RPG Crossroads

Amber (Phage Press) >> Blood Loyalties >> PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra Post by SisyphusX on 05/09/2004 at 16:30:12

Post by Taria on 05/17/2004 at 22:45:34

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra

Shrugging it off as a false alarm, I release the sword hilt and gather up my reins, once more falling into reflection.

wave my hand, dismissing memories of yesterday's unpleasant meeting (which still left a sour taste in my mouth).

You sigh deeply, as reality once again offers nothing you had not expected. Surprises aren't always good, but they are always...interesting.

watching the dust swirl and puff in the mild breeze of Arden's afternoon, you see the final, most shocking change of the last few minutes.

"Are you... okay, milady?" the Ranger asks, eyeing my face and the bare ground with concern. "Mayhap I can escort you back to the castle?"

forward, alert. I concentrate on the ice-cold card, reaching for a response in the static surface.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra Post by SisyphusX on 05/18/2004 at 02:24:47

doing, he is beyond the ken of the mystical artifact you hold in your hands.

her borders?

tattered. And the mind...

phrase in your mind...

you to sit up

Greyswandir.

power from this distance.

THANK THE UNICORN YOU'RE HERE!

Then everything turns white-hot and searing, and then black.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra

that it seems to be scorched as well, although luckily my hair is short to begin with.

Greyswandir; luckily, he had entered from the opposite side of the clearing.

bring me to Bleys' study in record time and I knock upon the door.

speak to Bleys again. "I have come upon a matter of great urgency."

desk. The emerald and ruby on his right hand glint with the gesture

deep in thought. I sheath Greyswandir and rest my hand upon the pommel.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra Post by SisyphusX on 05/18/2004 at 15:52:27

that it was seen and identified - but not impossible, you fear.

physician had entered. His expression is one of duty and concern.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra Post by SisyphusX on 05/18/2004 at 20:35:08

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra Post by SisyphusX on 05/18/2004 at 20:39:31

Post by Taria on 05/18/2004 at 20:18:05

lie down while we speak together."

sheathed on my hip.

instead of her own initative.

Flora clasps her hands in her lap. "I can't think of Corwin, too, falling to such a fate..."

leave, studying my somewhat disheveled condition in a note of maternal disapproval.

A single word in a deep voice echoes from inside the room. "Come." I open the door and step within.

visitation tomorrow, but I wish to discuss this matter with all due haste. I will not take much of your time."

I step forward and sit, palming the burned Trump from my pocket as I did so. "I have contacted Corwin. Briefly."

Flora smiles nervously, but Bleys only raises an eyebrow and smiles with his customary charm. "Have you, now? And what were the results of this contact?'

I ignore her continuing murmurs, concentrating on subsuming the pain of my headache and my burn. I am startled out of my trance by Bleys. "If you will excuse me, Killashandra, I must think upon this." He touches the Trump with his left hand, sapphire glinting. "I will keep this."

I nod. "As it please you, Uncle. I will take my leave." I stand and bow to Flora. "Aunt." I leave the study, shutting the door behind me. I don't look back.

I think I will spend the rest of the day in my room - quite enough excitement today as it is. The question remains: what to do with Greyswandir?...

"Aunt Flora." I bow slightly to her, and move toward another chair instead of my bed as she indicated, taking a deep breath to regain my composure.

blade, but in very general details. I have come to get a more specific description. Please, start from the beginning." She leans forward attentively.

open your door quickly and back into your room, making sure you are unobserved. With a sigh of relief, you close the door and bolt it.

few ornamentations. She sits relaxed, legs crossed, and a pleasant smile on her face that belies the seriousness in her eyes.

"Good afternoon, Killashandra. I would like to speak with you a little, if you will permit me to do so."

disappearances, but... one can never be too paranoid with one's own family if one is a scion of Amber.

I watch her through lidded eyes, wondering at what she was hiding. Grief? Or guilt?

be a good year, as well. She pours two glasses into fine crystal flutes.

taken is..." Her voice trails off, uncertain and fearful.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra Post by SisyphusX on 05/27/2004 at 16:16:18

through it in shifting patterns as Flora trails off

trying, we may have better luck.'

the same without Amber...

enough."

at least do that." I wave away the subject.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra Post by SisyphusX on 05/27/2004 at 16:22:37

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra Post by SisyphusX on 06/08/2004 at 11:08:40

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Killashandra Post by SisyphusX on 06/14/2004 at 16:24:36

Post by Taria on 06/14/2004 at 15:46:48

soft sheets and quilts in front of you, and their allure is growing harder to resist.

dreams come to an end as you sleep a harder sleep, borne of exhaustion and fatigue.

Rangers at the moment, and I hesitate to distract him in this crisis.

I gesture at the sideboard. "Please forgive me for not offering you refreshments before; would you like something to drink?"

intrigue and Shadow, but I am formidable in my own way." I incline my head to her comment about Averdor.

disparate is its defense even in the best of times." She takes another sip, and then gazes directly at you.

more scarce about Amber, before this current emergency. Now, I feel compelled to stay. It is my duty."

