

Journal 9 - in Amber

Back at Corwin's townhouse I left Guin changing into tough-looking clothing dyed several green and earthy colours; she called them camouflage fatigues, a military term if ever I heard one. I went to my room and selected some (hopefully) appropriate clothing myself; tough, ankle high boots, a rugged pair of dark trousers, dark woollen shirt and a thick jacket, all from my newly bought winter collection. I then carried my sword and a wicked looking 'survival knife' (as it said on the box) downstairs to the living room.

Victor was out somewhere but Morianna, Joe, Tristan, Andreas and Intruder were there, as was Corwin in a kind of supervisory position. The others were dressed in essentially similar clothing to me; hardy clothing, suitable for long walks in hostile territory. Andreas handed out 'slightly enchanted' leather armour jackets and rolled up leather 'skirts' (presumably similar to the skirts worn by the Roman legionaries of old) for use against arrows and the like.

Then Corwin handed each of us a ring that was enchanted to protect us against casual searches of a magical as well as normal nature; they would make us unremarkable.

We were each given a Trump of a small sailboat; more of a small yacht really. It was depicted tethered to a small wooded jetty in some small harbour. This was in case of emergency, to be used for escapes only.

Intruder led Morianna away to brief her on her mission and send her on her way.

During this time we were instructed in the use of the 'Ranger First Aid Kit', a small pack containing all manner of bandages, pills and 'drug ampoules', small glass things similar to syringes but each containing one dose of a drug. We had various drugs, from painkillers and last ditch nutrient supplements to stimulants and 'PCP substitutes', whatever they were.

After about an hour or so of instruction in the use of these kits Intruder returned, saying that Morianna was safely on her way. He had changed to clothing that was not as distinctive as his black leather strapped armour.

Our route, Andreas told us, was from the coast north of Rebma (after swimming ashore), through the outskirts of Arden to the city. We would then try to locate and seize Julie and Florence (Victor's woman and Joe's wife respectively) from whoever might be holding/watching them, before making our way back out from Amber in another yacht.

Andreas Trumped us to the small, unnamed harbour, where we were confronted with a small, perhaps twenty-foot, four-man yacht. We boarded and set sail; it seemed faster than I would have thought, considering the wind we were sailing by.

We sailed into Shadow for maybe four hours, hoisting a black sail when night fell. It was not a bad journey, but a little worrying as we neared Amber. We had to work hard to avoid being spotted by picket ships.

Eventually the time came for us to scuttle and abandon our ship. We packed our clothes and equipment into barrels with attached flotation sacks. We were forced to wear 'swimming trunks' (briefs for swimming in) while crossing from ship to shore. Pulling our barrels behind us we made quick strokes towards shore, trying to make as little noise as possible; the sinking yacht made enough noise by itself so I do not know why we bothered.

Once ashore, we dried off and dressed before heading inland a short distance to rest fully amongst a large cluster of heather. We spent around four hours recuperating from our freezing swim in the sea, eating what Andreas called 'high-energy chocolate rations', bars of chocolate around a sweet, gelatinous centre. Andreas dubbed it 'caramel'.

After our rest we moved off slowly, moving from the heather moors close to the beach through light woodland and into the deep forest that is Arden. In all, our careful journey took three hours.

Our expedition was halted soon after we entered the really thick forest by an arrow thudding into the tree nearest Andreas, who was at the front. Looking around, we found ourselves surrounded by several men dressed in remarkably camouflaging coats, all holding ready longbows and each accompanied by one or two large dogs, each much the same as Morianna's dog Bernard, only larger.

Now it became clear where that hound came from, and perhaps also explains why she considered Julian's vote to stand for Random influential enough to make her choice

based on that decision. Who else would she have got a Hellhound from but the master of the Rangers?

We were to be escorted elsewhere to meet someone, or so the apparent leader told us. By the way Andreas and Intruder were acting, we were amongst friends. As we headed off, I noticed to my shock that two trees appeared to be paralleling our course through the forest. Tall and sturdy like oaks, a large branch on each side seemed to act as arms while their roots seemed clustered together to act as legs. Strange, blank-seeming eyes stared from woody bodies as they carefully pushed their way through the forest. Seeing my stunned expression Andreas informed me that they were Ents, the same creatures that had deposited Tim in the pool in Arden so long ago. I knew they existed, but it was still incredible to see one.

Following a barely perceptible path we soon came out at a small building, about the size of a medium tavern. This, we were told, was Waystation 341, not something that was intended to enlighten or inform us in any way. We were taken inside where Andreas and Intruder talked to another Ranger, more obviously some kind of leader judging from his red waistcoat.

