

## Journal 30 - in Amber

Our caravan was large, easily the size of a small house. It had two stories, of sorts; the second was a raised area to the rear, reached by two steep and narrow stairs. It was divided by curtains into several small 'rooms', each with a bed, a small table and a washbasin. The rest of the caravan was given over to low tables, lounging sofas and well-padded chairs. It was the height of luxury, with thick carpets and silken wall hangings. There was plenty of wine and sweetmeats at all times.

It was a welcome change, to be sure.

Meals were cooked on huge wood stoves stored in one of the caravans, and we could eat outside or inside as we desired. However, since the caravan train was otherwise constantly on the move our actual freedom was rather limited, if comfortable.

As we travelled I could feel, in some way I could not entirely explain, that we were moving through Shadow. It did not feel quite the same as I was used to, though; rather it felt like the difference between using a woodland path and forcing one's way through the undergrowth. Also, I felt the changes were becoming spaced further and further apart.

Just over two days since we joined the procession we entered a forest. It was incredibly old, plainly quite immense, and it seemed familiar. It was the look on Morianna's face that made me realise the truth; we were in that mighty forest called Arden, which formed the majority of the land border of Amber. We had arrived in Amber at last.

Eventually we came to a stop at the periphery of a large camp that seemed to occupy the majority of a large clearing and several others as well. As we climbed out I recognised the clothing worn by the vast majority of the people present; they were Rangers, Julian's troops who used to guard the land routes into Amber but now fought a raiding war against Eric's army. They moved around and between a great number of tents, small and large, all dyed in colours that caused them to blend in with the surrounding foliage and the tree canopy above.

Near to where we had stopped was perhaps fifty of the blue-skinned, scaly beings that we had been travelling with. They stood in military formation before two women dressed in colourful robes. Both had red hair, bound into short braids, and their robes were covered in embroidered dragons. One had a blue robe with red dragons while the other red with blue dragons. By the way Garath greeted them I guessed they were related to him, though the dragon designs had already suggested it.

Close to a fair-sized tent I saw Benedict standing with Corwin, Bleys and Gerard. Gerard held a glass of some drink in one hand, and no doubt the others had their own glasses close by. The three of us went over to join them, and after rather perfunctory greetings we were immediately directed to a large tent where we could get a change of clothing. There was to be a banquet of sorts that night and it would be best if we were to change first.

A change of clothes was certainly welcome, though I could have wished for some finer and less utilitarian garb. After the quartermaster gave us a quick and practised glance he handed each of us a pile of clothing topped with a pair of dull brown boots, a haversack and a wide-brimmed hat. It seemed the fashion this month was to be Ranger Livery in Brown and Green. Given no choice, Zatharuss and I retired to the smaller, eight-man tent that had been assigned to us to change, while Morianna went to another.

Remarkably, the clothing all fit very well, all things considered. Even the boots caused me no pain. The hat was a little too much, though. The big cloak had a little more flair to it. I packed all my old clothing in the haversack; I had finally learnt to keep a change of clothes handy. My sabre looked slightly out of place, but so did Zatharuss' swords and daggers.

Outside we joined up with Morianna, who seemed rather more comfortable in her gear than I felt. Did her garments look to be of better quality than ours? Perhaps I was imagining things. Bernard finally seemed to look at home, which was of course understandable.

Then who should come up at last but Victor, finally rejoining us after we got separated from him back after the family barbecue. Since then he had accrued some injuries; the small cuts on his face were nothing compared to the fact that his left arm was in a sling. We all said hello, and Morianna led Bernard further into the camp with Zatharuss trailing after.

I asked Victor about his injury, and he told me he had been wounded by a piece of shrapnel from some form of shell dropped from a flying machine. It and several others had attacked the houses around the lake, destroying all traces of them. He had barely escaped into Shadow. We followed after the others as I told him a very brief version of what had happened to the three of us.

The evening meal was not so much a banquet as a massive, orchestrated free-for-all. Almost unit by unit, groups of men approached the clearing filled with stoves and ovens to receive their dinner. With that many people, so many I could not begin to estimate their numbers (the Ranger uniform made distinguishing groups all but impossible), everyone got the same meal; venison stew with roasted potatoes. It was filling, if a little bland; but this was to be expected, given the circumstances.

