nothing that was not offered, and now sits contemplating for a moment.

"I see." He says at length. "Are we done now?"

I feel crushed. "Yes." I can't just sit here, knowing he doesn't think this is important. "I'll go fix dinner."

I leave gracefully, though I feel like running. Thankfully Merlin doesn't follow. I spend the next few hours engrossed in the preparation of a complicated dish involving lots of chopped vegetables.

After a very quiet meal, I head for the royal apartments. I just want to sleep and not think about this strange situation anymore. But Merlin stops me before I can enter.

"Not until the wedding."

And he leads me off into one of the other residential quarters for the night. I don't even bother to question it. I promised him his honeymoon; let him have it as he wishes.

"I'm so tired of being here
Suppressed by all my childish fears...
These wounds won't seem to heal
This pain is just too real
There's just too much that time cannot erase...
But though you're still with me
I've been alone all along"

- *My Immortal*
Evanescence

Day 44129 (1 May 2006)

The past week has been... Well, odd is the only word I can think of. I kept my word. I talked about nothing serious. And Merlin seemed to relax, at least a bit.

The 'honeymoon' took on the form of an extended tour of the castle, as Merlin was determined to see all of it. We spent hours poking around, finding every passage and room. We slept each night in a different guest room, but never entered the royal apartments. And we discovered that to some extent, the castle itself changes to accommodate us. Small changes, subtle ones. It is not rigid and unchanging as Castle Amber is, nor as violently unpredictable as the Courts. It seems a living thing, in a strange way.

And throughout it, like a strange game, Merlin kept seducing me in all the oddest locations. He seems to have some desire to have sex with me in practically every public room in the castle. The places that will never be private again, after tomorrow. The kitchens, the grand staircase, library, throne room, audience chambers, servants' passages... What a week! There is almost something desperate about it. I've never seen him like this before. But I can understand desperation.

And despite the depression I experienced the first day here, Merlin has actually somehow managed to cheer me up.

Today we finally enter the Great Hall; we find it is somehow already prepared for the coronation to come. It is an awesome sight. Light filters in from high windows, reflecting from the mirrors around the perimeter. Everything is silver and marble and crystal. White, violets, grays and ice blues. The light focuses on the dais, which is itself flanked by a massive pair of silver mirrors. The huge table that will one day serve for court dinners is tucked against the back wall, draped in silks and already bearing the regalia of state in formal array.

The room seems almost to watch us. It is unnatural to see so huge a room empty; it reminds me of an abandoned cathedral. It is somehow cold and forbidding.

Merlin practically drags me up onto the dais, and I realize just how long a walk it is. I didn't remember it feeling so long when I sat at the head table in Chaos or Amber before. Why am I so nervous?

He just looks over the regalia with a raised eyebrow. He seems unphased. But then again, he's been through a coronation before.

He shakes out the robes first, and regards them critically. Silken stuff, in grey and silver, trimmed in purples and ice blue. "Not too obnoxious," He quips, tossing them aside. Next he hefts the crowns. "At least they're light."

They are open filigree of platinum, set with blue diamonds and opals. When he tries to drop one on my head though, I step away, that is too far. It doesn't seem right, somehow.

Merlin just laughs as he tosses the crowns back onto their pillows. "You're as nervous as a cat in a dog run. I can almost believe you don't want to be queen, Surrey."

"I never did, Merle. This was all for you."

He gives me the strangest look. "You going to run off and leave me at the altar tomorrow?"

"No. Of course not."

"Good." He pushes the finery all aside then, and sweeps me onto the table.

His intentions are clear. "Merle!"

"This is *our* place, Surrey."

I just hope I can avoid blushing at the memory of this tomorrow...

"Here in this lonely place
Tangled up in our embrace
There's nothing I'd like
Better than to fall
But I fear
I have nothing to give
I have so much to lose
I have nothing to give
We have so much to lose..."