Shadowdwellers know sorcery - as Sterling does, indeed. He may have already reported seeing your...find...to someone."

generation were being recalled - I would be interested to know what could be considered a 'safe house' if not the castle."

desire me to do naturally won't necissarly be what course I follow, but it is polite to ask advice of one's elders..

and for you, if I can." She smiles warmly and openly - and it seems without pretense or posture.

attack will be launched soon - as terrible as it is to say, I would prefer to hope for that rather then more of these disappearances.'

cannot link a name to a face." I describe the individual with the katana and wakizashi.

of 'safe house'..." Her eyes roll upwards briefly, and then return to the conversation.

phantoms of Shadow, or from the sworn enemies of Chaos. Those two at least offer security, of a sort." She takes another quick sip.

Please hang up, and try your call again." She speaks the words in a monotone that she apparently finds comical - you are unfamiliar with the reference, however.

knows only that if Benedict and Fiona both fell, nobody is safe." Her expression changes, briefly, and you cannot read it. But she sighs again, and visibly relaxes.

Glancing at my hand once more, I head toward the infirmary. There was no sense waiting - the sooner I can get my sword hand in shape, the safer I would be.

soothing ointment. He notices your disrupted concentration and prepares a soothing herbal tea for you, which both calms your nerves and greatly ameliorates your headache.

you, but there are other patients I must attend to again. I beg your leave, milady." With that, he picks up a satchel of medicines and moves quickly to one of the private rooms.

Post by Taria on 05/18/2004 at 15:45:44

ears against his skull, he steps forward.

keep from reaching for Greyswandir once more.

he will no longer carry you.

my other hip.

rooms. The Castle Guard has been somewhat redeployed to keep order in the City - there is a restlessness there that has raised the incidence of violence and crime. heard that Orion has gone down to Arden this morning to meet with the rangers, as Bleys instructed. You don't know where Shiro is at the moment - there is no answer at his door.

The day is fresh and bright with the sun, but the tenseness of the Castle and the City belies the good feeling of the day. The Castle itself is rather quiet, and fewer people seem to be in the hallways and

You know that Bleys and Flora are preparing for tomorrow night's visit from the Chaos delegation. Caine is at sea, supervising more of his rather frenzied exercises to keep the navy fresh and ready to defend by sea. Gerard is more than likely down in the City, helping as he can to maintain order. Vialle isn't in the royal quarters, but you are told that she is spending the morning relaxing. You also have

I wander the castle for the morning, revisiting my favorite locales - the library, armory, and practice yard. Finding nothing of interest besides the ever-tense atmosphere of Castle Amber, I decide that a refreshing ride in Arden with Sha'kar is in order. I consider leaving a message that I will be relaxing in Arden for the afternoon, but drop such reasoning upon reflection that I can be reached by Trump I leave the castle and stroll toward, and past, the stable, nodding to the stablehands as I pass them. Shortly down the path to Arden, I draw the stylized dagger from my side and lightly plant it in the

ground in front of me. As soon as I step back, it shimmers and shifts, becoming the familiar large form of my mount. I scratch under Sha'kar's chin for a moment before swinging astride. As usual, he

appears with full tack, no doubt sensing my restlessness and guessing my need for a refreshing jaunt.

Breathing in the cool mountain air, I touch my heels lightly to Sha'kar's side. "Let's try to avoid Orion for the time being, hmm?" I say to his backward-cocked ears. "This situation is getting to everyone, and I have no desire to be in the middle of any tense situations as he is meeting with the Rangers." Sha'kar tosses his mane in response to my voice and flows into that relaxing gait I so enjoy.

As I ride, I reflect upon Benedict's being out of touch and Corwin's abrupt departure. Really, there are few of my relatives who remain in Amber whom I get along with; and with the talk of recalling those off in Shadow, there will be fewer yet with whom I even care to speak. I would have liked to have accompanied Corwin, or Benedict - assuming he is simply off in Shadow and has not fallen to whatever mysterious circumstances King Random and the others most definitely have. And for that matter, where did Corwin hie off to, anyway? Did he have some lead on this situation that the rest missed?... Sha'kar, now in Arden proper, lifts his head abruptly, swiveling his ears back and forth alertly. I scan the forest about me, hand dropping to rest casually on my sword hilt, listening for disturbances in the natural forest sounds. Arden was patrolled, but not tamed, and every once in a while something slips past the Rangers, so it is best to be wary - especially with the disappearances. Not that Amber is all that safe for one of the family at the best of times - I swear, nothing in my previous life prepared me for the curse of the offspring of Oberon.... After a moment, my steed shakes his head and continues on.

