

Journal 32 - in Amber and Shadow

I went over to my father, who stood on the balcony where the cloaked rifleman had stood. He was surveying the room and balcony, apparently looking for something specific. Looking out at the view, I got my first real view of Amber and its surroundings.

From where I stood I could see out over both the forest Arden and the city, though the view was split by the mountain range that the peak Amber stood on was the last of. The forest went far into the distance, coming up against another range of mountains that appeared to form the main land border to the region directly ruled from the throne room I now stood in.

It was an impressive sight.

Benedict spoke then, commenting on how other bodies were visible down the side of the mountain, but not that of the suicidal rifleman. I looked over the side and found myself staring down at the jagged rocks several hundred feet below. I swallowed, and noticed that he was right.

Turning to him, I asked Benedict what Eric had been attempting with his device and the Jewel of Judgement. He said that Eric had been intending to project himself into the Jewel, becoming part of it forever. I asked him if this was possible and he suggested I talk to someone else, perhaps Fiona; such things were not his forte.

He then stopped for a moment in thought; with a faraway look in his eyes he walked away from the balcony and returned in short notice bearing a long-handled broom. He unscrewed the head and handed me the handle, directing me to hold it like a rifle. I did so, and he carefully positioned me before sighting down the 'barrel' of my 'rifle'. He nodded to himself contentedly, murmured something to the effect of 'I thought so' and began to walk off.

I watched him for a moment before thinking to do likewise, and found, to my surprise, that the cloaked rifleman would have been unable to hit the section of the device that had been hit from this position! He would have had to either shoot through one of the widest parts of the spiral or through a very tiny gap between two coils. Both, clearly, were impossible.

Now more questions had arisen where I had thought all was solved; how had our supposed saviour survived a more than three hundred foot drop, and how the device was really broken.

About halfway to the doors Benedict turned back towards me and asked what it was I had wanted of him in the first place. I asked if he knew somewhere I could get a bath and change of clothes, since I was still in my armour and stained with blood.

He nodded to me and waved me over while pulling out a Trump with his other hand.

I had not noticed it before, but his previously missing hand had grown back; however, it did not appear to be of a size with its mate, and he wore gloves, probably to try to conceal this fact.

Once the rainbow of the Trump had faded, I found we were standing in his orchard, where Andreas had brought me once before. Walking towards the main house we were met by an old gentleman whose clothing and manner identified him as some form of steward. He greeted Benedict as 'Mr Barimen' and, after I introduced myself, decided to call me 'Mr Bek'. My father left me in his care and I found myself being led to low wooden building where a large, deep bath awaited me. It was easily ten feet along each side, and the water within steamed and bubbled. This, I was assured, was due to the action of some form of spring below.

He directed me towards several varieties of soap, some large, fluffy 'towels' and bathrobes made from similar material. He then asked me what form of clothing I preferred; we eventually narrowed it down to 'eighteenth century Earth'. He then left.

I slowly peeled everything off (several aches, tiredness and the stickiness of the outer layers prevented me doing anything else) and lowered myself into the bath. It was bliss. It felt as if I had not had a good bath for weeks, if not months. I just lay in place and soaked in the bubbling water.

Sometime later (an hour? Two?) my rest was interrupted by the arrival of a maid. She was perhaps in her twenties, attractive but not overly so. She offered to scrub my back with a loofah, so naturally I accepted. Unfortunately she did not join me to do so.

As she scrubbed she asked me who I was; was I one of Mr Barimen's captains? After a moment's thought I said something non-specific; I did not feel it would be a good idea to take advantage of my position as the son of the master of the house.

After a while she told me I had a small wound in one shoulder. She told me she would see to it; so I told her I would need some drink, to deaden the pain. She just shrugged and fetched a bottle of very fine, thick, sipping brandy from a cabinet in one corner of the bathhouse. It was very good stuff, strong and tasty.

The maid left and returned soon after with some thread and a needle. By then I think I had had enough drink to deaden the pain of being shot. I think I had overestimated the size of the injury; a few small stitches and twinges and it was all over. When she had finished with me I waved vaguely at her and said I would soak a while longer; she said she would return in a short while.

I relaxed even further; all my troubles were behind me. Hopefully.

When the maid returned she told me that Mr Barimen wanted to inspect my wound for poison. She then went to fetch my clothes, so I reluctantly climbed out of the bath, dried and pulled on one of the fleecy robes.

Benedict arrived and told me to turn round and lower the top of the robe. I did so and yelped as he pushed what felt like a small, red-hot poker into the sewn up cut. In fact it was only a pin; he been testing for poison. The poison could have had the result of deadening pain, but as I felt the pin I was not in any danger.

At some point the maid had been and gone, leaving some clothes behind. As well as some interesting undergarments I pulled on a pair of simple, black cloth trousers, a baggy white shirt made of silk, and a pair of short, soft leather boots. I felt like my old self again, less the finery. Soon, I promised myself, I would be properly attired once more.

My father lead the way into the main house where we ended up in a small dining room laden with fine food of both the German and French variety, close to what I was used to. There were several breads and meats, and a couple of bottles of light wine.

I ate for a time. Benedict was not hungry so I ate for the both of us; it had been a long day. Several times it looked as if he was about to say something, so put down my glass and asked him what he wanted to say. He asked me if I would refrain from 'interfering' with Jeeves' daughter, the maid. I agreed not to, saying that I preferred not abuse my position if I could. As some form of adjunct to this, Benedict said he only publicly revealed our relationship when he did to protect me, to put off anyone who may have sought to threaten me in some way.

He then asked me if Zatharuss had said anything to me regarding the disappearance of Andreas; I told him he had not, but that I would ask him about it when I next saw him.

