

14 – One Wedding and No Funerals

A Random Encounter

They were pulled through into Castle Amber, to King Random's private quarters, by Random himself. The crown was tossed onto the floor on top of some shoes. His wife – Queen Vialle – tilted her head towards them with her sightless eyes and smiled a warm greeting. "So good of you to come".



Despite his apparent youth and underlying cheerfulness, Random seemed tired and harassed. Nodding to the discarded crown "It's true what they say... the damn thing's heavier than it looks".

"We have to send representatives of the Family to the wedding of Dara to the King of The Courts of Chaos – Fantos Swayville. Dara was originally a Hendrake but is also a descendant of my brother Benedict. She's also the matriarch of House Sawall – her husband, Lord Gramble, died VERY recently and she's had an apparently whirlwind romance with Fantos."

Vialle offered them a folder full of papers describing various Great Houses of Chaos (and a few Minor ones).

"Anyway, Benedict would have been the obvious choice as some sort of great grandparent of the Bride, but he's too unpopular among certain factions down there as he's been cracking down on terrorist rebels for the last 5 years on behalf of King Fantos.

Every other Elder has some history of friction with at least one of the Houses, so we're down to you two – the unknown parentage of both of you is actually in your favour for once."

Vialle rolls her eyes at her husband's lack of tact.

"Contact Benedict at 7:00am tomorrow and he'll pull you through. He's arranging a State Carriage to take you to the Thelbane for the ceremony and it will be followed by an 8-hour party/feast/dance. You are representing the Crown and the Family, so try not to fuck it up. Don't make any significant deals WE might have to honour. And try not to die."

As they asked questions and asked for him to send them to visit Kato Zen (Court Trump Artist) and had clearly not been too impressed or awed with his royal presence, he seemed to get a bit annoyed, and was heard muttering about it to Vialle as they stepped through to Kato Zen's villa 10 miles east of Amber City.

Cherry Blossoms



Zen was an old Asian-looking man – apparently 70-ish but actually just over 100. He was perpetually fatigued due to his work. Examples of his art were everywhere in the large villa/studio building set in beautiful ornamental gardens.

His son – Kato Jet was a Samurai – mid thirties and an experienced warrior/commander of troops. Zen was clearly disappointed that he hadn't inherited The Gift.

Aleyn and Zen chatted for a couple of hours about The Art of Trump – mainly Zen trying to convince him to forget about metalwork and etching trumps and follow the True Path to Trump Mastery – Painting.

At first it seemed like they wouldn't get on, but when both were happy to bemoan the ways of the Young and talk about how much better things were in the Old Days, they started to bond. Aleyn was even given Zen's Trump (rudely taken from Kato Jet!)

Jet and Cassie spent some time in the garden – chatting, drinking tea and Cassie reading the Chaos Dossier. Jet had done a bit of wandering in Shadow – on a ship with Gerard and on a few missions with Caine and had fought 5 years ago on the steps of Kolvir against the forces of the Black Road.

Before they left to ride back to Amber on borrowed horses, Aleyn and Jet exchanged a few words about how Jet might impress his father if he could use his katana to draw a perfect circle of blood in a single artistic slice of an enemy. Jet agreed to incorporate this idea into his repertoire, and they left on good terms despite the loss of Jet's trump – even agreeing to a friendly sparring session on a future visit.

The Courts of Chaos

Benedict pulled them through to his bustling military camp a few miles from the Thelbane. He had time to give them only brief notes on the most recent situation.



The Bridge to the Thelbane had been blown-up last night by a Rebel raid. Rather than just fix it with planks, the Waymasters of various Houses had come together to construct a Way across the gap. Travellers will teleport from one side to the other seamlessly. Quite impressive – if they had been able to work together like that during the Patternfall War, things might have gone worse for Amber.

The balance of power after the Patternfall War seems to have slipped further towards Amber – the main complaint of the disgruntled factions is that now Logrus Shadow-walkers only have access to about a third of the Infinite Shadows instead of the half it used to be. [Cassie and Aleyn speculate this could be because of Corwin's Pattern!]

