RPG Crossroads Amber (Phage Press) >> Blood Loyalties >> PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood -PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen Post by SisyphusX on 05/08/2004 at 12:42:12 You awaken in a fine hotel room, well-appointed and luxurious. A cigar, long cold, rests in the ashtray on the desk, and your clothes hang on hooks near the door. You hear the sounds of light conversation outside, and the motion you feel suggests that you are on the water somewhere. A light breakfast of fruit, coffee and pastries has been left on the table near the bed. The light filtering in through the window is far too bright for your weary and somewhat bloodshot eyes. You only vaguely remember having a good time last night, but you have wandered so much that you have little idea where you are right now And it is in that hazy and discordant near-consciousness that you feel a -very- unfamiliar sensation behind your ears. A warm and buzzing sensation you have not felt in perhaps years - a Trump contact is being attempted. Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen Post by Talen on 05/09/2004 at 16:17:58 Through the haze of over indulgence, the disorientation of the motion and brightness of the light, I struggled for coherency. A quick concentration on the attempted contact revealed no hints as to who it might be. That wasn't actually that surprising, as I'd only ever had contact with a few others previously, and the signature of the one I knew best was always hidden from me unless they chose otherwise. The call was insistent and I was intrigued, so steeling my mind, I opened to the contact, and prepared to attempt to sever it again at the slightest hint of trouble Yes...? I spoke to the contact, probably with more feeling than I intended... Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen Post by SisyphusX on 05/09/2004 at 16:19:07 You experience a brief moment of seasickness, as the motion of your ship is asynchronous to the motion on the ship Caine is on. He is high in the rigging, and it is a bright morning on the seas near Amber City Harbor. He is refreshed and alert, and his adrenal energy courses through both of your systems, even as the brighter light of the sun in the background forces you to flinch away in your haze. But you regroup, and meet Caine's cheerful expression with your own, put off and disturbed. "Talen! Glad to finally meet. My name is Caine - you know who I am. I see you're enjoying your days out in Shadow - sowing your wild oats, are you?" He laughs, and you hear the sounds of men on the deck of his ship setting to turn the ship to port. "Hey, I know enough not to bother you - you've had enough history with the family that you probably don't want or need us right at the moment. But I have to warn you. You might be in danger. Many of the Royal Family have gone missing. Fiona, Julian - even Benedict and Random, for crying out loud!" You try to sense the truth of his words, but Caine's mind is nebulous and ephemeral. There is nothing to latch hold of. "Bleys is acting Regent right now, and he's asked us to round up all the family and gather them at the Castle. It's the most real, so it will be much harder for anybody to use any power to attack here. Plus, it gets most of the suspects in the same room." He sneers a little, and swings to the other side of the rigging as he talks. "And there's another bit. We don't know under what circumstances people are vanishing, but we can't rule out the Trump as a possible line of attack. We've been using Trump to talk to each other - no helping that, really - but we've stopped using it to move for a while. We want to know more about what's going on before we make any more mistakes. Plus there's what happened to Grandpa. No idea what the hell to make of that. You hear a commotion on the deck of Caine's ship. Caine looks down in attention, and then he looks up, irritated. "Crap. I'm trying to keep Amber's navy at the ready with some decent war games, but they do tend to intrude at the most awkward times." He shouts down to his crew. "I thought I told you I wanted ten minutes?!" You hear a noncommittal sound of confusion from the crew. "Anyway - I can probably answer a few questions, but then I gotta go. But I do encourage you to come back here. You can stay where you want, in the Castle or not, and you don't have to talk to anybody you don't want to. We just want to know what's up. And even though we have every conviction that your old man is out of the picture, if it just so happened that he wasn't, you'd be in a special kind of danger." He rests himself on the rigging, and looks into you attentively. Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen Post by Talen on 05/09/2004 at 16:19:19 Caine. Pleased to meet you to, I guess? I wasn't, of course, and I tried not to let it show in my surface thoughts, but I don't think I was successful. I'd tried very hard to avoid contact with the family, after I left my home and my father, and this was the first time they'd even tried to contact me, so it must be important. So, what about Dad, is he missing as well? And what do you mean, 'special danger'? My guess was that he suspected my father was involved in the disappearances of my Aunts and Uncles, and as the son that spurned him, maybe I'd be a target, too. Still, forewarned is forearmed, and I hadn't been back to Amber since my 16th Birthday, so... I'm intrigued, Caine, I have to admit. Perhaps I will travel back to Amber. It may take me some time, though - I'm quite a way away. Should I contact you if I need anything? I looked longingly at the breakfast and coffee getting cold. I rose and walked over to the table, a little unsteadily, and poured a cup, black, three sugars, and drank it straight down, listening intently to Caine's reply. Thanks, Caine, I'll be in touch, see you in Amber...good luck with the sea trials... ...and I crossed my hand across my face, breaking the contact. Satisfied with the conversation, I engaged the breakfast, wolfing it down, and finishing the remainder of the coffee. Feeling a little better, I showered and dressed quickly, and set out to establish exactly where I was, and see about getting off this damned boat... Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen Post by SisyphusX on 05/09/2004 at 16:19:59 At the words "about Dad, is he missing as well...", his eyebrows raise for a brief moment. You suspect it is the single genuine reaction directed to you during the conversation so far. He pauses for a moment, then starts again. "Yeah, he's not around here, either. I suppose we don't know what really happened to him. But if he's still around, I think you know what the 'special danger' might be. Your father is a...unique individual. One accustomed to a more mechanical view of the world, rather than parental. If he finds you, he's just as likely to continue honing you as the tool he wants you to be, and that might not be so pleasant for anyone, especially yourself." He pauses as the wind shifts. "But that's really beside the main point. We haven't heard from him in some time, but he's been off on his own before, so it's hard to tell what it means. But Benedict usually checks in, or at least will speak to people, and Random vanished in the middle of the damn Treasury! I've no idea who's safe and who's not anymore. He hears your offer to return, and nods approvingly. "Good to hear that you're heading in. Yeah, you can talk to me if you need to - but I think Bleys might be a more helpful contact, as I haven't left Amber and the Golden Circle all that often recently. Still, I suppose I'm available." You take a swig of coffee - it's still pretty warm, but it's not fresh any more. You suspect it was left less than twenty minutes ago. You polish off the breakfast quickly, and get dressed afterwards. The clothes feel soft and smell fresh - they've been laundered quite recently. Your mood is quite good, despite Caine's mysterious missive, and you have a good sense of yourself as you prepare to leave this room, this boat and this Shadow on the way to Amber. But you stop short as soon as you open the door, your eyes agog. The hallway outside is entirely constructed of obsidian, and it is illuminated by lamps in the shapes of demons with fire in their mouths. The ambient sound now sounds much deeper and more guttural - the ripple of passing water has been replaced by the more solid swishing of something thicker outside the hull. And then, there are the people waiting outside your door. They are man and woman, young and attractive, dressed in simple leather straps, their skin lightly oiled and barely concealed. They have thin but strong metal collars around their necks, which are attached to cords of an indeterminate but strong material. Their heads are bowed to you, and they reflexively offer you the handles to their leashes as you emerge. Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen Post by Talen on 05/09/2004 at 16:21:04 From Caine's words, I deduced that Caine thought that maybe Dad was responsible for the disappearances...I'd better start watching my back... As I open the door and take in the corridor, I'm stunned, to say the least. Just what the hell was going on here? Hell seemed an apt description - the black walls, the demonic lamps. And slaves, acting more like well trained pets...more and more interesting. I push out my psyche to try to get a feel for what may be going on - glancing back into the room to check that reality. Stroking the head of the young man in front of me, I use the contact to establish a contact with his mind, to impose my psyche on his, to scan the surface thoughts, to try to garner some idea of what he wants, or is expecting of me, to try to establish where I actually am. That was the most disconcerting issue right now. I didn't actually remember getting here, nor even knew where here was, and that was very strange, very strange indeed. The changes I was aware of smacked of manipulation of Shadow at the least, maybe Logrus. I need to find out, and find out quickly... Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen Post by SisyphusX on 05/09/2004 at 16:21:53 Your consciousness extends out gradually, taking a feel for this new and rather unsettling environment. There are many beings on board this boat, and most of them are empty husks. There are a few consciousnesses - and those are black, evil and terrible. They are, however, most definitely of Shadow, and consequently very frail compared to yours. You turn back to your room, and look upon a rather idyllic cabin in a very peaceful setting. The effect is actually fairly jarring - the discongruity sudden You turn back, and the man and the woman look hopeful as you turn your attention to them. You touch the man's head, and he smiles. You start to enter his mind, and feel it yielded openly before you - for all the good it does. It is largely empty, and shallow at that. Only one thought really resonates throughout it, and you recognize the energy - it is yours. It practically shouts through his mind. "STAY THE HELL OUT OF MY ROOM -I'VE GOT A HEADACHE THE SIZE OF KOLVIR." But as you examine the psyche for anything else, you notice that the emptiness is manufactured. If you compare his mind to a stone tablet, once it had much writing and a long story to tell. But someone, and you're fairly sure it was not you, sanded away all traces of that story, leaving a much thinner and blank face to work with. If you were trying to create people who could be built and rebuilt as the circumstance dictated, this would be a brutal but practical way to work. As you again touch the signature of your own words on his mind, you have a flash of memory of last night. You were at a casino, a very opulent and fancy one (and not at all in the dark and fiery motif you see around you now). You were dressed as you are now, and you were drinking some thick blue liquor. There were two very beautiful women on your lap. You were shouting something like, "You call this high-stakes!? This money is paper, and evanescent at that! I'm going to find some really high-stakes games!" You snap back to an awareness of the slave's mind, as hollow as it is. Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen Post by Talen on 05/09/2004 at 16:22:14 It was a relief to know that I was not under any immediate pressure, there being no strong psyches to contend with, but I was still unnerved by these empty husks. Obviously manufactured, but for what reason? I needed to get out of here, so I decided to make my way up on deck and see what I was up against. I ignored the proffered leashes, but muttered to the two as I strode past, "Follow me if you want, I don't really care..." The corridors were dark and foreboding, but I swept along, not looking back to see if the two were following me. I took several turns at random, looking for some stairs upwards, and took them as soon as I found them. On a ship, up was generally good, I figured. That echo of me, "STAY THE HELL OUT OF MY ROOM - I'VE GOT A HEADACHE THE SIZE OF KOLVIR." still had me worried. Did the guy that was waiting try to enter my room last night? At the top of the stairs I had two choices... left or right. Reaching in my pocket I grabbed a coin, and flipped it... heads is left, and off I went... As I walked, I decided I needed some advantage, so concentrating, I walked the Pattern in my mind, and as I reached the centre I felt the calm settle over me. Holding the image of the Pattern in my mind required a certain amount of concentration, but the advantages were obvious to me under these circumstances. I let out my psyche a head of me, bolstered by the strength of pattern, and used it to scout ahead... [ooc] don't know what your rules on pattern lenses are...edit the last paragraph as appropriate...[/ooc] Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen Post by SisyphusX on 05/09/2004 at 16:23:45 You hear the two slaves following you, but tentatively. Your extended psyche only detects from them the glimmer of thoughts - they are more them - and a few of them are much worse off than yours - they have been rather sadistically beaten, it appears. But all of them are calm, placid and docile As you move up a small service stairway to the next floor, you start mentally re-walking the Pattern. It's always best done as a reminiscence of your first time on the Pattern, and so your eyes close briefly as you climb the stairs. You bring the Pattern to mind, and use its energy to guard yourself in this unfamiliar environment. You quickly find the stairs that lead up to the main deck. It is growing uncomfortably warm, though - and now you see why. You are aboard a steamboat made of a material similar to obsidian, and you are softly paddling through a river of molten rock. You can feel the waves of heat roll off the river and up into the boat. The shores of the river are not too far away, but endlessly far away if you wanted to reach them. The shores beyond are dusty and dry, and covered with a network of cracks, that seem to reveal an angrily red interior. There are a few black wagons driving around, being pulled by grey-silver animals that fly a few feet above the ground. There is a lone figure on the shore - a slave, by the look of him. He is chained to the ground, and he has no protection from the searing heat of the ground and the red-hot rock below. He is slowly burning to death, but he doesn't appear to have any concern about it. He stands firm, a cloud of smoke gathering around him. There are a few slaves here on the deck, in addition to the ones outside your cabin, that are still following you. These other slaves appear to have been left outside doors that lead into the main hall of this floor of the steamboat. As you stare at your surroundings, you suddenly catch a glimmer on the shore. You don't focus in well enough before it fades to nothing - but you definitely feel that something happened there that was out of place. You felt something real, but just for a second. There is nothing left to indicate what it might have been, and the boat is even now slowly moving away from where it was. You can see a few doorways leading into the main hall, and a stairway that leads up to what might be the bridge of the ship. You see no lights on from within that high room, however. There are some sounds of merriment coming from within the main hall - and you believe a band may be playing. Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen Post by Talen on 05/09/2004 at 16:24:08 That flash of reality could only man one thing. Another Amberite...but who? Seeing as I could do nothing about that at this point, further investigation of my predicament seemed more logical and more immediately pressing. I need to get out of this shadow and into one more conducive to my particular needs, but I wasn't about to just start walking shadow taking this whole boat with me, without knowing a little more about where I was, and who I was travelling with I wandered slowly up the companionway towards the stairs leading to the bridge, looking into the main hall through an open door or window should the opportunity arise. Again I try to ascertain, using my psyche, the relative strengths of the occupants, and anything I can about them. As I each the foot of the stairs, I motion to the two slaves to stay by the railing, and cautiously set foot on the stairs. I walk up quickly and with purpose. Reaching the top, I try to prepare my self for anything, and steal a quick glance backwards to get a view of the boat and my immediate surroundings. Hopefully seeing nothing of consequence, I brace myself, open the door and enter... Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen Post by SisyphusX on 05/09/2004 at 16:24:29 As you walk slowly across the side of the ship, you see a few open windows looking into the main hall. The hall is large, almost cavernously large, but it's all decorated in the hell noir style of the lower decks. Obsidian furniture, demon-sculpted lamps, dark red carpeting. The room is sparsely populated. There are a few slaves standing at various beverage service stations, and at three or four of the tables, there are seated groups of people playing games. Three are playing some form of card game, and one table is playing a dice game. The players are all of somewhat varied appearance, but all look more than a little maleficent. Some have vestigial wings, some have pronounced horns, and most have reddened skin. Otherwise, they look somewhat like well-off nobles - they are dressed in finery and coiffed with pleasing form. Standing next to a few of the players are slaves holding papers, which a player occasionally looks at and returns. You realize that while there is no band, you have been hearing the faint strains of a player piano off from the depths of the room. You reach the bottom of the stairs to the bridge. "Now, you two - stay here. I'm going upstairs, but I imagine I will return shortly." The two slaves take up flanking positions at the bottom of the stairs, and then kneel. They again speak in unison, and it's more than a little unsettling. "We shall not move until your return." They bow their heads. You shrug, unsure how to handle their...well, their slavish obedience. You turn and slowly climb the steps. They are well-maintained, so you don't worry so much about the odd squeak from old wood as you ascend. But still, you are careful. As you continue, you extend your mind into the room at the top of the stairs - which curiously has no windows at all. You know it to be the bridge from the location on the boat, but you wonder how a pilot could effectively guide the boat from a sealed room. You sense a mind inside the bridge - just one. It is relaxed and somewhat bored, and it appears to be intermixed with some larger effect on the bridge. You are unsure as to what this other presence is, as it seems to be...reflecting off the inner walls of the room, creating a contained environment of some sort, leaving few remnants that you can detect from without. You steel yourself for whatever might lie within, and open the door swiftly. The room is almost identical to the material down in the main hall. Black obsidian on the walls, red carpet on the floor. There is no light in this room, barring the light spilling in from the lone doorway you stand at. In the middle of the room is a large, ornately-sculpted chair. Lounging on the chair, legs splayed and arms drooped over the side, is a very demonic figure. You believe he would be at least eight foot tall if standing, and his wings should still be strong enough to support his weight if he so chose. His skin is a dark red, smooth and near-glistening with sweat. His clothing is minimal - some leggings, a vest, and thick red gloves. He has no shoes on - his hooves are polished and well-kept. His horns are long, twisting and curling upwards from the sides of his head. His face is human-looking, red as it is - thick beard, strong eyes, thin nose. His eyes open suddenly as you enter, and he turns his head to face you. "Talon!" You hear the difference in pronunciation - he is saying Talon, not Talen. "You're up a little early. And what brings you up here? I'm a little busy right now - is there a problem I need to know about?" His face is open and friendly. His mind is still intermixed in some fashion with another effect in the room. You're getting the hint of a feeling of something larger about it, but you would need to enter the room completely to get a stronger feeling for it - and it for you, you suspect in the back of your mind.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen Post by Talen on 05/21/2004 at 07:41:50 Well, this wasn't quite what I had expected.

**Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen** Post by **SisyphusX** on 05/27/2004 at 13:39:33

**Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen** Post by <u>Talen</u> on 05/28/2004 at 06:50:25

no scars - you feel fine, if quite disoriented by your surroundings.

want to - the helm's relatively calm right now." He beckons as you approach.

ghosts behind every door, and Demons behind what ever was going down.

stairs. Can you arrange to have them looked after till my return?"

food and drink and set off down the single road out of the town.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen Post by <u>SisyphusX</u> on 06/07/2004 at 18:22:55

quickly and avoided a crowd gathering.

as vivid now as ever before.

**Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen** Post by <u>Talen</u> on 06/17/2004 at 10:48:45

main dining hall I had experienced on my sixteenth birthday.

attention to any difference I spotted, make a mental note.

prepare my self for the 'morrow and meeting my family.

**Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Talen** Post by **SisyphusX** on 06/21/2004 at 17:45:50

rejected it - possibly all over their shoes.

guards a block away.

you approach.

of hers."

with their faces and remember what my father had told me of each...

and contemptuous, but also gleaned from hard experience and analysis.

correct, as you have been told that he is the acting Regent.

look upon the worlds they have left behind."

unmatched in his own way, but he cannot easily combat the attacks we will bring.

disdain for anyone who wasn't him. "Me? Why, son, I'm your father. What more can I tell you?"

any real matter." You remember your father's sly sneer - and you knew Corwin was doomed.

every day, he were again crowned King - after someone else had handled the day's business."

otherwise think to talk to each other. But you may relax - she is safely stored at the moment."

of Amber's defenses, properly dealt with, has all the defensive strength of a croquet wicket."

and subtler combatant than your father? Somehow, you doubt it, staring at the wide-eyed innocence in front of you.

however, his focus does not involve intelligence, unlike Benedict and Fiona."

playing field." He snorted viciously. "Good for her, and good for me."

and suspicious as they evaporate into the night.

When Caine speaks, he has already anticipated your reaction and planned his speech to produce what he desires."

a faceless siege.

patiently.

the bottom, they gasp and bow their heads more deeply.

the profit and loss tally.

proffered bows so I smiled as I passed them, waving my hand in a non-committal fashion.

pertinent to the current situation. I also recalled how much I hate long distance travel, so boring....

you see fit to collect them. I am pleased to offer whatever service I can." He bows with a flourish as you depart.

on your last memories of your father. Will he be there, despite Caine's assurances? Why hasn't he contacted you?

Elders did - but knew him to be useful if you wanted something done that was...less than wholesome.

to my self though, no one here knew of home, so I guessed these were standard guest quarters.

I wanted to see just how similar home was, and whether this could be an advantage to me.

uncertain terms that guns didn't work in Amber. Perhaps a sorcery duplicated the effect?

was. Damn I'm confused...

than most.

I wasn't sure what I had expected, but this definitely wasn't it.

I glanced down at my own hands as I thought crossed my mind...did I look any different?

Who the hell was Talon and how had this creature confused me with him. More to the point what or who the hell was this creature.

"No problem, just wanted to clear my head, and see if you needed anything?" I responded. It seemed appropriate.

There was too much going on here I was unaware of. Obviously I wasn't where I was expecting to be, and it appeared I might not be who I thought I

Only one way to find out what is going on I thought to myself, and making sure I was calm and that my pattern defence was still up and running, I

You examine yourself before you enter the Bridge. Nothing appears out of place on your person - except that your clothes are much cleaner than they usually are, given your proclivities for traveling from place to place and not waiting for something as mundane as laundry. But no marks, no wounds,

"I thank your Lordship for your offer to help, but I suspect you've got more on your mind than whether or not I've had breakfast yet. Come in if you