- *Fear*
Sarah McLachlan

Day 44130 (15 May 2006)

The final morning finds me with an upset stomach. I'm happy, but extremely nervous. Merlin soon disappears to bring Martin, Luke and Dalt in for the event. I am left spending the morning being fawned over by Coral, Gilva and Lady Tessa, who Ghostwheel ushers in shortly after Merlin's departure. Oddly enough, I don't mind. It's much better than being alone.

Sand arrives in her own time. And the lot of them fuss over me, fixing my hair and jewelry... An elegant low-cut dress in pearl gray, and the jewelry all in silver and opals and diamonds; the court colors. All this attention certainly doesn't make me any less nervous, but at least it is a distraction from the nagging worry over what will undoubtedly go wrong today.

Finally I dismiss them with my thanks to go prepare themselves, and I personally Trump in my father Finndo. I wasn't certain he would be willing to attend, but he agreed even to walk me down the aisle, which surprised me. When he arrives, he wears his formal robes of state from Chaos.

"A mask, father?" I am somewhat disappointed, but not surprised. He's concealed his identity and existence for so long, I suppose I shouldn't expect him to be willing to reveal it now.

"If you wish it removed, you have but to ask."

I am surprised, but pleased. He would do this for me? "I do, please." I wished him here as my father, not as Justicar.

"Very well."

Finally the time comes for me to enter the Great Hall. No longer empty, it is thronged by people. At least so far nothing terrible has happened; though the highest ranking members of the Courts of Chaos and the royal house of Amber are in attendance, there has been no untoward behavior... yet, I remind myself.

And so I take a deep breath and rest my hand upon my father's proffered arm. The look he gives me speaks of amusement. And I begin the long walk up to the dais, where I can see Merlin awaits me, with his friends standing behind him.

But before I can take more than a few strides, it comes to my attention that my father is no longer beside me. Rather than his red, a man in green accompanies me. Brand! My first reaction is to attempt to step away and strike at him, but I am unable. Having so smoothly taken my arm, he has locked his immense psyche over mine, and I move only as he wishes. I didn't even notice it happen he was so subtle. Damn it!

Now now, be nice... It is his thoughts invading my mind, again. We continue to smoothly walk up the aisle, as if there is nothing in the world wrong.

Where is my father?!

I sent him home.

Bring him back!

In time.

Now!

Perhaps for the reception.

Bring him back NOW.

Tsk, tsk. Who is more deserving to accompany you at this moment? Who has had more to do with your upbringing than I? Where was he then?

Oh, and shall I summon the Unicorn to escort me on the left hand?

Let Merlin arrange his own people. You are of mine. My greatest student.

All this time, eyes are locked upon us, and I walk as if unconcerned; Brand's puppet again. All our conversation is merely the passing of thought between us. I can see Merlin, his face gone gray and cold, waiting my approach. Brand hands me off with a bow to Merlin, and then turns, sweeping a great bow to the gathered audience before teleporting away.

An uncomfortable silence descends, lasting in truth only a few seconds, though it seems much longer. I smile to Merlin, though I try my best to convey with my eyes that this was not what I had intended. But Sand steps forward, and begins the ceremony then.

The rest goes well enough; there is no more interference. We are wed, rings are exchanged, and at the end Merlin goes so far as to sweep me into a passionate kiss in front of all assembled. Despite myself I end up blushing a bit.

But that is just a passing moment as well, and we move seamlessly into the coronation, which Merlin arranged. We crown each other; having created this kingdom together, who else would have the authority to invest us?

The room is silent for a few moments, but celebration is quickly begun. The great table is moved forward, and the wedding feast is served. At our head table Random and Vialle are seated to our right, and Leonardo and Tuesday, the two most recent regents of Chaos, sit to our left. Tuesday is confused as to why she is so seated, which amuses me no end.

During dinner, I turn to Vialle, "Your Majesty, Lady Vialle. Please know that the loss of your Trump ability was not meant as a slight, but merely the consequence of the... universal realignment. Should you wish it, I would personally escort you to the Hall to regain it."