I thought I overheard Flora mentioning that she has not attempted to reach Corwin. I think she is afraid; these disappearances have concerned everyone. Not that I have ever been all that impressed by Flora's courage, anyway. I brood momentarily, staring at my mount's deadly horn as it points, arrow-straight, his path through the woods. And those lunatics from the Church of the Unicorn! I roll my eyes in disgust. I am all for venerating our patron beast, but really - Sha'kar is not a unicorn - not as Amberites are familiar with a unicorn. He is an altogether different creature - and one from Shadow, at that!

I pull out my deck of the family's favorite playing cards and thumb through them, looking for Benedict's and Corwin's. Flora may be too afraid to get answers, and no doubt the others (her included) are too busy plotting how to best take advantage of the situation, but I am not. I shuffle out the two major arcana I am looking for and replace the rest of the deck. Benedict first, then Corwin. I have tried Benedict before with no response, but once more cannot hurt. I hold my first choice up before me, signaling Sha'kar with my knees. Ever responsive, he stops and plants his body in a guard stance, ears up and

As you ride through Arden, you do see one or two Rangers, and you suspect you are observed by a few more. The ones you do see bow their head at you as you pass, knowing you and respecting your station. They have a quiet and stern nobility about them, instilled by long years in Julian's service, that has an almost...reassuring quality to it. What could possibly happen to Amber with these iron men at

As you concentrate on Benedict's card, looking at it, into it and THROUGH it . . . nothing happens. Even with your experience with the Trump, you have rarely if ever known such absolute silence from a Trump that does not have the tepid temperature of the dead. You concentrate with redoubled effort, hoping against hope that it will make a difference, but it does not. Wherever Benedict is, whatever he is

You shuffle Benedict's Trump back into your deck, and then draw Corwin's. You stare at the handsome man before you, and open your mind to his image, staring into it with focus. You feel a twinge of

As the seconds tick by, the twinge becomes a throbbing, then an itching, then even perhaps a burning. But you pay no heed to it, as the Trump before you is starting to respond. You see it becoming darker, even fading to near-black. But as you do, you also see the image of Corwin distorting. The proud and clear gaze becoming bleary, fatigued and glassy. The clothes becoming torn, grey and

The pain in your mind has grown substantially, but you fight it back as you feel the first intimations of a mental contact. You pierce through whatever veil or barrier separates the two of you, and you feel a

You awaken to Sha'kar's gentle nuzzle. You have a roaring headache, and the light hurts your eyes. By the position of the sun, only a few minutes have passed. You raise your hand to your head, and find two startling developments. First, you are still holding Corwin's Trump - or what is left of it. You have in your hand a burned corner of a piece of paper. You can see the normal border of the Trump, but the illustration is pitch-black. Second, the skin of your hand is reddened and angry where it was touching the Trump - you may need to get this burn treated at some point. Sha'kar retreats slightly to allow

And it is only as you arise that you see the slight circle of ash both on Sha'kar's back and on the ground near him. It is a fine grey powder, and is already being ruffled by the wind. And as you turn around,

A sword stands straight-up in the clearing. The point rests three or four inches into the soil, and the grass around the blade is seared away. It has a bright sheen to it, and there might be thermal ripples issuing into the air from it, but your vision is still focusing. It has a disturbingly familiar set of etchings on the blade, and the hilt is still moving slightly from side to side. You can even feel the soft aura of

I pull myself to my feet, staring at the blade in the center of the clearing with shock. Using Sha'kar's tack for support as my head spins, I tuck the burned Trump into a pocket, attempting hard not to think of

I wince as my burned hand contacts the cloth of my pocket, and feel the skin of my face tighten with a twinge of pain as well; much like a bad sunburn. A short lock of hair falls before my eyes and I notice

"Sha'kar, kneel. I don't wish to attempt to mount with my vision and head as is." Sha'kar obediently kneels, whickering in concern, as I never use this method of mounting unless I am injured. I dust the ash from the saddle and swing astride, pausing for a moment to allow the pain in my mind to recede a bit and for my eyes to stop crossing. Patting Sha'kar on the neck and sending a wordless thought of comfort to him that I do not feel myself, I signal for him to rise. He quiets, being sensitive enough to catch the calming thought, and smoothly regains his feet. With my knees, I signal him to move forward towards the blade. He takes a few steps then snorts and paws the earth for a moment, reluctant to move closer. I lean low over his neck and murmur into his ear, urging him to Greyswandir. Flattening his

As we move closer, I can feel that my eyes did not deceive me - the blade had been emitting slowly cooling thermal ripples. The air in the blasted circle of grass is still warm, and the blade itself would likely still be warm as well. I move Sha'kar alongside, and consider reaching down to touch the pommel. It cannot truly be there in front of me. Corwin does not allow Greyswandir away from him... and if that is Greyswandir, then.... My thoughts were disturbed by the arrival of one of Julian's (or would it now be Orion's?) Rangers. Before he can speak, I maneuver myself and Sha'kar between him and