And as you enter, the psychic presence inside the room gently settles all around you, not invasive or forceful, but rather a gentle presence, like the soft glow from a television screen at night. You cautiously open your mind a little, and you perceive what this room is. You are in a light state of contact with the ship itself. It is a living ship, albeit with limited sentience. You feel the heat of the magma river below, you feel your 'feet' kicking behind you as the ship is propelled forward on a paddlewheel. You feel the passengers moving around your decks, rather sedately at the moment. There are a few people inside the main hall, but many of the passengers are still asleep. You even get a sense of perceiving yourself outside yourself, as you perceive your 'head' and feel your own small body and that of...the Captain. Yes, you have an instinctive awareness through the

And then, as you get a slight contact with the Captain's mind, you finally have a flash of insight and remembrance of what's happened to you, as you touch upon the Captain's perceptions of you. You remember now - you were drinking and gambling last night, traveling from Shadow casino to Shadow casino and sampling whatever libations they had to offer. That was the first memory you recalled earlier - when you decided that the paper money you had been gambling for was suddenly no longer enough to satisfy your rather heated desire for a more 'high-stakes' game. And so, you walked in Shadow and found a riverboat casino in Hell, where slaves were wagered and souls were the coin of the realm. This was a realm where you were a demon prince - Prince Talon. The Captain knows you to be a traveling lord from a far-away demesne, and he wants to encourage the reputation of his ship as an enjoyable diversion, so he is anxious to make sure you are comfortable and happy. You dimly recall spending the evening playing cards and roulette at the tables down in the main hall - and apparently, you came out of the evening ahead by two slaves, highly valuable ones at that. But even as your mind suddenly explodes with memory, you realize just how paper-thin this world is. Indeed, you are aboard a living riverboat casino of the damned on a river of lava - but it is still just a Shadow, just like any other Shadow - except that the decor is a little more gothic

As my memories of the previous night returned, I breathed a small sigh of relief. That Trump call from Caine had me spooked so bad I was seeing

Assuming a positive response, I turned and left the bridge, striding down the stairs with my new found confidence. Time I was leaving I decided. I

I had left the Ship before I reached the foot of the stairs. The lava river became water, and the ship a more standard wooden construct. Shadow walking on a boat was a bit weird, so I spent a little time getting back to dry land. The boat docked at a small town, seemingly to take on board fresh fuel and food. There were a fair number of people waiting to board the boat, but they courteously waited for me to disembark first, one or two even

I acquired a draft animal of sorts, a sort of cross between a camel and a zebra, a little uncomfortable to ride, and more than a little temperamental, but it was easier than walking. I also bought some less salubrious clothes, because my current accoutrements were definitely drawing attention, obtained

I didn't want to waste time so I made straight for Amber, with no concern for stealth or subterfuge. I shifted shadow with regularity, striving for the familiarity I seemed to have with that place, and slowly it came to me. My beast of burden changed little as we shifted, and eventually I had to swap it for a more conventional horse, but I made a handsome profit, as the folks I sold my mount to had, of course, never before seen its like, but all's fair in

My journey to Amber took time, and I spent much of it in retrospective thought. Trying to look back on past events and see if there might be anything

The Captain looks at you and smiles openly, teeth sharp and bone-white. "Indeed, milord. They shall be given honored roles on the ship's staff until

The slaves at the foot of the stairs do not look up as you descend - it is not their place. But as your footsteps recede into the distance, never touching

Your time spent on board the more normal ferry and in the port town goes quietly. Your fancy dress was attracting a little attention, but you moved

You have a decent familiarity with the realm of Shadow, so it doesn't take you long to find the Shadows around you and collect your bearings on the way to Amber. Amber...land of intrigue and treachery. You visited so long ago - will you be prepared for what you find there now? Your mind muses

Your journey is long and uneventful, and you let your mind stroll over the past. You don't have a personal acquaintance with almost any of the Elders save Brand - but he briefed you extensively on each of them, so you are a little nervous to remember that **both** Benedict and Fiona are gone. It neatly caps both ends of the power spectrum - whatever this assailant is, it apparently out-strategized Benedict and defeated Fiona's sorcerous defenses. If it can take those two, taking any other Elder is probably not too complex a task. And yet Caine is still around. Brand never trusted Caine - as so few

You are not terribly surprised that Bleys has assumed the Regency. Although, you are not exactly sure whom he assumed the Regency from - last you knew, King Oberon had vanished and not returned. Eric was King when you last heard - sort of. But you remember Brand's rather sneering rejection of Eric. "He's good at getting to be King, but he won't be any damn good at being King." You hear the sharp and angry tones of your father,

