

## Journal 31 - in Amber

After a brief rest we continued onwards. After perhaps a half-hour we came to a halt about fifty yards short of the edge of the trees. From our cover we could see a conical tent, maybe two yards in diameter. A fire could just be seen burning within it, and smoke spiralled up through a hole in the top, which was roughly three yards from ground to point. Carefully moving closer we could also see maybe half a dozen men around a campfire sixteen yards or so beyond the tent.

A few ideas were brought forward. Zatharuss was for grabbing the clan leader and running, shooting down and discouraging any pursuers with bow and arrow. Bill was of the opinion that if it came to fighting the guards, we would have no problem; there were only five of them. I suggested creeping quietly in, cutting a hole in the back of the tent and dragging him out that way; however, the tent door was on our side of the camp, fortunately for us. Victor just suggested charging them, then looked at his bound up arm and sighed. Morianna kept quiet and then provided the main focus of the plan we followed in the end.

Morianna would enter the tent to get our man, backed up by Victor; Zatharuss and I would take up position on each side of the tent, in case of trouble. Bill would cover us all with his bow. Zatharuss and I took our places, and watched as Morianna entered the tent. There was the sound of quiet talking, and Morianna, Victor and our guest scurried back into the forest. As the three of us covered our retreat, we could not help but notice that the guards looked our way and stood up. They gathered their gear and just walked away from the campfire, (presumably) back to their forces.

Did they want us to capture him? Was it a trap, or a deal?

Zatheria of the Clan of the Grey Wolf was a man of perhaps middle age, with greying beard and hair. He wore a wolf-skin cloak over simple but tough-looking clothing of military cut. He was unarmed. He politely asked if we were lords of Amber, and despite our vague answers (or perhaps because of them) he told us it was an honour to be captured by us.

He calmly accompanied us as we returned to the camp, by a different and rather obscure route no doubt intended to confuse our well-behaved prisoner. When we arrived back at the camp we were passed quickly through the sentries straight to Benedict's tent. We presented Zatheria to him, and they began to talk politely as if they were acquaintances rather than on opposing sides in a war. But then, I guess they were both gentlemen.

From what I managed to glean from their discussion, Eric was, in effect, their god. However, of late he had been acting contrary to their most basic laws, as well as treating them (and the other contingents of his army) unfairly. He and his men were unsatisfied with the arrangement and wished for some way out of it. He also alluded to the view that because Benedict was Eric's brother, he too was a god to his people.

Zatheria and Benedict were of the same mind, or so it seemed, for when Benedict announced that this was a situation that could be resolved by trial by combat, Zatheria agreed almost instantly. Either Benedict had been studying the Clan of the Grey Wolf for just this occasion, or some arrangement had already been made prior to this meeting.

A blade was fetched for each of the two combatants, and they set to each other. Zatheria was skilled, very skilled in fact; but it soon became clear that he was no match for Benedict. Benedict held him off for a time, and then, in a flurry of blows, Zatheria was disarmed.

Zatheria made it known that usually death follows defeat in such duels, but pointed out that since Benedict was, in effect, now his god, this was not necessary; indeed, he and his men would now fight for him. This was clearly the resolution both men sought, as Benedict helped Zatheria up and handed him a wineskin. The leader of the Clan of the Grey Wolf then announced that he would return to his men, and that they would be ready to fight in three days. Benedict nodded acceptance, and directed four men to guide him back to his camp.

As he left, I spotted Fiona come up behind Benedict; I could just hear her say to him that perhaps he should have told him we were to attack tomorrow. Benedict just shrugged and remarked that we would not need them in any case.

Surprisingly, Fiona was dressed in a suit of light leather armour and seemed ready to defend herself with the sword she carried so capably at her side, and the bow that was hung

over one shoulder. But then again, I suppose it would have been more of a surprise if she had stayed back from the battle.

Benedict ordered that the camp be relocated, and then set to managing the major points of such a major operation. We helped when asked, and by the time the whole camp was disassembled there was almost no sign that there had been a camp for several thousand men there at all.

After a brisk two hour trek through the forest the camp was rebuilt at another, similar locale. It was not exactly the same, however; while the layout remained the same, the terrain most definitely was not, so there were trees in the kitchen area that had not been there before. This time the camp was even bigger than before; it had almost doubled in size to accommodate perhaps six thousand men, perhaps even as many as ten thousand.

We spent the night in our assigned tents, which I think were in fact the same tents we had had before.

The next morning I was woken by the sounds of the movement of several thousand restless soldiers and the shouted orders of their superiors. Zatharuss and Victor left in search of breakfast, but I was in no hurry to get up and prolong the waiting time before the battle began. I eventually did get up though, since my stomach began to shout orders as persistently as the sergeants outside.

