

## Journal 33 - in Amber

After my ride I once again considered my options. Finally deciding that I would have to investigate the shooting in the throne room before they tidied up too much or removed the device, I stopped my horse and pulled out my deck of Trumps. Appearing in the throne room with a horse was probably not the best course of action, so I shuffled out the card for the fountain in the courtyard of the castle instead. I then took my coat off and set about covering the eyes of the horse with it; I found travel by Trump a little disconcerting, so I did not want to worry about the horse going mad.

Once the coat was secured I concentrated on the image and before long the two of us were transported to Amber. The horse tried to escape my grasp by bucking a little but I kept him under control.

I tied the horse to a post at the edge of the courtyard, beside an individual who, for all intents and purposes, was a six foot tall frog-man. He may have been taller; his hunched posture concealed his true height. He just squatted in place and watched me, grinning (naturally) from one side of his face to the other. When I greeted him he waved his hands at me in a manner that suggested it was a means of communication; of course, I did not understand it.

A loud-voiced foreman eventually shouted at him to get him back to work repairing what appeared to be some stables; once the frog-man had left, he denounced all of his kind as lazy layabouts and stomped off after him.

I entered the castle through the massive wood and iron doors and wandered around the passages and corridors until I remembered the way to the throne room. There I found Random, looking a little better than when I had last seen him, conversing with two young pageboys. By the sound of it he was giving them some instruction in their duties and the things they had to know. The device still stood before the dais the throne stood on, and the parts of the end, where the Jewel mounting for the Jewel was, were gathered together near it's base.

I went over to it and began to look around, at the balcony the cloaked figure stood on and around the room in general. I noticed that there were a number of windows high up in the walls near the ceiling, at least a score in various shapes and sizes. I had begun to consider possibilities when I was interrupted by a cough; I turned to see Random looking at me with an expectant expression on his face.

I greeted him, calling him 'my lord'; he thanked me, rather sarcastically, and continued with his lesson.

The broken end of the device was shattered into three large parts and a few smaller fragments. I pieced it together as best I could and compared the broken end of it to the place on the main device where it came from. Most of that area had been replaced by a hole about half a hand-width apart; this suggested a high velocity round (according to the ballistics book). It would probably have been in the middle calibre range, perhaps between a third of an inch and half an inch in diameter, and made of some dense material.

Additionally, there was a small nick on the inside of the 'wound', a small groove along the inside. Could this have been caused by the cloaked gunman? I held the main parts of the end in place and looked through the hole, trying to gauge where the shot had went; the distance to what I sought was likely to be shorter, or so the book said.

I eventually narrowed it down to a section of floor tiles near the main doors into the throne room. I went over and ran my hands over them as well as closely examining them visually. After a few careful minutes I located a fairly shallow depression in one of the tiles with a sharp edge on the same side as the device. The back edge was not sharp, no doubt smoothed down by the impact of the round.

Then a shadow fell over me and I looked up to see Random standing over me. He looked questioningly at me so I explained that I was trying to determine if someone other than the cloaked rifleman had fired the shot that had taken the end off the device; so far, it looked as if that was indeed the case.

I kneeled beside the indentation and looked back at the device. As I was about to speak Random told the two pages to gather up the pieces of the end of the device and hold them in place. This done I looked closely at it and asked if string would be a good idea, to

draw a line between the impact point and the point of origin, passing through the hole in the device. Random, however, said we would need a very long piece.

Instead I lay down on the floor and did my best to line up the back of my head with the impact point on the floor. I then looked at the device and tried to determine where the shot had come from. It took a little while and a lot of squinting, but I narrowed it down to three windows that were directly adjacent to each other.

I asked Random how to get to them and he told me there was a balcony, more of a ledge, that could be reached from one of the back corridors around the throne room. The windows did not open, at least not normally, and the area was usually guarded. He gave me directions and I headed off through a small service door.

The passage was almost pitch back and very narrow; I used my hands to guide myself along but this meant that several times I got a cobweb in the face. The passage turned left and started going upwards until I found myself at a door. I opened this and was momentarily dazzled by the sunlight.

I found myself on a high, narrow ledge that was perhaps four feet wide and twelve long. It faced to the north, and it was quite windy. I stayed close to the wall to avoid any unpleasant accidents. The view was quite good, though.

I slowly and methodically examined the whole an inch at a time. It was slow and a little boring, but ultimately it was rewarding; first I found a spot of rain-washed blood on the right window and then there was a small semicircle of glass cut out the very bottom pane of the middle window. I carefully lay down and looked through the hole to see it was in just the right place.

I looked around a little more and found a small grating cut into the marble of the ledge. I ran my fingers over it and found that one side had a slight crack around its edge. It was possible the grate had been lifted up at some point, and that it could be lifted again with a length of wire, or perhaps a pocketknife.