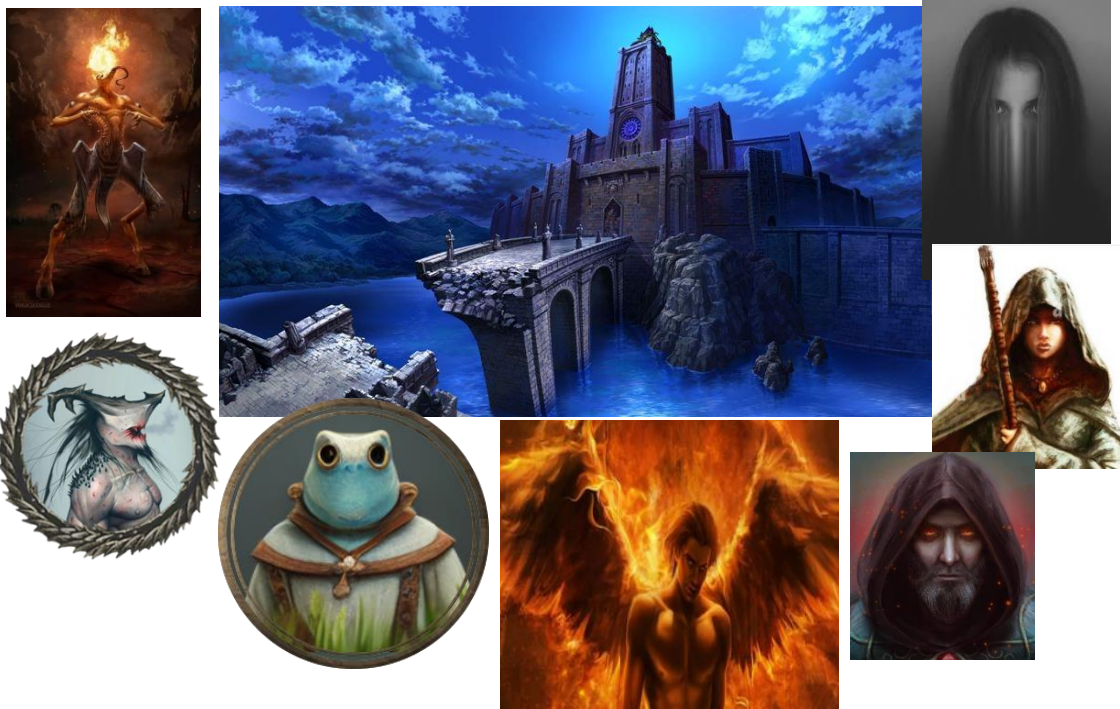
House Sawall is part of the anti-Amber faction – but only in political speeches, can't be proved to be involved in the actual insurrections. He suspects Dara herself, but hopes that isn't the case. Her marriage to Fantos SHOULD bring more unity/stability to the Realm as Fantos of House Swayvill is very pro-Amber and wants everyone to get along peacefully.

If they get into real trouble, use his Trump and he can pull them out – but that would be a social/political faux-pas so only in emergencies.

"Try not to get killed – it would make us look weak!"

The Unweaving of the Ways

The RedSky was fading to BlueSky as their carriage moved across the bridge. All around a mixture of human and demon formed creatures (representatives of all the Major and Minor Houses) made their way to The Thelbane.



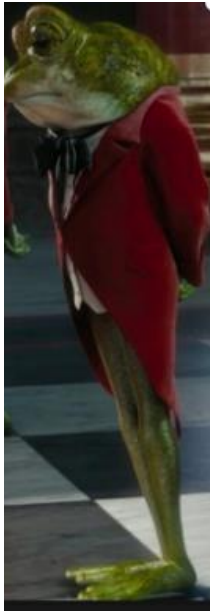
As their carriage reached the "Ways", Cassie felt the buildup of psychic pressure, then saw tendrils of smoke entering the carriage and groping for her. It was clear from Aleyn's manner that he hadn't seen them. Not wanting to disrupt the Ways, she withdrew into herself, wrapping a protective pattern shield gently about her.

The smoke fizzled and evaporated as it touched the outer shell but the magic held together long enough for the carriage to teleport across. Sadly, the touch of the Pattern caused it to unravel just after they emerged. A dozen other guests were dumped into the lake.



One of Dara's Hellmaid guards came to angrily demand to know what they had done! Cassie managed to assure her that it wasn't deliberate sabotage.

For some, this reinforces the superiority and power of Amberites and for others it shows Amber's disdain for the Courts.



They enter The Thelbane – the lower chamber is a huge church with rows of stone pews. Inside a 12 ft-tall humanoid frog introduces himself as "Batrican" and asks them to come to him with any issues or desires during their stay at the Courts.

The Wedding Ceremony



The High Priest of the Serpent "Bances of Amblerash" officiates and makes a long, long speech about the union of these two bringing a new era of stability and unity to the Courts.