Zatharuss came up as I came out, looking well fed and armoured; he had acquired from somewhere a suit, or rather a long, sleeved shirt, of heavy chainmail, accompanied by a solid-looking helmet. I asked after both food and armour, and he directed me to the kitchen and armourer both.

The food was dispensed in healthy quantities, and what it lacked in craft it made up for in simple, solid and filling portions. The armourer was a tall, dark-skinned man with the broad shoulders of a born smith. He looked me up and down and guessed from my lack of armour knowledge that I was a novice as far as armour was concerned. Rather than giving me what he called the 'heavy infantry kit' (presumably what Zatharuss got), he gave me a set of 'Ranger Kit', a much lighter set of chain topped with a simple helmet, rather Roman in design. It was quite heavy to wear, but no doubt it was lighter and more comfortable to the other mail. I rolled my shoulders a little to settle it as he instructed, then made my way back to the tent.

As I walked back, I noticed the mail was surprisingly quiet, and perhaps lighter than I had noticed at first. Not surprising if it was made for Rangers, but it was obvious that above average skill had been used to make it.

No sooner had I returned to the tents to find Victor and Morianna present, than a Ranger in a red waistcoat approached us with our orders. Victor, Zatharuss and I were to guard the young and old dragons while the healthier members of their group fought; Morianna was to assist in one of the medical centres. The Ranger led her off, and she did not look particularly impressed with the duty assigned to her. But then babysitting did not sound too attractive either, even if they were dragons.

Zatharuss started to hop about like a cat on a hot roof; he explained that he was trying to settle his armour properly. I began to emulate him somewhat half-heartedly, and then Victor grabbed me by the shoulders and began to shake me in order to try to produce the same effect. It did not really work too well, as he held the armour still as he shook me, rather defying the point.

Suddenly I found myself another four feet higher than I had expected with Victor lifting me, so I craned my head round to see what had occurred. Surprisingly, Victor looked about as surprised as I must have; the large fellow with the lethal drink and excellent stories from two nights previously had gripped Victor in much the same he had seized hold of me and proceeded to lift the two of us off the ground. He slowly put the two of us down again and reached slowly into one of his pockets. He produced his small flask and began to look about for a water barrel. Suddenly people began to gather, and someone came running up carrying a barrel, but the budding revelry was cut short by the arrival of about half a dozen officers who quickly broke up the group before they got any of the watered down spirit. Needless to say, though, they each took a small sip before sending the big fellow on his way.

We waited for an officer to tell us where we had to be, and I took the opportunity to find my way to my father's command tent. He looked up as I came in, and asked me what I wanted. I asked if it was possible that he could look after my sword for me, since it was not

really intended as a battle weapon. I asked if he had a sword I could make use of in its stead, and he handed me a blade similar to both his and the one used by Andreas. I thanked him and told him I would see him later; hopefully.

He informed me that I had been assigned to a safe position; he had plans for me that did not involve me dying in battle, or at least not in this one. I thanked him and bid him farewell.

I had no wish to be coddled, but then, I did not want to be in the thick of the battle either; I suppose I had to be satisfied with what I had been given. I would probably have complained wherever I had been put.

I arrived to see what was obviously an officer waiting for me to return. He led the three of us a short way through the forest and then across some open ground till we found ourselves with our charges; Garath, the dragon lord (or so I christened him), two old men (including the red-robed gentleman we had first met on the caravan route) and four women who were so alike they had to be sisters. They were pale of skin and their hair was as red as fire; indeed, their hair even moved a little like fire, swaying even when there was no wind. Zatharuss appeared slightly fixated.

To the east I could see the wide, blue expanse of the sea. In the distance, across the valley before us, rose a mighty range of mountains, and I knew the easternmost peak by the shore was Kolvir. Somewhere on its heights stood the castle of Amber itself, that I had only briefly glimpsed before and now fought for despite my unfamiliarity with the place. Hopefully I would have the opportunity to see it close up, preferably when my time was finally my own and I had no more wars to fight in, at least for the time being.

I could just make out what looked to be the forward lines of Eric's forces at the foot of the mountains, and I thought I could see some other body of men to the west.

Garath nodded to us and took firm hold of a tree; the other dragon folk braced themselves against trees, boulders and each other. As Garath turned to look up into the western sky and spread his feet a little further apart, I finally took the hint and fell to all fours, just in time. A flight of dragons swept overhead, close enough to make out the scales on their bellies; some took off the tops of the trees as they passed. It was incredible; it was beautiful; it was also loud and just a little bit terrifying.