"Good day." I nod at him. "You'll have to excuse me," I gesture at the ground between us with my non-burned hand, "I had a bit of... bad luck during an experiment. I apologize for the damage this has caused Arden; it was not my intention." I reach down with my other hand and grasp Greyswandir's hilt, wincing at pain this causes my burns, and draw it from the ground. For a moment, I exalt in the feeling of the blade in my hand; but remembering the Ranger, I sheath it in the saddle-sheath I keep for a spare blade. My hand itches to regain the sword, and I clutch it into a fist and rest it on my leg to

"That is quite unnecessary. I will be fine on my journey back, with Sha'kar." I lay a hand upon his neck; he is eyeing the Ranger with wariness, and I desire to calm him. "If you will excuse me, noble sir." I nod once more to him, then turn Sha'kar with my knees and ride out of the clearing back the way I had come. I hear the Ranger turn his horse and canter off; no doubt to inform Orion of these events. Once out of view of the clearing, I lean low over Sha'kar's neck. "All speed, dearheart, back to the castle. I desire a run." He snorts in eagerness and tosses his mane as his hooves begin to pound the ground. I lose myself in the ride, recalling my old riding instructor's words. Galloping is hard work for both horse and rider, a fact that it little known among the unmounted. One must shift one's body to complement the movements of one's mount, always to make it easier for him to bear you. That is a very important lesson, Killa - your mount bears you out of willingness; make it too difficult for him and

The ride banishes thoughts of what I carried at my side for a time, but once we reach the castle grounds, I recall with awful clarity. I dismount from Sha'kar, pausing for a moment holding onto his saddle as my head spins at the foolish move. I push the pain to the back of my mind and draw Greyswandir from the saddle-sheath. I place with my current sword in the saddle-sheath, then sheath Greyswandir at my side. My hand lingers on the hilt, reluctant to release it. Corwin, Corwin, where art thee?.... I tap Sha'kar on the shoulder. "Down, great brute, I cannot enter the castle with you following like an oversized mastiff." He snorts, then nuzzles my face before shimmering and reforming as a dagger. I catch the hilt of the dagger before it can fall, and hold it close to me for a moment before I sheath it on

Facing the castle, I stride through the entrance, checking the time as I do so. Bleys should be in his study at the moment; his meeting with House Hendrake is tomorrow, and he is no doubt deciding how to handle them. I should have time.... I cradle my right hand against my side. I should have that looked at later... it may be serious.... I stride though the castle corridors unerringly, lost in thought. My feet

Flora and Bleys sit across from each other, pouring over a set of documents. Flora seems a little agitated, but Bleys is calm and contemplative. "Aunt Flora, Uncle Bleys." I give a slight bow to each, then

"Ah. Well, I have no wish to intrude - and there are other administrative matters to attend to before the state visit. And I think this is as good a time to temporarily adjourn our discussions as any." Flora looks at Bleys somewhat askance - there is an hint that they have disagreed on some point. "Please excuse me, Killashandra - I would not intrude on your meeting." She rises gracefully and prepares to

I shake my head and gesture towards the chair. "If you would be so kind as to stay, I feel you would be interested in the news I bring as well. I do apologize for interrupting your conference in lieu of the

Flora hesitates, then smiles and reseats herself. Bleys leans back away from his desk, shuffling papers into order and placing a book atop the stack. "Please, sit." He gestures at the other chair before the

Bleys' sharp intake of breath when he sees Greyswandir speak of his startlement, as does Flora's gasp as she raises a hand to her mouth. I did not miss how Bleys' hand dropped to his own blade when I

I shook my head. "You may examine it, but I will not let it out of my sight - not until I discover who is behind these disappearances. It is my belief that Corwin has fallen into their clutches as well; I do not know if he is even still alive. As I do not know who or what is behind this...." I let myself trail off. I must be very upset, a small voice in my mind noted. I am being very transparent at the moment. Bleys only nodded, having regained his composure. "Very well." He examines the blade as best he can, not touching it, nor asking me to release it. Finally, he sits back in his chair, to all appearances

You purposefully head out to the infirmary, which is attached to the barracks for the Castle Guard. The physician on duty, a kind young man named Huntington, dresses the burn quickly after applying a

"You'd best not engage in any combat today, as the burned skin is still delicate and could tear if stressed. Otherwise from that, milady, you appear in excellent health. Thank you for allowing me to assist

It is now early in the afternoon. As you contemplate what to do for the rest of the day, you remember that Greyswandir has a very distinctive hilt, as well as a blade. It will not do well for you to be seen carrying it around so openly. Indeed, you have little idea if anyone noticed it on the way to the infirmary, as you were concentrating on the route and the speed with which you could get there. It is unlikely

As you get ready to leave the infirmary, a strange man enters at a brisk pace. He is dressed in an unfamiliar style of attire - it seems formal, but the pieces are much more distinct than in other styles of dress. The shoulder pads are thick and stitched on top of the shoulder, for instance. He has a katana at his right and a wakizashi at his left. He moves quickly and quietly, which is quite the feat for someone garbed as he is and armed as he is. You have seen him once or twice before, but you cannot place him immediately. He appears to be headed for one of the private rooms - not the one that the