After several hours of riding and occasionally switching horses, you finally arrive at Amber itself, late in the evening. You are met in the Forest of

"Prince Talen, you are expected. Quarters are prepared for you, and you will be shown there as soon as possible. Most all of the Castle is asleep now, but there is an official luncheon scheduled tomorrow as an introductory conference between those of your generation." But you of all people can see the fear behind his eyes. Even without trying, you sense waves of confined and trapped fear underneath his conscious thoughts. Amber is under

Ever since entering the Castle, I was plagued by feelings of déjà vu, and homesickness. This was home, yet not home. Everywhere looked so familiar yet there were subtle differences, and in some places not so subtle differences. I guessed there had been changes to Amber that had been made after the construction of home, either that or there were deliberate omissions, like the missing door giving access to the pattern room from the

I left my horse to be stabled and allowed the Castle Guard to lead me through the grounds to the castle proper. As we walked, I paid particular

As most were sleeping, I asked the guard to arrange for food to be prepared and sent to my rooms. I need to rest and eat after my travels and

It's somewhat dark as you walk from the stables to the castle, so the details that may or may not have changed are not easily visible. The

We reached my 'assigned quarters', and I was a little disappointed that they were smaller than the suit I had used at home. I kept my disappointment

The food came, and there was a surfeit. I ate my fill, but strangely. I was far from tired. No one had said not to, so I went for a stroll around the Castle.

On my return, I laid out my Trump deck on the table in front of me and studied the faces. Not to initiate any contact, but merely to refresh my memory

landscaping has changed a little - trees moved and flowers changed. Your eyes pick out a few small indentations or nicks in some of the castle walls, and you're a little unsure what to make of them. They almost look like the chips that bullets would knock out of stone - but you were told in no

You turn back to the castle, and just before you enter, you detect a curious smell in the air - after a moment, you place it, based on your experience in many fine taverns and other halls of debauchery. Somewhere close, someone apparently decided that their dinner didn't agree with them, and

And indeed, after you conclude your dinner and take your walk, you find the source - and it amuses you to note that whomever decided that their stew didn't agree with them did so from the Royal Library window. A castle groundskeeper is cleaning it up, but he rises briefly and bows to you as

After your sumptuous meal, you retire to your guest quarters. You fan out the Trumps of the Elders and remember your father's words - usually cold

A stern and determined face stares past you, surveying the field of battle. "Benedict could be King in a heartbeat, as nobody believes they have the military experience to stand against him. Yet, for a warrior, he remains too cowardly to assume responsibility for Amber and all of Creation. He is

A smiling and easy-going visage, topped with fiery red, grins at you and seemingly offers you a goblet of wine. "Bleys is more than likely the toughest challenge of my generation that we face. He knows of war, sorcery, diplomacy and intrigue. He will be aware of the totality of our moves before any other of my siblings, and he will maneuver to his advantage. However, he lacks my vision of Amber's future, and must be cast aside. Never underestimate Bleys, and do not try to play him in multiple arenas. Jacks-of-all-trades are defeated in the focused effort." Apparently, your father was

Another red-head, smiling at you as he rides a horse away. But you know that smile, and what it contained - the ambition, the calculation, the sheer

Now you behold a sailor, standing with a foot up on a rail, looking out to sea. "Caine is almost as dangerous as Bleys. Caine lacks some of Bleys' talent and skills, but he is not as crippled by Bleys' sense of ethics and loyalties. I have watched Caine for many years, and he has tought me well the value of the spoken word against the taken action. But a liar will speak the truth when it suits him, too - and it can sometimes be the greatest lie of all.