The Rangers, he reported, were holding their own against Eric's forces, though it was mostly in the form of 'guerrilla actions', whereby small groups of men make sudden strikes against targets with the primary intent being to tie up the resources of the enemy. Any more direct course of action would result in the Ranger forces being destroyed outright. The Ents were doing most of the ambush work, disguising themselves as trees so as to strike without warning. However, recently giants of animated stone were countering them.

A number of strange eagle-like creatures had been spotted, presumed to act in some way as Eric's eyes 'like Julian's hawks' (whatever that means). Another oddity was that as far as the Rangers could determine, Eric's troops were close to thirty to forty percent under-supplied.

No clear mention was made of Julian's whereabouts one way or another, though I think several veiled comments were made on both sides, comments that went right over my head.

Andreas then told us more of what he had been told of Eric's ability to somehow search using some magical faculty, probably involving the mysterious (at least to me) Jewel of Judgement. He was required to examine every square metre of land to find what he sought (us), though the rings Corwin had given us would make it harder for him. Once he found us, however, he could always do so until we left Amber, at which point he would (hopefully) have to locate us again.

As a result, it was decided we should move on as soon as possible to ensure the Waystation was not endangered.

We were re-supplied and headed onwards. After maybe two hours we caught the sounds of distant fighting on the wind, perhaps fifteen miles distant. We continued more carefully; I took my cues on stealth from the others, but mostly from Andreas and Intruder. I was fairly quiet (for an amateur) but they were almost soundless; Intruder was practically inaudible.

Before long we passed cautiously over a rise via a helpful copse of trees and found ourselves confronted with more than a hundred refugees, clustered pitifully around a number of fires. Joe, Tristan and I went forward to join one of the nearest groups while Andreas and Intruder stayed back in case they were recognised.

We joined an old man at his fire, around which were grouped maybe a dozen other refugees. Joe asked him about how things were in Amber that the people should be forced to flee. He told us of the troubles in Amber: how the town was 'still burning'; how those against Eric were never seen again, except in the few cases meriting public executions; how the dead filled the streets.

Joe gathered his Ranger pack and set about helping those he could; he is a doctor where he comes from, or so he told me. Either way, he was a capable physician. After some time of this he relieved me of my pack as well, having emptied his of the medicines he needed.

Andreas came over and asked me to join him, so I followed him over to a cluster of children. He showed me one in particular, a grubby little thing, barely determinable as a girl, mostly due to the blood and burns that covered the left of her face. The expression on Andreas' face was a mixture of deep pain and hopelessness, not what I would have really

expected from him at all. Perhaps I had only seen Andreas the Warrior before, and never Andreas the Man.

Then I understood as his expression mirrored the determined set of his shoulders. With a small wince of inner pain he carefully and surreptitiously broke the child's neck. The child had obviously been beyond any hope of recovery. Quiet tears rolled down his cheeks as he stumbled out of the firelight into the night.

Returning to join Tristan (who had been aiding Joe somewhat) and Intruder by the fire, I tried to block any thoughts that came into my head pertaining to the brutality of the Mob I had seen in Paris. I had the feeling that I would be seeing similar horrors soon enough, and did not wish to see them again in my head before I witnessed such sights again in reality.

Joe soon returned, having done what he could, and after close to an hour Andreas returned too, though he was clearly deeply troubled, being rather mechanical in word and action.

We moved onwards once more, with Andreas taking the rear position. After another hour or more we topped another rise to finally see the city before us. It was much as I had expected from Rebma, only on land of course, with wide avenues separating areas of finely built houses and such, with a number of parks dotted here and there.

At least, that is what I managed to guess from the blasted remains of a city we saw below us. I only recognised the principal attributes from my passing familiarity with Rebma; but it was easy to recognise the parks as being the small wastelands overflowing with army tents, and once-fine districts now turned to burnt-out rubble. Several bonfires stood at the various gates of the city; we did not know if wood was burning or if it was the dissenters I feared they might be.

As we got closer, we found my fears were justified: some, if not all, of the bonfires made use of human fuel. The smell must have carried for miles around. No wonder the people of the city and surrounding countryside fled.

Before that moment I had been acting to aid those others I was with partly because they expected me to, partly because I had been subtly threatened, and partly because by walking the thing they called the Pattern made me obligated to do so. Walking it and learning the skills associated with it made me part of their group, with all the responsibilities and duties to the family it seems to hold over any of their number. If the Pattern was destroyed we would follow soon after, or so they claimed.

At the moment I saw the city this changed, or rather I got a new reason to aid them. Before Eric was just a name, someone who had taken a land I had never really seen from people I had never met. Now he was someone who inflicted great suffering on normal folk through brutal soldiers. Since I was in a position to stop this madness, I had to help or consider myself inhuman, without care for others. Civilised men should always try to combat evil whenever they can.

Perhaps this was the real intention of the mission; to make those who were undecided make up their minds.