Vialle smiles thinly. "Don't be offended if I chose to wait and see how this shakes out a bit. I'm not such a fool to leap in without testing the waters first."

"Of course."

After dinner, there is dancing. Merlin and I are the first to step to the floor, at Merlin's insistence. After a brief time, a few other couples join us; Random and Vialle, Luke and Coral, one or two from the Court of Chaos. I half expect to see Brand sweep his wife Jasra onto the floor, but it doesn't happen. It seems that if he is still here, he has decided that he's stirred the pot enough for one night. Of my father I also see no sign. Brand did not return him. I also note how few couples there really are among all the assembled. It doesn't surprise me.

Once the first dance is done, Merlin is swept aside by his cronies for celebratory drinks. I am left on my own for all of a second, perhaps, before a hand rests upon my shoulder. Turning, I see that it is Bleys.

"You still owe me a dance, your *Majesty*." His tone is barely civil enough not to be considered mocking.

"Of course, uncle." I should perhaps be surprised, but I am not. Bleys has always been quite forward.

As we dance, I remember another instance, from long ago. My first foray into the Hall of Mirrors. A vision of a shadowy place, where mad ghosts acted out a wedding. My wedding. And I danced with Bleys then as well. It seems even twisted prophecy can in some degree be realized.

And Bleys is of course staring at my cleavage, covered with Clairvidere's silvery filaments. But it doesn't really bother me anymore. "Enjoy the view, best you'll get."

He gives a short sharp laugh.

"Nice to know I can still amuse you. I do hope you've been entertained this evening."

"Yes, my brother walking you down the aisle was quite a surprise, even if it wasn't your intention."

"Brand does as he does."

"He always has."

"I suppose I should thank you."

Bleys lifts one eyebrow in curiosity. "For what?"

"Teaching me about limitations."

"You seem to have overcome any laid against you quite handily."

I shrug elegantly. About this time we are interrupted.

"May I cut in?" It is Mannelous.

"Of course," Bleys smoothly turns and sweeps Manny into the dance, flustering him a bit.

"I meant with the lady." Manny's indignant tone makes me chuckle. He never did get to know Bleys very well. He takes nothing seriously.

"I know." Bleys hands him off to me and ambles away.

"Well," Manny begins, "congratulations."

"Thank you." I wonder what long conversation I'm about to have.

"Sorry for barging in on you last night... I had just walked the Pattern and told it to take me to you, but I had no idea you were... involved."

"Done is done. Ancient history."

"Oh, and you sent me back to Sawall... You do realize I'm not Lord Sawall anymore."

"No, I didn't."

"Yeah, well, after the demise of my... *wife*... they kinda kicked me out."

"My condolences."

"Don't be sorry. I'm not. She was... more than I could handle."

I shrug. So Dara is dead? I just thought Mikhail sent her away somewhere... I'll have to look into it.

"Anyway. So all Trump has stopped working?"

"For the moment. If you're a Trump Artist, you can walk the Hall and regain the ability." I knew this would come around to business eventually.

"What, in exchange for a vow of fealty to you?"

"No more so than you had to swear fealty to Amber to walk the Pattern or to Chaos to assay the Logrus."

"Ah. I see."

"Given that you don't have a home though, you are welcome to join our Court if you wish."

"You would let me stay?"

"If you want to. Although a permanent Court position here *would* involve fealty. We're neutral in the Amber-Chaos politics."

"Huh. And I could get this," he indicates a tattoo on his forearm, "working again? Brand gave it to me, but it's been mighty handy..."

"All you have to do is get a Trump Artist to reactivate it." Oh, lovely. A Trump tattoo from Brand. And he wants it to work again. Well, I suppose better I give it back to him than Brand does...

"Reactivate it, huh? That would be you or Merlin, right?"

"There *are* other Trump Artists. You don't have to join our Court, you know."

"But it means a lot that you would invite me after everything..."