I cursed myself ruefully as my thinking finally clears enough for me to realize the ramifications of being seen carrying Greyswandir. I thank Dr. Huntington for his time, then prepare to leave the infirmary as the good doctor moves toward a private room. When the familiar stranger enters, I lean my arm over the hilt, attempting to conceal it in-between my arm and body with a casual gesture. I angle my body away from him and nod to him in acknowledgement as I leave the room, my expression brooding and showing no interest in conversation. I head for my suite, trying to take back hallways and avoid

You furtively move through the back corridors of the Castle. You pass a few housekeeping staff and one or two guards, but they are more interested in their own business than in yours. You consider the possibility that the staff has learned to mind their own business for the most part, given the nature of the family that they serve. In addition, you are easily able to position yourself between them and the object you carry. Your suite is on the third floor, so it is quite the cross-castle trek, but you hurry yourself and soon find yourself at your door. You look both ways down the hall, and nobody is present. You

You turn, startled by both the suddenness and the sheer politeness of the voice behind you. Florimel sits on your chair, turned around to face the door. She has changed clothes since the last time you saw her - before, she was wearing a rather formal gown and elbow-length lace gloves. Now, she is garbed much more informally - for a princess of Amber, that is - in a dress of a light green material with

"You may rest assured that your possession goes unreported, and I have enough friends inside the Castle and outside that I would have heard of it by now if it were even a rumor. Please," she entreats, indicating your bed, "rest yourself, for your injury is not yet healed, although dear Hunt is quite a skilled practitioner. I mean you no harm, but am desirous of information only you possess. I would that you

She adjusts her chair to face yours. "Very well - though I would rather not tax your health at this point, we can certainly speak this way for a while. Now, you've told Bleys and I that you'd found Corwin's

I sigh as I settle into my chair. As an afterthought, I unbuckle my swordbelt and lay Greyswandir, still sheathed, on my right-hand end table. I brush my fingertips across Sha'kar's hilt, but leave him

"There's not much to tell, Aunt." I shrug and lean back in my chair. "I went for a ride and attempted to contact our missing relatives. I tried Benedict first, but my results were... expected. That is, I had none. I attempted Corwin's Trump next." I close my eyes in thought, but listen for any rustle of cloth that may signify Flora moving or another individual in the room. I don't believe that she is behind these

"I felt a... twinge, a different sensation than normal Trump contact. I focused and forced the contact - which is how I ended up with the massive headache that had me traipsing about Castle Amber oblivious to common sense." I open my eyes and wave a hand in dismissal. "I digress. As I was saying, I finally made contact with Corwin's mind." I describe his appearance and his words - as well as my

tried to hide the blade, but..." I shrug. "It was fairly obvious there was something unusual going on, especially with the blasted circle of ground. I told him it was a failed experiment."

infirmary, but wait to hear her reactions on my story first. It is sometimes interesting to tell the truth and watch the confusion as people try to decide what you are hiding.

request a hot milk toddy be brought to you - I've always found those to be soothing." Her face and eyes look helpful, but there is a shadow to them that is inscrutable.

"When I awoke, I was on the ground - and Greyswandir was standing upright in the clearing, still radiating thermal waves. I came straight to the Castle from there. Oh, I did encounter one of the Rangers. I

I lightly touched Greyswandir's hilt. "How I wish you could speak, old friend," I murmured, remembering the times I had seen Corwin with this blade. He had treated it very like an old friend, as I recall. I blinked and turned back to Flora. "Is there anything else you might wish to know, Aunt?" I know I was being slightly rude, at the very least for not offering her refreshment off of the nearby sideboard, but I rationalized it by recalling that she hadn't acted like a honored guest either. Most guests do not invite themselves in before their hosts are home. I debate asking her about the individual I had seen in the

Flora has listened to your words intently, soaking up the detail of your inflection, your expression and your tone. As you describe Corwin's moment of contact and his near-shouted expression, her eyes widen - briefly, but noticeably. However, at your last remark, she flushes briefly and moves her legs as if to stand. "Oh, my word, I am terribly sorry. You're weakened by this experience, and you're understandably on edge and upset. We should probably arrange this meeting for some other time, when you're more centered and your injury has had a chance to heal. I could summon Doraine and

"Please, Aunt, stay and ask whatever questions are necessary. My 'injury' is not as great as you seem to think it to be; I have suffered far worse in my time. I can answer a few questions before I rest. Indeed, I should have stayed in Bleys' study for further conversation; but I feel far better after Huntington's infusion for my headache. It would be best if you raise any questions Bleys - and yourself - may have on the events; as they say, 'Time fades even legend' - and this past day is not yet even a legend." I note her reaction (or lack of) to my words, and my hint that she may be here at Bleys' orders