Dara is in her demon form – looking like a horned devil/succubus. She is somehow VERY alluring despite the diabolic appearance. Every sway of her hips draws gasps from many of the audience and seems to have totally entranced Fantos – who was in the form of a large blue ogre.

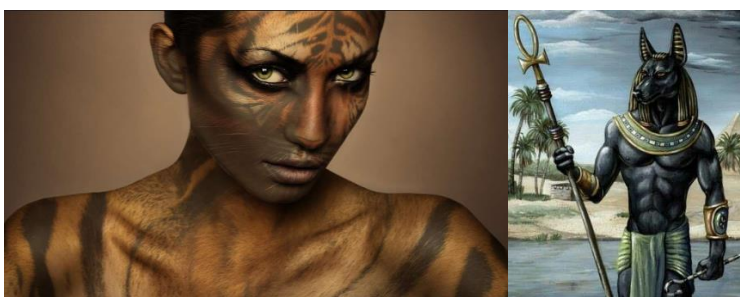
From general chat they learn that Fantos and Dara came together in mutual suffering as both had lost their previous spouses only a week or so earlier. Fantos' wife had fallen from a balcony during a drunken episode. Dara's husband, Lord Gramble of Sawall, had a hunting accident. In their mutual grief, they had comforted each other and decided to marry almost overnight!

When the ceremony is over the dignitaries all troop past to offer their congratulations (and the Chaosites swear fealty to King and Queen).

House Amon

There were two representatives of House Amon – a small House but still classed as a Great House because of their Power and Immortality. The Shapechangers of House Amon are the most powerful practitioners. Setep – Destroyer of Worlds in particular is feared and respected due to his mastery of Sorcery and Shadow mingled with technology.

Present today are Osiris – jackal-headed and Bast – beautiful, sleek and furred all over like a cheetah.



The Head of the House – Ra is rarely seen. They overhear King Fantos thanking them for their attendance and commenting that he's grateful that Ra has not come in person because of the difficulty of housing him without roasting half the audience. There is some comment about "Now that the Father has become the Son" which they correctly interpret as "... has become the Sun"!

Bast seems to be paying attention to Aleyn, particularly to the hilt of his sword. She gestures that they should speak later.

House Sawall

Cassie is sat next to Lord Mandor, newly become head of House Sawall. He is in his Demon Form and is accompanied by a beautiful, winged succubus. Despite being much older than Dara, she is his Step-mother. On the other side of Aleyn is a strange-looking, almost faceless man with a spiralling tendril of smoke emerging from his stomach. This is a Logrus Priest of House Sawall one of the Waymasters who worked on the bridge. Beyond him is the only member of House Sawall wearing a human form – Jurt, younger brother of Mandor.



Jurt is constantly glaring at Cassie and Aleyn and clearly despises them.

Both Mandor and Jurt greet and congratulate their Stepmother enthusiastically and clearly view the marriage as a successful union and rising of fortunes for House Sawall.

Jurt bluntly asks if they are happy about causing the disgrace of the Courts outside! As they deflect him politely, he turns away.

The Happy Couple



Dara greets them as "Cousins" and wants to know their lineage. Shrugs and loses interest when they claim not to know. "My own lineage (from dear Benedict) is somewhat confused – just how many generations were bred in a fast-time Shadow is unclear".

The King clearly just wants the ceremony to be over so he can get to the consummation! He manages to be just polite enough. Mutters a few platitudes about Unity and Stability and perhaps soon not needing the support of Prince Benedict and his peace-keeping force.



Feasting, Dancing & Negotiating

In the Hall above the Church, there are minstrels, tables of fabulous food and a large dance floor. The party is supposed to last about 8 hours!

Colourful mixtures of creatures dance in elaborate Quadrilles. Aleyn has seen enough of such things in the 19th Century to pick it up quickly. Cassie's training in body-language lets her pick up cues from the other dancers and move in time.



MudGlub XVII - A humanoid toad who claims to represent a Coalition of Three Minor Houses starts to talk to Aleyn.

Many of the guests were discomforted by having to climb down into the water, swim across and climb back up to get into the event. Many are still soaked and casting angry (sometimes fearful) glances at the two Amberites.

Mudglub proudly boasts that his own garments are made of a water-repellent cloth of his folk's own design and that he found it quite refreshing to dive into the lake.

Aleyn shows some interest in the "Marsh-Cloth" and agrees to broker a trade agreement swapping it for Steel from some other Shadow.

The High Priest of the Serpent (Bances of Amblerash) approaches Cassie.