Night found Zatharuss, Victor and myself by our tent. We had found a campfire already lit before it, as was the same with all the others we had seen. Similarly, we also had a bottle of brandy waiting for us. We set about splitting the contents between us, but Victor turned his share down, saying the painkilling drugs he had taken prevented him from having any. Zatharuss seemed content with his third, so I got to have the rest to myself. Needless to say, I was overwhelmed by their generosity. Maybe.

I had almost finished my portion when Victor mumbled something and went off into the camp somewhere. Morianna was nowhere to be seen or heard, so there was little doubt where she was. I saw Zatharuss had moved over to a larger fire close by. I joined him there to find a number of men from nearby tents gathered around the fire, swapping stories and jokes. Zatharuss seemed to fit right in; as a mercenary, I suppose he had sat around many similar campfires before other battles.

The group consisted of both what I would call 'normal men' and 'foreign men', those that kind of look like the sort of folk I grew up with but were obviously different, like the blue-scaled men that the dragon folk seemed to have brought with them. Despite their obvious differences, however, they got on like old comrades.

One particularly ribald story was interrupted by the arrival of an extremely large fellow. He carelessly dropped an oversized pack down beside two men and strode off into the shadows in the directions of the 'kitchens'. He was large not only in height but also girth; not that he was fat, exactly, but he had very broad shoulders and his waist was similarly broad. It was probably all muscle, though. He moved slowly and ponderously.

The story had almost got going again when he returned carrying a large metal box, easily four feet long by two wide and three deep. It was almost completely full of water, but despite the obvious weight of the thing he moved with the same deliberate pace and showed no outward sign of strain.

Several of the men moved aside for him as he put the tank down beside his pack. He then took a small metal flask out of his jacket and mixed some of it with the water. That is to say he poured half a brandy glass full into the water and mixed it about until he was satisfied. By that time some of the men around our fire had begun to form a queue, each carrying a cup. As the others and I began to join onto the end, I could see people from nearby fires coming over with cups in hand; obviously the large man was well known and his drink, whatever it was, was very popular.

It must certainly have been very strong in it's pure form, because as watered down, as it was it was better than the brandy I had had before. Even so, he drank occasionally and sparingly from the flask; his constitution must have been incredible.

Once we all had a serving, he began a long, long story that was in turns funny, tragic, lewd and serious. Despite how gripping it was, the mysterious drink made remembering it later somewhat difficult; however, it was certainly very good.

I must have eventually fallen asleep because I was woken a few hours before sunset by a very insistent messenger. I found I was curled up at the base of a tree between two roots, and stretched to loosen some stubborn and stiff muscles. The messenger told me that Prince Benedict had sent him to find me, and that he wanted to see me as soon as possible.

The messenger then moved on to Zatharuss, who was laid out nearby, and delivered the same message. Once we felt ready to move, we followed the messenger through the camp, making a brief detour to the kitchen area where I splashed some water over my head to wake myself up. Zatharuss did likewise.

The messenger eventually left us outside a large tent. We went in to find Benedict standing beside a table covered in a bewildering pile of papers and maps. Morianna and Victor were already there; Victor's arm was now wrapped in leather bindings, presumably to hold the injured flesh in place.

Benedict then told us what he wanted of us. We were to locate and escort a particular person to our camp; a certain Zatheria of the Clan of the Grey Wolf. He was the commander of his clan warriors who were part of Eric's army. At sunset he could be found performing a ritual for a dead comrade. He would be performing it just beyond the borders of the forest Arden proper; part of the ritual was that it had to be done in enemy territory, something about watching over the dead man's body as his soul travelled into enemy territory on it's way to the next life.

Fortunately, several aspects of the ritual made it easy for us. As part of the ritual, Zatheria was forbidden from resisting if he was captured, though anyone with him could resist for him. However, he was only to be accompanied by a number of his closest companions, who were unable to approach him closely during the ritual. So while he would not resist us, his men could and neither stricture prevented the laying of traps.

We were to leave immediately. Bernard could not come with us (thankfully) but we would be accompanied by a Ranger. Benedict waved him in, and he was mostly indistinguishable from the others; average sort of appearance, emphasised by his attire. He was introduced to us as Bill.

The briefing complete, Benedict nodded farewell and turned to his papers. Bill led the way out of the camp and into the forest. On the way he told us that his primary role was to lead us to the ritual site and assist us any way he could.

We walked through the forest for an hour, until sunset was almost upon us. Then Bill called a halt so we could rest before continuing on to conclude our mission.