Flora shifts back, and her reaction is one of quiet surprise and, perhaps, a mild sense of...respect. "Well, it's good to hear that you are feeling better. Huntington has steadfastly refused to give me his recipe for tea - he says he'd never see anyone without it." She laughs lightly. "But rest assured that I am here only for myself, for a deeper sense of what has happened to Corwin. Bleys, busy as he is, merely expressed a worry that such a possession as Corwin's blade would be safe in the hands of someone with, as he put it, 'such inexperience in the hazards of life'." She smirks. "I don't share his doubts - for I have been to Averdor several times. It is a peaceful land, and you carry its' quiet resolve. I was wondering if you'd notice what has been left for you on that sideboard." She slides out of her seat and walks over to the sideboard. She selects the bottle of sparkling white wine on the far right and holds it out to you. It reads, From the House of Viceroy Mackenzian, Attendant of the Far Shores - Mackenzian Silsillade, 2376 A.P.. You recognize the title - this was the personal label of a vassal of the King of Averdor, the lord of the lands across the Sea of the Twilight. And you know it to

"I think you'll find this a good companion to Hunt's tea - the flavor is subtle and ephemeral." She offers you a glass. "No, I didn't come here to interrogate you, for I am satisfied as to your character and your integrity. I merely sought as much information as I could know about the incident, as it is the only relief from the waves of terrible ignorance that crash over this house daily in this time of crisis." She takes a delicate sip of the wine, and smiles. "Bleys is even now trying to suppress the tide from spilling out into the city - he has taken a squadron of the Castle Guard and tours the streets, a strong champion and a presence of the Royal Family. If Julian were here, he would be a much better choice - the people know him as a trusted protector of the frontier. But, Bleys is doing what he can. Gerard is taking the situation far worse than most will admit - I think he is feeling the weight of uncertainty, and his strength can do nothing to lift it. But I believe we are expecting most of your generation to arrive tonight or tomorrow morning, and Gerard is asking that you assemble for a meeting in the Grand Hall tomorrow evening before dinner." She sighs heavily, and then takes a longer drink of the wine. "I only wish we knew more. I believe Caine is right - I believe Benedict and Fiona were first targeted in order to prevent their aid to us as we grew more aware of the attacks. And the fact that both of them were

I sip the wine and roll the flavor on my tongue, closing my eyes in bliss. It was indeed a very good year. I nod my thanks to Flora as she reseats herself. I gaze into my glass, watching the light dance

"I can inform Bleys when next I meet him that, despite my 'inexperience in the hazards of life', I can, and will, hold Greyswandir until it can be returned to its rightful owner. If someone wishes to take Greyswandir from me, they are welcome to try. I doubt they will be successful." I flash a rather feral smile. "I may be dreadfully predictable and transparent to many of you, lacking your experience in

"I, too, fear that those two were taken first to cripple us." I take another sip. "It was a very good tactic for our enemy - divide and conquer. Take the two individuals that would be the most threatening to an invasion, then take the Monarch - the glue that holds the rest of the family in place and prevents us from falling on each other. Now we are falling into disarray, eyeing each other with as much suspicion, if not more, then we watch outsiders." I sigh and set down my glass next to Greyswandir. "I am sorry, Aunt. I wish I could help you more, but I really have no further information on Corwin, though I wish I did. Have we as of yet tried a massive effort to get through to those missing? Perhaps by having most of the family concentrate on trying to contact one individual through their Trump? Wth many people

As Flora sips the wine gracefully, letting the flavorful liquid roll around before swallowing, her face alights with a smile, but the expression is somewhat more bitter. She swallows and speaks. "You are a little new to the Castle and the Family - there has never been a time when we have not eyed each other with more suspicion than outsiders. It is hard to fear betrayal either from the insubstantial

"We have indeed tried Trumping as a group - before the War, it was used to try to reach Brand. I believe it may have been tried to reach Benedict, perhaps Bleys, Corwin and Gerard working together. As far as I know, it came to nothing - the same as all the efforts. I halfheartedly expect some disembodied voice to appear inside the contact - 'The person you are trying to reach is no longer in service.

"However, we are reluctant these days to commit to such collaborative operations as group calling, as it involves a lowering of defenses within the group, and we do not know who or what is responsible for our current troubles. So there is a general consensus that it would be...somewhat imprudent right now." She sighs. "Sometimes I think the conquest of Amber is such a trivial thing, so fragmented and

"And on that regard, let me assure you that Bleys means well when he is somewhat anxious about someone as young as you possessing such a powerful artifact as Greyswandir. Do not mistake his comments for the chiding of a relative - it is the comment of a battle-tested commander, who fears to lose a powerful weapon because it may be poorly defended. He knows little of you or of Averdor - he