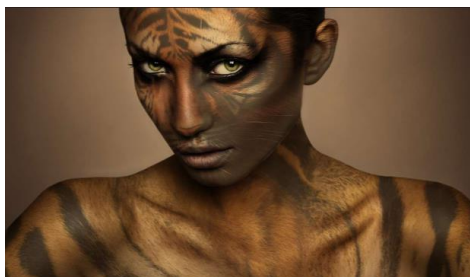
"Are you aware just how strong the Pattern is within you?"

"Was it some deliberate attempt to destroy the Weaving at the bridge, or are you always like this?"

"Would you be interested in learning more about your own nature? I have a laboratory nearby set up to study such elemental forces. Would you care to accompany me (after the Party is over of course)?"



Cassie assures him it wasn't deliberate. Pretends that she didn't know her Pattern was quite so prominent, and they leave it as an open invitation to visit the Temple of the Serpent anytime for the purposes of "research". It's only after Bances has left that she remembers that Amblerash are the House that has a vendetta against Esther and Esther's mother – Elizabeth. Elizabeth married a Chaos Lord "Skagland Amblerash" (Amblerash are a Chaos House linked to Logrus religion). Skagland had been sent to kidnap her for purposes of sacrifice on the Altar of the Serpent! They instead fell in love and eloped. Just a couple of months ago, House Amblerash made a recent attempt to attack Esther's Shadow of Belisar.



Bast inquires about Aleyn's sword. "It appears to be very similar to one of my Brother's creations – Setep! You appear to be a man that he is interested in finding."

Aleyn admits that he is acquainted with Setep.

"My brother ordered me (all the Family actually) to keep an eye out for you and report any sighting immediately. Fortunately for you Bast is nobody's servant and it amuses me that his obsession with finding you is all that kept him from attending today's event. Ha ha! He'll not hear of it from me, and Osiris is too self-absorbed to have even noticed you."

Aleyn describes meeting Setep 1000 years before on Shadow-Earth. Bast says that used to be a playground world for her House until the coming of the Pattern made travel there impossible. It was that exile that stopped Setep's experiment. "You should be wary of the blade, it is surely built for Setep's benefit, not for yours. He had thought the experiment ruined and lost forever but now is keen to find you... and it".

Bast gives Aleyn a Trump card. "Although we are famed for our Shape-Changing and the rest of my family need three (or four) dimensional sculptures to contact them, I find that this body suits me admirably for ALL purposes, don't you?"

A Quadrille Collision

Soon after Bast has left, a woman in human form lurches out of the dance floor and collides with them, spilling red wine on their outfits. She is apologetic and swiftly blames her dance partner.



"So sorry... I'm Trellys Jeseby - it was Jurt's fault really, he spun me much too fast". They see that Jurt is openly sneering at them, and all eyes are on them.

Aleyn is exceptionally polite to the young woman, ignores the stain on his clothes and offers to dance with her.

She is delighted to accept, clearly annoyed with her previous partner and they dance very well. This is too much for Jurt who angrily butts in.



"She's with me!"

Trellys angrily says "I'm with whoever I say I'm with Jurt, and it certainly isn't you!"

Jurt mostly ignores her and goes face to face with Aleyn. "Are you challenging me?". The room collectively breathes in, waiting for the response.

"Why would I, the lady has clearly made her choice. Do YOU want to challenge ME?"

Jurt, struggling to keep a grip on his temper spits out "Would you want to face me with Trisp and Fandon?". Aleyn clearly realises that the challenged party gets to decide the weapons and that's why Jurt is hoping to get him to do the challenging.

As Cassie took the time to study Vialle's files...

- The Trisp is a sort of short Light Saber, calibrated to burn very sharp (paper-cut) wounds – very painful - cauterising them as it goes so they leave scars even for regenerating shape-shifters.
- The Fandon is a small force-field shield the size of a buckler that lasts about 1 second and is triggered by squeezing the handle and then has a 2-second cooldown before it can be triggered again.
- Ritualistic Duels are usually "to the surrender or unconsciousness". If being witnessed by the King, then the fate of the defeated is determined by the King – with a range of possibilities from "Enough / Scar / Maim / Death". King Fantos is so pro-Amber and pro-Unity and happy to be wed, that he would VERY probably be merciful.

Aleyn just looks back with a slight smile and Jurt stalks off, furious. There is a small ripple of applause at Aleyn's handling of the situation.

As he continues the dance with Trellys, she mentions that House Jeseby are the Trump Artists of the Courts of Chaos, and she has had the pleasure of meeting several members of his family who came here to have their Trumps drawn.