"Ancient history. This is a fresh start."

By now the dance is ended, and I slip away with a nod. Let him think about it for a while. And let me escape his incessant prattle for a while. Ancestors forbid he actually joins our Court.

Suprisingly, I actually get away to the edges of the crowd for a moment. I take that moment to Trump my father, and invite him to rejoin the gathering.

"Sorry about that..." I rarely apologize for anything, but this really was out of the blue.

"Brand is a force of nature."

"That he is. Will you stay a while?"

"As you wish."

Finndo relents and joins me on the dance floor. He is as graceful there as the battlefield. A few eyebrows are raised at the sight of him. Few of the younger attendees realize who he is. The Elder Amberites, though, almost seem surprised. Even those too young to have met him before he left Amber would recognize him from his portrait in the family Trump decks Dworkin made long ago. But he is my father, and I am glad to have him here. He came willingly enough.

After his dance, he drifts off into the crowd, and I notice Dermott and Corwin speaking to each other. I do hope they won't get into it here and now... I know Corwin still has a grudge against Dermott for the damage he did to his Pattern...

Dermott, seeing me, disengages and invites me to dance.

"Surengiin. You look lovely." He's dressed in the robes of the Serpent priesthood.

“Dermott.”

“And are you happy now?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Well, I still ought to provide you a gift, so if there is anything you want...”

“Nothing, at the moment, Dermott.”

“Alright, as you wish. And I must say, Brand escorting you was a nice touch.”

“I wish he hadn’t done that. It made a statement I didn’t wish made.”

“Oh, come now. You always have been his favorite. His greatest pupil. It wasn’t about politics. Metaphysics is so much more meaningful.”

I just sigh. “I was never his student.”

“Stop denying it. The Shadowstorms that erupted with the creation of this kingdom are still rippling outward. It’s more Chaos than even he caused with the Abyss. My congratulations. I wish I was so apt a protégé.”

“Chaos in the short term only, Dermott. A triad is a most stable form. The new balance will be *less* chaotic than before.”

Dermott snorts in derision, “If you say so. At least you can admit this is really about metaphysics, not politics.”

I shrug. Dermott has always made me uncomfortable with his odd discussions. New balance. Am I truly no better than Brand? Ah well, this is no time to second-guess. Done is done. I should be happy!

It is I who breaks this dance, as Corwin is still nearby, and I should acknowledge him as well.

“Thank you for not getting Dermott’s blood all over the new flooring.” I decide to start light, with a quip. Dermott’s heavy conversation has disturbed me somewhat.

“It would be bad form to ruin my son’s wedding.”

“Still.”

“Besides, Dermott was trying so hard to be conciliatory.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Anyhow, I must congratulate you, you’ve played this out quite well.”

“Pardon?”

“Running just enough for him to catch you.”

“You seem to be under a misapprehension. This was all Merlin’s idea.” I didn’t try to court Merlin! Quite the opposite. I agreed to all this for political reasons, though it has worked out well enough so far...

“Of course it was.” He gives me a condescending smile, one that says ‘but we both know better’. “As long as my son is happy, I’m content enough. I suppose I should offer a gift. If you wish it, I could arrange for you to walk my Pattern, I suppose.”

Walk his Pattern? But I’m not of the Blood for it... “You could do that?”

“Of course I can. I did create it, after all... I’m sure Mikhail and I could arrange something.” He gives me a look that suggests I am still a fool.

I feel the fool. “Of course. My folly to think otherwise. It just hadn’t occurred to me. I’ll think about it.”

Corwin nods.

After a while, Merlin returns to the dance floor again, escorting Queen Vialle, and so I find myself on Random’s arm for a time.

“I hope we can consider ourselves allies you know. This was never intended as any sort of move against Amber.”

“Better you than us. You’re now a handy buffer between us and Chaos.”

“I wouldn’t say between. It’s more like three points on a triangle.”

“Whatever. You’re still a tempting target. New realm... If Chaos marches on you, you’ll have a fight on your hands.”