"I've noticed of recent that you generally seem to have avoided spending time with your younger relations residing here at the Castle. Being slightly suspicious of Shiro I can understand - he is of a different culture, and will take some time to acclimate himself to this society, this world. But what of Orion? He has lived here for a long time, and would make a good friend in these times, I believe." I wave away Flora's comments about Bleys. I had my own theories, and it didn't matter much at this date anyway. I suppose she is somewhat correct - Bleys knows little of me, but for that matter the same goes for most of my relatives. Oh, that I could be ignorant of my true heritage once again... The stab of loss that accompanies the thought banished the wish from my mind. But things would not be

I stand and walk to the window, sweeping up my glass from the table as I do so. "Shiro didn't answer the door this morning - I had thought to invite him on a ride through Arden. Upon reflection, that was probably a fortunate conencidance, because of the outcome of that little ride. Orion I have spoken with on a few occasions, since we have both been here for a bit of time - but he is no doubt busy with the

I turn from gazing out the pane to look at Flora. "Truthfully, dear aunt, most of the family makes me fairly uncomfortable - save Benedict and Corwin, and in the past, Dierdre." I sip my wine and look at her. "I am a very forthright person, Aunt, and most of the family is not." I take another sip, letting the flavor roll off my tongue. "Forgive me for being blunt, but there it is. I had thought of making myself

I turn away and lean myself against the windowpane, my profile towards Flora. "I will attempt to make connections with the others of my generation if it pleases you, Aunt. You are correct in that I should

I debate bringing up the individual I had spotted in the infirmary before finally deciding that I may as well. She's here, and we are having this little 'heart-to-heart' chat... I stife a sarcastic laugh before it begins. "Aunt, I saw someone while I was being tended to by the Doctor that I feel I should know. Perhaps it is the shock of the past few hours," I gesture at my appearance with my burned hand, "but I

Flora slowly rises, her glass empty and set on the desk. "Shiro is indeed quite the early riser. I don't know if it's just his own way of the world, or the Shadow equivalent of jet lag. But I believe he was speaking with Queen Vialle in the solarium earlier today. She's leaving, by the way. I'll miss her dearly, but I do believe it's for the best. Although I'm still hard-pressed to agree with Bleys on the definition

"And yes, Orion will be busy for some time. Ideally, though, he'll have enough sense to leave in place most of Julian's procedures and patrols. My brother has the delicacy of an ox, sometimes, but he has guarded Arden long enough, and fervently enough, that I do trust his judgment in that regard." She moves towards the window you are standing at, which overlooks one of the barer faces of Kolvir - but it is a wonderful view nonetheless. "But I had more meant why you hadn't introduced yourself to Orion in general, not just today. But never mind - I'm sure your generation will get to know each other soon

As you speak of your discomfort with most of the Elders, her eyes pick up...perhaps a twinkle of sorts. "My dear, I do wish to make one distinction for you. Bluntness is one thing - crassness another. Just because you wish to speak plainly is no reason to speak rudely. Speaking of Julian." She smiles lightly. "And not that I think you have offended me with your frank words, I merely wish to remind you that you can be both plainly polite or plainly impolite. But I appreciate that it becomes difficult to care for people whom you know are at the very least circumspect and evasive, if not outright deceitful. But try not to hold my brothers and sisters too responsible for how they were raised. Father was...somewhat willful, and his temper and delight turned very fast. Children are wont to compete with one another and especially as our mothers tended not to remain available for long, Father was the judge and jury of all our affairs." She thoughtfully stares down out the window, straining to make out some of the city far below. "If I were a more cynical person, I might suspect the dear King of purposefully creating an environment in which it would be impossible for any one person to acquire so much influence as to

"But I am glad to hear your resolve to defend Amber and her people. We will need such resolve, I suspect - that and so much more. I am glad to speak to you now, to learn your mind, while..." She turns her eyes away from the world outside, and matches your gaze, strong and yet pained. "I don't know how much longer I can expect to remain free - we lost our best students of both war and the supernatural early on, so we have never had even the remotest idea what was assailing us. But the pace has increased over the last three days, and I fully expect that one more will go missing today." She has drawn her Trump deck from a pocket, and is rifling through it, pausing occasionally. "But these wonderful cards suggest that they are not dead - merely out of touch, out of range. So I am hopeful. Not for the now, but for the future. I have a hope that you and your cousins will, after much struggle, solve this riddle and rescue us. But it will require a sense of purpose such as you have declared. And

Flora listens patiently to your description of the man in the infirmary. "Well, I cannot guarantee it, but it sounds as if you have met Sterling, albeit briefly. Sterling is a family friend, and has been for a very long time. He has served many of my brothers well in some of their more...private affairs. Recently, I believe, he had taken Shiro under his wing, and it was Sterling who brought Shiro to Amber. I would really have expected him to be with Shiro - tomorrow is rather an important day, and I suspect that Shiro will have questions on how to proceed. The infirmary, you say? Hmmm. I have no idea why he would go all the way down there. But the fact that he excused himself to a private room does not necessarily mean he had business there. Keep in mind that anyone can use a Trump, and that many

I listen to Flora's thoughts and guesses while slowly draining the rest of my wine from the glass. I gesture towards the sideboard with my nearly empty glass, an inquiring look questioning if she desires a