I think there were more than forty of them, perhaps as much as sixty. They swept low over the valley and unleashed their fire against the valley floor. This made no sense to me, until the valley floor erupted in a multitude of furious explosions. It looked like it had come under fire from a massive battery of artillery; in truth, it transpired that the whole area had been mined. Hundreds of small explosive devices had been buried just below the surface, designed to explode when trodden on.

The noise was terrible, but I was glad for the opportunity to sit down and rest despite the din. Then suddenly the dragon folk went stiff and began to stare up into the skies like cats watching birds. If they had been dogs I would have said their hackles raised a good foot; I think they actually did. They grew more and more agitated and enraged until, with a noise like a giant taking a really big breath, Garath launched himself into the air, changing form as he did so. As he clawed his way into the sky, a number of dragons broke off from the main group and they all headed off towards a group of rapidly expanding dots on the horizon.

Before long all the dragons were following Garath, and their targets soon resolved themselves into other dragons, only these ones were all black. The old gentleman we had met before told us that the black dragons were Shadow versions of the True Dragons (the capitals seem appropriate) who, in their arrogance (*their* arrogance?), considered themselves the greatest of dragons. Naturally, there was a certain degree of mutual dislike.

Our job done, a Ranger officer soon arrived to lead us back to the main camp. There we found Benedict, Gerard and a number of officers standing at the head of perhaps a thousand men; it was difficult to judge the numbers correctly. As we approached Benedict turned to us and said we would be joining him in his assault of the castle. I had barely a moment to consider the probable danger of such activity before Benedict turned to me, saying something to the effect of "coming, son?".

I hesitated a brief moment in surprise at this sudden public acknowledgement of paternity before jauntily replying "certainly, father" and asking if he had a spare horse.

The surprised looks on Zatharuss' and Victor's faces were priceless.

My father nodded and four horses were brought forward for the three of us and the Ranger officer who had led us to Benedict. He rode in another direction, presumably to rejoin his comrades. I athletically vaulted into my saddle, eager (stupidly) to go; my two friends were more sedate.

We left the shelter of the forest and headed around the south of Kolvir towards the Eastern Stair, which, I was told, was the oldest route up the side of the mountain to the castle. Starting at the base of the precipitous east face, it zigzagged its way up the cliff face all the way to castle. Most of the way it was single file, but on the lower parts it was possible to go two abreast. Corwin and Bleys had come this way before, long ago when they had last attempted to take Eric's throne from him, or so I was told. They had failed; I could only hope that our attempt would be more successful. The officers told me we had fewer men than they had had, but that with Benedict at our head we could not fail.

In the distance to the west we could see a battle taking place in the foothills of the mountains. Apparently a large force under the joint command of Corwin and Bleys was approaching from that direction, and would occupy the forces there while we entered Amber by way of the Eastern Stair. If the opportunity presented itself, no doubt Corwin and Bleys would attempt to march on the castle from the west.

At the Stair, one of Benedict's officers stood forth and declared that he would go first, to allow his general to get a feel for the troops we would be facing. Benedict paused for a before waving him forth; he knew, as we all did, it was almost certainly a death sentence.

He was good, very good; he would qualify as a master swordsman were he a duellist and not soldier. He took fifteen men before he was taken down himself, and we were barely a tenth of the way up. Then my father took over, and he did so with a finesse and efficiency the likes of which I had never seen. I think he managed to use a different technique on every foe; tripping, straight fast thrusts, sweeping slashes and lightning fast combinations too fast for the eye to follow closely.

From the occasional comment made by Gerard, behind whom Zatharuss, Victor and I stood, it was a more impressive feat than Bleys' had been, despite the fact that the number of men we (or rather he) faced was in total less than Bleys had faced as this time Eric's army was split between three forces. Three hours and about halfway up he began to visibly tire; his blows remained as flawless as they had been before (at least, as far as I could tell) but they seemed to be getting minutely slower.

Then a muttering passed down and then back up the ranks; to be ready for the chant. It meant nothing to me, but clearly meant something to everyone else. Then at a gesture from Gerard, the whole thousand strong force cried out in unison: "you can't let Bleys beat you!". Even from where I stood behind Gerard's bulk I could see Benedict smile slightly, straighten up and hold his blade more resolutely than before. He redoubled his efforts and set to work with more vigour.

Time passed in a foot-paining haze as Benedict fought his way up the mountain. Hours passed, or were they days? Later I learned we had been at it for close to eight hours, mostly due to a brief respite when Eric's forces gathered above us to prepare for our arrival, holding back from attacking us until we reached them.