My father told me that if I wished to obtain a Trump of the place I could have one, but that if I did so I had to inform Jeeves that I had them and, if I used them, to inform the steward of my presence immediately on my arrival. He then stood and told me that he had been called away by the king, so he had to leave.

I thanked him for being a good host, and he smiled slightly and simply said I was family. Then he left.

A short time later I felt a strange feeling run through me; it felt like a Trump. Benedict had departed.

Just as I was finishing eating the maid entered the room and handed to me a small book that Mr Barimen had left for me. It's solid cover proclaimed it as "The Ballistic Analysis Handbook". A quick read of the back and the introduction described the book as 'a guide to the analysis of ballistic trajectories and their application in forensic investigations'; in short, it told one how to calculate the origin and path of a projectile fired from a rifle or similar firearm.

When I looked up next the maid (I should have asked after her name) was still cleaning things away, so I asked her about procuring some of Benedict's Trumps. She pulled on the bellpull by the door and went back to work; her father soon appeared, and I repeated my request to him. He nodded and left the room, returning after a few minutes carrying a small ivory case with the familiar unicorn device on the top. It was thin, possibly only holding a half dozen cards at most.

He asked me if I had permission to have them, and I told him yes. He seemed satisfied by my answer. I told him that I had been told to inform him of my arrival if I used one and he said that this was indeed the case, especially after last time. When I looked at him

questioningly he suggested I ask Mr Barimen, saying only that it involved his granddaughter. When I looked even more confused, he again reiterated his suggesting that I ask Benedict, so I left it at that.

He then asked me if I was planning to stay, and I told him I would stay for the night at least. He inquired if I wished for anything else, and I asked if there was any coffee to be had. He quizzed me on what type of coffee I wanted and in what way I wished to have it prepared, inquiring after my place of origin to better determine my preferences, sending his daughter to fetch it once he had properly ascertained my tastes in that regard. He named her when he did so; Kanar. An interesting sort of name. I was surprised when he narrowed it down to Saxony, but he downplayed his deductive abilities by saying that he had help, of a sort; every time Mr Barimen went somewhere new for a time he always brought something from there back with him.

I took this to mean that he was aware of my true relationship with Benedict.

He led me upstairs to a fair-sized, well-appointed room with a comfortable looking single bed. As I got acquainted with the room, Jeeves left and soon returned bearing a silver tray upon which stood silver coffee pot, a solid-looking cup and saucer, a small jug of cream and a bowl of light brown sugar. He bid me goodnight and left.

I drank my coffee and examined the Trumps I had been given. The first depicted part of the orchard behind the house; it looked to me as if the spot was quite far back from the house. The next bore the image of a gazebo, constructed from some dark, unadorned wood. There was no indication that it was in the grounds of the house, but it seemed likely it was. The third showed the front of the house; no doubt the best card to use if wishing to be noticed on arrival. The fourth was of a road somewhere, winding between two fields. The fifth depicted a small clearing in a wood, a good place to make an unobserved appearance.

Then I got down to reading the book. The bed was comfortable, the sheets fresh and clean, the pillows soft and plump; after all my sleeping in tents recently it was heaven itself. The ballistics book was quite heavy to read, but once I reached the actual working section of the book I was engrossed. I read till several hours after midnight

The next day I was drawn down to the kitchen by the tantalising scent of hot chocolate and fresh croissants. Kanar was at work in the kitchen creating a feast of a breakfast; croissants, butter, jam, some meats and the aforementioned hot chocolate. She directed me to serve myself and went off to do some work somewhere.

I gleefully ate my way through about a dozen croissants and drank about four cups of hot chocolate before I felt wholly satisfied. Then I pulled the bellpull and summoned Kanar. When she arrived I asked if she could locate a bag or knapsack I could use; she nodded and fetched one for me. It was of medium size with two shoulder straps on the back and fastened shut with two clips. I told I was leaving this morning so she packed the last half-dozen croissants into a clear box with a white lid that clipped itself onto the rim of the box. The writing in the centre of the lid proclaimed the box was 'genuine Tupperware', whatever that was.

I asked her if I could have some bottles of wine to take with me and she fetched down two bottles of yellow-white wine from a rack above a tall cupboard. I added this to the croissants in the bag and picked it up to test its weight. She then handed me a long coat, about ankle length, made of some dark leathery substance. I thanked her profusely for her assistance and headed back upstairs to my room.

There I collected what little personal effects I had managed to keep on me; my Trumps, pocket watch and so on. My old family signet ring I still kept on a chain around my neck. Then I went in search of Jeeves.

I found him tidying in what appeared to be a more formal dining room. I told him I was leaving and he bid me good journey. I said farewell and headed out. It was sad that I had to leave; it was a good place to rest and recuperate. I resolved to return when the opportunity or need presented itself.

I began to move out into Shadow, slowly moving away from Benedict's estates with no particular destination in mind. After a while I reached a point where I had to make a decision about what I was going to do next.

I narrowed it down to two choices. The first was to return home, namely Bek; I wanted to see the old place again, and besides which there were a few questions I wished to

ask my mother. On the other hand, there was the mystery Benedict obviously wanted me to investigate in Amber: if the cloaked 'man' had not shot Eric's device, who had? And from where?

While I pondered which course to follow, I took myself to a certain place where I knew I would find a horse trader with a good selection of mounts available for good prices. While I knew this was a quite improbable thing where I came from, in Shadow all things were possible, and in short order I had bought a fine beast from just such a fellow. Of course, I just happened to have the right money on me to buy it, too, along with a saddle and other relevant furniture. The horse was a gelding, a fast creature with remarkable endurance (just as I had wished for). Black with white socks on his forefeet and a small star-like mark behind his right ear, he was as good a horse as you could ask for.

Finally mounted, I testing his mettle with an interesting ride further into Shadow.