I take her disguised admonishment as what it is; I was being rude, after all. I show little reaction to most of her news, feeling too run down to even care at this point. If it happens, it happens... Although I do feel sorrow at those lost to us, I don't believe that they are dead... and there is nothing I can do to protect anyone from the same fate. Except lend my sword arm to Amber should She need it. Still, I feel compelled to at least speak some comforting words, regardless of if I believe them or not. "Perhaps we are incorrect in that assumption and none will fall this soon. It is possible that a more forthright

I nod at her words about Sterling. "Well, it matters not at this date, Aunt. I can hide the sword or carry it openly, but I doubt it will take long for word to get about that Corwin has fallen to our unnamed enemy as well. What would you and Bleys, as the only two to whom I have told of the sword, wish me to do?" I set my empty glass down and turn to face her with a raised eyebrow. Of course, what they

"I will agree that I believe Amber, and the very Castle, to be the safest place I know of. Unfortunately, even the treasure room did not provide Random adequate security. I won't say where the Queen is headed, as secrecy is the entire point of her departure. However, once the situation here returns to normal, there is someone on the staff who has special instructions that will allow her to be contacted." Flora turns and paces back to the sideboard, depositing her empty glass there. "I agree - an open assault, even the gunfire we heard during the Interregnum, would be music to my ears compared to the terrible silence of the Castle's halls of late. It wears upon me like a heavy woolen coat in the middle of a desert." She sighs and turns. "But I am still here now, and there is much I can still do for Amber -

"As to what you should do with the item you have secured, I can't say I know at all what would be best." She lets her eyes linger on the sheathed sword on your endtable. "I must say I don't always know my brother's mind, but if Corwin has given it to you - especially in the circumstances you describe - I am most reluctant to interfere. Keep it safe - but that is obvious. I do not believe it should be made known to the citizenry that Corwin and Greyswandir have become separated, and I would ask that you work to keep that from becoming known to them. After that, if you believe that you should share the knowledge with someone, I cannot say that you should not. But always a warning - not every child of Amber is as dedicated to it as you are. Some may desire some of her more potent treasures for themselves. You are indeed a strong and powerful champion for the sword, and the kingdom - but prudence is ever a watchword within these walls." She starts to move to the door. "You appear tired and dwelling on this is wearying even to me. I will go rejoin Bleys - while he is a good negotiator and knows the houses of Chaos well, I am his best source for information on the needs of the City and of the Golden Circle. You should really rest, now. We anticipate almost all of the younger generation arriving at the Castle tonight or tomorrow morning, and are planning a luncheon to get acquainted and to pool whatever information we have." She smiles and nods at your table. "That will be for you to hide or divulge at your discretion - Bleys will merely include Corwin's name amongst those of the lost." I smile at Flora and move to the door. "I thank you for your time to speak with me, and for your... openness of words. I will think upon our conversation. Surely we will speak more often." I bow low and open the door for her. "Please rest, aunt - you look almost as tired as I am." I give another genuine smile. "Let us hope for the best - mayhap we will wake up tomorrow and this will all be a bad dream."

You feel very, very tired, It's been a long and stressful day, and you have much to consider for tomorrow. You have enough energy left in you for a few bedtime preparations, but you feel the call of the

I lock the door behind Flora and drag myself to my bed, detouring only long enough to move Greyswandir to my bedside table. I sit heavily on the bed and remove my boots and belt; I lay Sha'kar,

Morpheus steals over your frame quickly and easily - the day's trials and tribulations have come to a close. You dream in fractures and fragments. Images of Corwin, Bleys, Flora, Huntington, and of the landscapes of Averdor swim around inside your dreamscape. Throughout it all, though, there is a dark undertone - a note of ominousness and foreboding that you cannot escape. Eventually, however, the

Flora smiles in sympathy and caresses your cheek briefly. "Thank you, Killashandra. You give me hope." With that, she walks gracefully out the door and closes it behind her.

unsheathed, on the bedside table as well and mentally bid him to be watchful. Without any more ado, I strip and fall into my quilts, into the depths of unconsciousness.

I raise another questioning eyebrow at the news of Vialle. "I am saddened to hear of the Queen's departure. I had thought that Amber was supposed to be the safest place, which is why those of my

possibly supplant him. But to be honest, I believe he just didn't notice the side effects of how he treated his children." She breathes out slowly, and draws another breath after a moment.

I could tell that they did not fully believe me. I laid the remnant of the Trump upon the desk. "This. And..." I draw Greyswandir and lay it crosswise on his desk, my hand still upon the hilt. "...this."

drew. Still watching me with caution, he picks up the Trump and examines it while Flora watches me with wide eyes. Laying it back down, he gestures at Greyswandir. "May I?...

energy at the back of your head, behind your ears. It's different, not a normal feeling. But you press on, with a surge of hope to fend off the disquiet of this new sensation.