We eventually reached the end of the narrow staircase and came upon the wider steps, of which the steps down into Rebma were just a reflection. We were all but unopposed there, and the troops swarmed past us and their leader to take the fight into the heart of Amber itself.

Benedict took his rest on a stone bench just inside the gates, panting heavily as he watched the castle. I handed him a waterskin I had acquired along the way somewhere and he drank from it gladly before handing it back and directing me to take my place amongst the soldiers.

The battle was long and bloody. Even the 'Defence of Rebma' was cleaner than that final conflict. The fact that it was Eric's last stand and the last step to freeing Amber made soldiers from both sides rather frenzied in their fighting. I stayed fairly close to Gerard and Victor the whole time; the simple reasoning being that I was not suited to a full battle situation and thus could use them to deter most combatants from attacking me. They would

(hopefully) be too busy fighting or avoiding the two largest men I know to bother with me. I still got my share of fights, though.

Within the outer walls of Amber we fought our way through the streets of a kind of small city; not quite a town, but not really large enough to be a city. It appeared to be built around the castle, or perhaps palace was more accurate, in a rough semicircle to the south and east. Beyond the 'city' was another set of walls, within which stood the castle.

For perhaps an hour at most we fought our way through the streets of this city, getting closer to our goal by the minute. Eric's soldiers fought a valiant but desperate defence, but they were nonetheless beaten back. Their situation became even worse when it became clear that Corwin and Bleys had taken the western way into Amber and were battering them from that direction too. They were forced further and further back against the outer walls of the castle and then inside them.

We pursued them within, and no sooner had Victor and I set into a battle with several soldiers around the large, ornate fountain in the centre of the courtyard before the main entrance than Benedict, recovered at least partly from his ordeal, came up behind us with perhaps a hundred of his troops, plus Gerard, and commanded us to accompany him into the castle itself. We could see Zatharuss amongst their numbers, so we joined him and followed Benedict into the castle.

By the look of it, Castle Amber was a very well made structure, considering it's age; originally, I suspect, it had been far more of a fortress than it was now, having slowly altered to be more of a palace and a place to live than a purely defensive building. Of course, I could be wrong.

In a more pleasant situation, like strolling with friends or a fair lady, no doubt the castle would hold many wonders; views across the mountains and valleys, magnificent paintings and sculptures, sweeping architecture. In this situation, however, the only thing that tended to catch the eye was the bodies and the blood, or more often the next group of foes to be fought. I would have much preferred to visit the place for the first time in more congenial circumstances, but I suppose I had Eric to blame for that.

After perhaps another hour, or even two, we finally joined up the primary contingents of the western forces, led by Corwin and Bleys. Almost simultaneously we cut our way into the throne room itself; unsurprisingly, it was the same as the one in Rebma, with the same vaulted ceiling and tall windows, though here, of course, they faced over the sea, to the east.

This throne room, though, was definitely different. Instead of calm, beautiful Moire, this place was ruled by Eric, and he stood before us guarded by about twenty of the Asiatic, black-armoured soldiers I had encountered before in Dworkin's company. He stood next to one of the cone-shaped spiral devices he had ordered constructed in the Hidden Valley. This one lay on it's side, and seemed to have hand- and footholds around the open end.

Eric himself was pretty much as depicted on his Trump; handsome, with deeply black hair and beard, large, strong hands and dressed in leather tunic and leggings. However, he was not smiling, as he was on the card; he appeared fairly grim, and perhaps a little more haggard too. His clothing had the look of being over-worn. With his right hand he held up a red jewel, rather like a ruby, from a chain connected to it's setting; he was staring intently at it (or maybe into it?). It was a rather substantial jewel, about the size of a small apple or a large plum. This, unmistakably, was the famed Jewel of Judgement that was so important.

Eric deigned to see us then, and his men drew weapons to defend their leader. He smiled in greeting, though it seemed slightly strained, and reached out to place the Jewel in the small end of the spiral device. He addressed us all (though I think he directed it mostly at Corwin and Benedict), saying it was too late and he was ready to take his rightful place (whatever that meant). He reached his hands towards the hand- and footholds and laughed as everyone, even myself, tensed. He accused Benedict of being weak for not wanting to rule Amber and asked Corwin if he was planning to hand Amber over to Random afterwards like before. He laughed again and once more reached for the rings at the wide end of his device.