Perhaps it was Eric's intention to make his opponents angry, to use atrocities to force their hands or make them take ill-judged action.

Whatever the case may have been, I had failed in my attempt to avoid getting involved in any more 'foolhardy crusades', moral or otherwise.

We continued on, avoiding the roads and skirting the city. After some time Intruder spotted a group of men clustered around a concealed fire off to our left. We avoided them and crossed another main road, spiralling in closer to the city boundary.

Suddenly there was a gasp behind us. Spinning round I saw Andreas holding up an armoured man carrying a sword in limp fingers. Limp because he no longer had a head. Andreas' right hand was poised back over his shoulder like a spear. It's possible he might have taken the soldier's head off with some sort of knife-hand blow; he must either be even stronger than I thought, or just very, very angry. It was probably both.

Intruder went over to talk to him, and soon Andreas took up his rear position again and Intruder and Joe set about concealing the body in the deep grass. Tristan and I kept watch as they talked, and I saw Intruder showing what looked like a Trump card to Joe. Then we continued on.

We entered the city. It was like a vision of Hell. Houses were either burning or burnt out; those that remained were in various states of disrepair. Bodies lay all around. Some burnt, some pierced by sword and spear, some violated in various ways. Rape, maiming, signs of torture. There were even some mass human pyres in the larger streets. Soldiers patrolled the streets in groups of six or more. The city population was few and far between, fleeing from soldiers and us in equal fear.

Andreas, now at least partly recovered from his earlier depression, instructed Joe and I to make our way to the harbour district and observe. He, with Intruder and Tristan, would be elsewhere. We were to meet again in a few hours just off the main square.

The city got no better. It might even have got worse.

The harbour was empty except for the partly burnt wrecks of two large sail ships. They did not look like warships. It was too quiet, or so Joe said; the bars were almost all closed, and those that were not looked to be forsaken by all except the soldiers. We moved on, to a 'restaurant' Joe knew called 'Bloody Max's', an unsavoury place always named after the previous dead proprietor.

It was quiet, understandably, with only the limping barman present. He gave us what we asked for, approximately, and he did so with no real animation, like some sort of automaton. We sat for a while, until a large, cloaked man came in. He ordered a drink and sat, closer to the bar than we were. He was as large as Victor, if not slightly larger, even though his thick cloak concealed his bulk somewhat, except when he sat down.

Joe went over to speak to him. He called me over after some brief but hurried words, and thus I was introduced to Gerard. He was much as on the portrait on his Trump, except now the smile was replaced by a grim expression, suggestive of loss of sleep and time spent worrying over things he could not control. He seemed rather morbid and a little depressed, no doubt due to the fact that he could do nothing right now to stop what he saw around him.

He asked after Caine and Julian; we told him what we knew of them, that Caine was yet to be found and that Julian was alive, if not well. Joe, who clearly knew him fairly well, told him what we had been told of events and plans to date. Once he was satisfied he nodded farewell and left. Soon after we left also.

Just around the corner as we left we heard fighting, though it sounded rather staged, as if someone were trying to bait us with the sound of someone clubbing a large man into unconsciousness. We headed away from the sounds, making our way through a number of back alleys back to our rendezvous; it was almost time.

The other three were there and did not appear too happy; clearly they had seen and discovered things they had preferred they had not. As they were somewhat lost in thought, Joe prompted Andreas to get us out of here, and he did so, making use of a Trump card to transport us to a small cave. It formed a small harbour in which rested another small yacht, slightly smaller than the first. The cave entrance was almost entirely blocked by a rockfall.

Andreas told the others to rest now, while he and I tried to rescue Victor's woman, Julie. In the meantime, Tristan could begin work on the rockfall while Joe looked after 'her'. We looked confused, at least until he muttered something at Intruder and he somehow *changed*, warping inside his clothing, bones *grinding* horribly, hair and face and body altering until he was *she*: Morianna.

She looked stunned and confused, like she expected to be someplace else. Even so, I do not think she was more confused than we were, though I could be wrong.

Before I had time to really think it through, Andreas made use of another Trump to transport us to the gardens of a small mansion, set in the middle of a number of fields. Most were untouched, but I could see at least one where the grain had been crudely harvested, probably for Eric's army. He led the way around to a back door, where we sneaked into the house, quiet as mice, until we disturbed a maid carrying a candle. Andreas grabbed her firmly but gently, with one hand over her mouth.

After a moment he told me Julie was upstairs, and then the maid slumped quietly to the floor. She was still breathing, but would have much to explain in the morning, poor girl. I asked Andreas how he had found where Julie was without asking the maid, and he promised to tell me later, leading me upstairs to a large oak door, where upon he handed me a length of wire. He told me to push the wire into the lock, put my hand over the lock and concentrate on the lock opening. This I did, and concentrating on what little I knew of lock mechanisms thought as hard as I could at the lock, so to speak.