A noble fighter faces you, gleaming sword at his side. He has a rose on his cloak and determination of the strongest sort within his eyes. "Ah, Corwin. You really needn't worry about him. He'll make a fun toy someday. And even if you meet him - he is entirely too idealistic and uselessly naive to be of

A proud woman stands, clad in plated armor and wielding a gigantic battle axe. "Deirdre has no subtlety, and less intelligence. She has chosen to race her brothers to becoming the biggest cloth-headed moron in the family. She loses all threat value if she can't hit you with that overgrown cleaver

A brash and confident face surveys the landscape, and the art conveys the sense of cocky bravado and charming personability. "**King** Eric. He's good at getting to be King, but he won't be any damn good at *being* King. His mind is full of tactics, but has no strategy. Remember that, young one - all the finest moves and strokes you can muster aren't worth a damn if they aren't moving you to what you desire most. I think Eric would be happy if

Another redhead - a woman, this time - has the thinnest of smiles on her face as she appraises you, hands clasped together in front of her. "My dear sister Fiona. She has my subtlety, some of my sorcerous gifts, and is as cold as a damned ice cube. She is determined to master the arcane and the magical - but she is merely Benedict's mirror image. Both of them have mastered their fields, yet neither one chooses to look outside their window to

You now stare, with breath momentarily held, at what might be termed the primal form of femininity. Beautiful of vision, strong and clear in gaze, hidden in intent. "Flora, Flora, Flora. She is so much more than she believes. And that makes her less than what she is. Properly handled - or rather, coddled - she is a useful tool and little else. The only problem she presents is her pervasive socializing - she can connect people that would not

A broad-faced, strongly-built and jovial man lounges easily in front of a fireplace, brandy snifter in hand. "Gerard. Gerard proves an axiom. If you make a mistake, correct it as best you can - and then move on, because you can do no more. If Gerard had been a more pragmatic man, he would be one of your greatest threats right now, instead of the 3000-pound gorilla of 3000-pound gorillas that he turned himself into. He is loyal to a fault, weak-hearted and his judgment easily clouded. He has picked his modus operandi and moved towards it with best speed. Unfortunately for him,

A solemn and proud warrior stands firm and resolute, wearing a pearl-white armor that dazzles in the morning sunlight. "Julian, **defender of Amber**. If only he knew what that meant any more. He has spent so long patrolling Arden and Amber's borders that he has come to idealize that which he defends, right or **right** as he would say. If you are of Amber and work in 'Amber's' interest, he has no quarrel with you. It's ironic that the main bulwark

A lovely woman stands by a mantlepiece, her face placid and demure. Her blue eyes are set off by the perfectly tailored sea-blue dress she wears. "My dear, sweet Llewella. At least she knows her strengths and her failings. Should you ever have to face her in battle, you will have conquered all else save Rebma. her own personal sandbox under the ocean. She fears the games that we of our generation play - and has decided to leave the

And lastly, you stare at the youngest face of all, dressed in a rather gaudy doublet and relaxed and at ease. "And dear Random. His indifference, his carelessness, and his unfocused stupidity have handed me a weapon beyond compare. Was I ever that young and thoughtless?" He smiled at you as he said this - but it was one of his classically significant smiles, and you still don't know what it meant. But the unusual part is your recollection that Caine telling you that Random vanished in the middle of the Treasury. You're fairly sure that only the King is allowed inside. Was Random a stealthier

You sit back in your room now, legs propped up on the corner of the desk, leaned back in the rather spartan chair, thinking about your relatives and your father. And it is in this somewhat awkward pose, with the consequent back strain the next morning, that you drift off to sleep, your thoughts dark

You turn momentarily, and look down the slopes of Kolvir toward the city. It might look like it sleeps peacefully, but you see enough guardsmen patrolling the streets to guess the truth - there is a curfew posted, and a severe one at that. You've been to enough relaxed and easy-going cities to recognize that this isn't one of them - not now. You strongly suspect that if you were down in the streets, you could hear the click of the boots of the

Arden by a Ranger patrol, and given an official escort to the stables. A Ranger captain addresses you with due deference.

A Castle guardsman arrives at the stables. "I am prepared to escort you to your quarters, if you have no other business."

checked myself over, to see I had everything with me, and as I reached the half way stair started to walk shadow.

I smiled at the Captain, and gesturing around the bridge generally, I complemented him on his ship out loud, whilst mentally I sent a feeling of respect and praise to the ship itself. "Captain, what a wonderful Ship you have here, I must say. Such a shame I must leave you for a while. Can you do me a favour? I have acquired two pieces of property, and sadly, I cannot take them with me right now. They are waiting at the foot of the

rudimentary consciousness of the ship - this is the Captain, and he uses this contact to navigate the ship down the river and back.