“We took Chaos’ army with us when we left.”

“Not all of it.”

“The best of it.”

“Yeah well, they have plenty of time to rebuild.”

“So do we. Besides, I would hope this might improve relations; each of us might find a ready ally in the other should one side get too aggressive.”

Random shrugs. “Hell, I think you’re crazy to want a crown, myself.”

“I undoubtedly am crazy, though I never particularly wanted a crown. But,” I nod to Merlin, “it seems once one has had one, it is a difficult thing to give up.”

“I wouldn’t know.” He winks.

“I would hope it is never a thing you are forced to face. Abdication is one thing; a coup is quite another.”

Eventually, as the night wears on into the wee hours of the morning, even dour Benedict relents to join me on the dance floor.

“I owe you my thanks,” I give the old samurai a smile. He wears a kimono, since our Court is eastern enough that he doesn’t stand out, so dressed.

“For what, precisely?” He gives me a look of guarded curiosity.

“For everything you’ve done for me over the years.” I’ve come to realize that I was fostered in one of his Shadows, after I was born.

“I was merely doing my brother a favor.”

“Still, I’ve spent long enough being an ungrateful bitch.”

Benedict seems slightly surprised. “A phase.”

“Perhaps the three of us should get together for a drink sometime; toast my dear departed mother...”

Benedict shrugs. “Perhaps.”

The reception seems to wear on forever. But then, what do you expect from a party involving folk with superhuman stamina? At some point I notice out of the corner of my eye that Merlin and his cronies are joined by Mannelous. Merlin punches Mannelous square in the jaw, laying him out on the floor. Then he offers him a hand up and a drink. Men. Go figure.

Finally, though the party seems nowhere near ending, Merlin snags my arm and we make to depart. Only to be once again waylaid, by Mannelous.

“Hey, before you two depart, I’ve got a wedding gift for you.”

“Just put it on the table with the others,” Merlin sighs.

I can agree, the man has no social graces. He’s dressed like Liberace on crack tonight.

“No, no,” he smirks, placing the box squarely in my hands, “This is a *special* gift for you *tonight*.” He gives Merlin a conspiratorial wink.

Oh, dear gods. What has he done now? I regard the box with suspicion. A trap? A plot by the Serpent? Manny has been Brand’s cat’s-paw before, is he finally making his move?

Merlin just snatches the box from my hands and tears it open, revealing a slinky bit of lacy lingerie.

“After last night, I thought, you know... It would compliment the lady.” Manny says to Merlin. “Nice tattoo, by the way.”

Merlin looks at it skeptically, then holds it high, and shouts “Hey Gilva! What do you think?”

“Not your size, Merle!” comes the sarcastic reply.

I am too humiliated to do anything but stand there, stunned.

Merlin turns back to Mannelous. “If you *ever* interrupt myself and my wife again, I *will* kill you. Understand?”

“Oh, totally...” Manny begins to start in again.

Merlin just sweeps me out of the room before Manny can get out another word.

And so begins my life as the Queen of Shambala.

“I’ve run my ship aground
on the rocks of the soul
There’s no lie like independence
there’s no demon like control
I’ve fanned the burning embers
til my house was on fire
There’s no parody like power
There’s no fever like desire
I’ve drained the wine of darkness
to the dregs of deceit
There’s no drug as strong as pride
There’s no blindness like conceit
I’ve railed against the mountain
With a pickaxe and a file
There’s no minefield like presumption
There’s no death wish like denial
There’s no gunshot like conviction
There’s no conscience bulletproof
There’s no strength like utter weakness
There’s no insult like the truth
I’ve adjusted my prescription
til I couldn’t trust my vision
there’s no killer like convenience
there’s no sickness like omission
I’ve amended resolutions and resisted explanation
There’s no trap door like emotion
There’s no pit like reputation
There’s no cancer like ambition
There’s no cure like crucifixion”
- *Insult Like the Truth*
Unshaken