It took two minutes or more, but eventually the lock slowly slid itself open into the unlocked position. I suppose it could have been some application of Pattern, though I had been told that such things did not work in Amber, due to the 'Real-ness' of the place. Perhaps it was something else.

When I was ready, we jumped into the room and Andreas seized her before she could cry out. He quickly explained the situation, and fortunately she recognised him, though she was wary around me. We looked away as she quickly dressed in what looked like riding clothes. At Andreas' suggestion I used the Trump we had been given to take us to the yacht trapped in the cave. As Andreas faded away I saw him using a Trump, and it seemed to correspond with Joe turning two-dimensional and vanishing in a rainbow flicker. Presumably this is what leaving by Trump looks like; I had never actually see it before from the outside, so to speak.

Obviously Joe had gone to aid Andreas in locating his wife, Florence.

Julie, on the other hand, recognised Tristan and Morianna and, seeing that Morianna was still confused and distracted from her change, went to assist her while I aided Tristan in clearing the rubble from the cave entrance. It was not as hard as in thought, partly because the rockfall was a constructed thing, designed to be easily taken apart, and partly because I had not noticed how my own strength had increased. Presumably those enhanced physical faculties all those of the family are supposed to be heir to had finally come to me.

Julie was a fine looking blonde woman, tall and slender with clearly feminine lines. I found just looking at her between bouts of rock carrying relaxed me. I could see what Victor saw in her, though it was hard to understand what she saw in him; a protector, or just one of the powerful people of Amber she could get close to. Maybe I am getting cynical, or perhaps the political powerplay environment of Amber is getting to me.

Just as I cleared the last of the rocks Andreas and Joe returned by Trump, accompanied by an attractive, athletic-looking, red haired woman who clung like manacles to Joe's arm. Evidently, this was Florence. She greeted Tristan, Morianna and Julie as we all hurried aboard, and Andreas cast off.

After a brief time of rowing we set sail. The going was easier than last time, according to Andreas, because the fleet guarding Amber was intended to stop ships entering, not leaving. We still had to avoid a couple of cutters though.

I asked Andreas about the maid, and he told me that our family could make mental contacts with people, to find things out direct from their minds and bend them to our will. But there was a risk that if you attempted it against someone when you did not know how powerful they were, they might overwhelm you, leaving your mind wide open to them. There was a similar risk with Trumps, in that they opened a mental link between individuals.

Quite a few hours passed before we found ourselves in the small harbour we left from in the original yacht. Andreas retired to the main cabin for a rest, while I headed out to the nearest tavern for a drink.

I picked a comfortable corner and settled in, refusing to talk to anyone and concentrating on drinking. Eventually someone would not leave me alone so it came to a fight. A rather short one, since one blow dropped him as if he was poleaxed. I was left alone after that. Which was fortunate, since I did not want to share my thoughts or memories with anyone just then.

I think I one of the others must of found me, because I woke up to the sound of kicks on the door of what I eventually noticed was my room in Corwin's townhouse. Presumably someone had moved me there from wherever they had found me while I slept (or was unconscious, depending on you looked at it).

After a while I dragged myself downstairs to find everyone except Corwin downstairs, including Intruder and Victor. The latter had several bandages and one arm and a leg encased in some sort of white clay-like material. As I wondered at this development Intruder told me she was upstairs, and as I digested that Victor said he was sorry, he had failed.

When I worked out what they were talking about, I hurried upstairs to Guin's room to find her laid out in bed with her neck and body in some form of brace and one arm and leg in the same solid covering as Victor's. A clear pipe carrying liquid from a transparent bag on a stand nearby was somehow inserted into the uncovered arm. She smiled when I came in, but I could see the beginnings of a wince of pain, quickly concealed.

She seemed happy and comfortable, and instructed me to get her some food from the kitchen. I went down to get some, and Victor hobbled over on a crutch, apologising for his failure to protect her. He was not very specific on his failure, so I decided to get it out of Guin herself.

She told me that when they had hit the supply convoy, a large gentleman, slightly bigger than even Victor, had engaged Victor in hand to hand combat. She had tried to even the odds a little with a magical bolt, but he had shrugged it off (he was protected against such things) and turned on her, hitting her hard across the body. She had blacked out, but Victor had told her how Intruder then appeared and dealt with him. She did not appear as upset by Victor's failure as he was.

I returned downstairs for my own breakfast. Tristan and his wife had gone out during my absence, as had Victor and Julie, and Corwin had arrived. Joe still was not forthcoming on his position, despite what he had seen, though I suspected his position would change when he had had enough time to consider. Or at least I hoped so.

Intruder said he had managed to get me some of the chocolates that Guin likes, which was fortunate because, as I had thought, I had had no time to get some myself.