Then the silence was split by the sharp report of a rifle shot, and with a loud *crack* and a spark the narrow part holding the Jewel fell off the end of the device, falling to the floor and rolling slightly as it did so. After a brief moment of shock everyone turned to look towards where the shot had come from; there on the parapet stood a figure, covered head to foot in a heavy cloak that concealed gender, build and all distinctive features, holding a half-lowered rifle of some form. Then Eric spoke; he cried out something to the effect of "You! But you're dead! I killed you!"

The figure saluted and threw itself backward off the parapet.

I was all but frozen in the face of all this drama, but even I turned in time to see Eric downed by Gerard's fist. The hit made a satisfying sort of *thump*, and the noise as he hit the ground ten feet away was equally satisfying. His men took one look at their fallen leader and dropped their weapons, surrendering. By the way Eric slowly writhed painfully on the floor it was clear he was still alive, though no doubt he would soon wish he were not.

Zatharuss seemed intent on killing the bodyguards, but instead headed out into the castle; whether he went in search of more fighting or booty I did not know.

I just stood there, trying to make sense out of all that had happened, when I was snapped out of it by an order from my father to go with Victor and one of his officers to free Random from the dungeons below the castle. I shrugged and did so, though I would have much preferred at that time to get out of my bloodstained armour and clothing and have a bath than run down to the bottom of the castle and back up again.

Deep down below the castle we went; it was the same as the catacombs under the palace in Rebma, though of course in truth it was the other way round. We did not go so far down as the room of the Pattern, however, heading instead towards the area where Eric had kept Random imprisoned for I do not know how long. When we eventually located the right door we naturally found ourselves without a key, but this did not stop Victor; he took a firm hold of the door and wrenched it out of the frame.

A rather weak voice from within asked who was there, and Victor called out his name. Then Random stepped gingerly out of the cell.

He was as emaciated as one would expect for being fed on prison food for so long, especially when one has been held captive by one's enemy. He was also quite filthy, of course, and did not smell too good. He was also rather shorter than I had expected, since all of his brothers were quite tall; where most of the male members of the family were almost universally over six feet tall, he was perhaps just over five and a half. He squinted at us and nodded before inspecting the door of his cell. He measured the thickness with his thumb and muttered something about Corwin.

We began to make our way back up to the castle proper, and we had not gone far before Victor had to pick the weakened king up and carry him most of the way. At one point he looked at me and stared; he asked me who I was and I courteously introduced myself; Victor saw fit to mention whom my father was once I had finished. I suppose he had the right to know, but not that soon.

We climbed several flights of stairs and passed along a number of corridors before eventually stopping outside what was clearly was the royal apartments. The door was opened soon after the officer knocked on it by a short woman whose green-tinged skin marked her as being from Rebma. She was slim and attractive, with long brown hair and fine features. She wore black, in a manner that suggested mourning. Random said hello to her, and a look of unguarded joy flashed across her face before she controlled herself. She directed us to enter the room in a soft voice, and Victor put Random down so he could walk in himself. Random reached out and took her hand, and she led him into another room.

We stood around waiting for Random to come back; by the sound of the water splashing in the other room Random was getting cleaned up for his return to his throne. The main room of the royal apartments was very well appointed, with fine furniture and various pieces of art. But it was a working room too, as the desk by the window showed, though it looked as if it had seen little use in that capacity for some time. The view from the windows was superb, showing both the upper city and the mountains and the sea and the main city below.

Victor had gone to the kitchens to get what food he could, and soon returned with a tray that bore a little bread, some meat and a rather elderly piece of cheese. He told us the kitchens had been quite heavily stripped of real food, and he had been hard pressed to find what he had brought.

I had just started to look closer at the city and its harbour when a door opened behind me. I turned to see Random standing just inside the room. He still looked a little weak, but now he had washed, shaved and decently dressed he was much more presentable.

Random then proceeded to consume the food Victor had fetched for him; he ate like a man who had not seen proper food for months, which of course he was. Once he had finished he looked much improved; even that little amount of good food had restored most of his colour.

He led the way to the throne room, though he still had to lean on Victor some of the way. Then he made his entrance; it was not very triumphal as we were lacking trumpets and gaily-coloured banners, but it would do. Bleys and Fiona (who had appeared from somewhere in the intervening minutes) were examining the spiral device, but turned away from it as we entered. As Random stood in the doorway everyone turned to look, then gave a ragged cheer. Random climbed the dais and sat on his throne (though slumped would be more accurate). I followed everyone's lead as they bowed to him.

He looked at us all, and thanked us. Then he frowned and asked if anyone had seen Bill Roth. A few of the officers headed out of the throne room, presumably in search of this Bill Roth character (the name was familiar; was he in the Trumps somewhere?). Corwin laughed and remarked that everything was back to normal. A few others laughed too, and the long struggle was over.