Just as a test, I spat on the ledge near to the grate and was rewarded with sight of the spittle flowing towards and into the grate.

I returned through the darkness of the passage to find Random; I told him what I had discovered, and he sent one of the pages in search of some appropriate wire. As soon as the page returned I headed right back up there.

Beneath the grate I found an unappealing amount of some dark brown and viscous semi-liquid matter. I gingerly probed in it with the wire and managed to locate some small metallic object submerged in it. No matter how hard I tried, the wire was no good for retrieving it. I was forced to roll up one sleeve and dip my hand into it.

It was cold and clammy and very thick. Just before it reached my elbow I got a good hold on the object in question; it was some sort of small cylinder. When I pulled my arm back out it was covered in the brown stuff within which were a few leaves and a leech, which had happily begun to fasten itself to my forearm. I broke its grip with the wire and sent it on a little journey down the mountain.

My prize was what looked to be a spent cartridge from a self-loading firearm of some type; it appeared to be made from a lighter, more silvery metal than what I was told was usual, namely brass. Holding my arm outstretched and hand downwards I went back down to the throne room to present it to the king. He took it off me and examined it while I wiped my arm off on a cloth one of the pages provided for me.

When I finished he gave it back to me and told me to take it to Dworkin. He then turned away from me back to the pages and continued where he had left off.

I stepped outside the throne room and took out my Trump of Dworkin; it was the easiest way, as I had no idea where he could be found. Rather than the contact I had expected, instead I found myself transported to a kind of study. Its style suggested Elizabethan, with a large table to one side upon which stood an array of rounded bottles and tubes made from glass, all held in place by various clamps.

When I turned around I found that I stood just before a heavy desk; behind it sat Dworkin. He asked me I wanted and I showed him the cartridge. He took it from me and asked where I had got it from, so I told him where and the supposed circumstances of it being there. He nodded as I spoke, then held the cartridge up with one hand and gave a long and very obscure description of its properties, using what I took to be a plethora of scientific terminology. He then gave the simple version, saying what metals it was made from and the

theoretical power of the round. He finished his report by saying he would determine the propellant later.

He then looked sharply at me and asked if I knew why it has been sent to him. I suggested that I could have been because he knew how to discover its secrets. He shook his head at my reply and told me it was so he could stop such bullets from working anymore. From the way he said it I think I was supposed to understand, so I just nodded.

Seemingly satisfied, he took a small cylindrical package out of one of the drawers in his desk and handed it to me. He pointed towards the door to my right, beyond the desk, and told me to go to the end of the corridor until I reached the griffin. Then I was to open the packet and feed the contents to it.

I did as he instructed me and found myself face to face with a large purple creature that could only be described as a griffin. It was easily as big as Morgenstern, Julian's incredible horse; bigger still by dint of its wings. It looked intently at me and its breath streamed. It walked right up to me from where it stood in the opening that led outside (wherever that was) and stared right into my eyes. It was very disconcerting.

I carefully lifted the green and blue package up and opened it to reveal a number of small white rings within it. The griffin sniffed at the rings and then licked my face like a very oversized dog. Its tongue was warm and very slimy. It made me shudder, but it was better it did that than bite my head off. It then gently took the cylinder out of my hand and swallowed the whole thing, crunching a little. The next time it breathed out, its breath smelled peculiarly of mint.

I passed the beast as it began to make a noise rather like a cat purring and found myself in a very strange place indeed.

The first thing that struck me was that the sky was an intense, almost unnatural blue; a glowing golden ball of a sun hung high overhead. After a while it became apparent that there was a sea of some form in the distance, and after a point it seemed as if sea and sky were one, so similar were they in colour. I stood outside a cave before which was an area of smooth, unbroken rock roughly oval in shape, a couple of hundred metres along its major axis. The rock was dark and beyond its edge land could just be seen sloping down towards the sea. The cave was set in a wall of rock down which a path could just be seen winding down from somewhere up above.

But what finally caught my eye and held it was the Pattern. It was definitely the Pattern I knew, but it was different. The Pattern I had walked in Rebma was like bright green-blue fire running over the rocky floor of the chamber, fixed in its intricate curves and twists. This one was pink-gold in colour and was more like the veins in marble; rather than seeming to run on the surface it was contained within the rock itself. But the most gripping thing about it was that were the Rebma Pattern burned with Power, this one raged like the sun.

As I stood and stared I eventually sensed a presence next to me; turning, I saw it was Dworkin. After a short time he told me that I was the first of the new group to see it. Not that he told me exactly what 'it' was.

A while passed before he pointed me in the direction of the bottom of the path and told me to go. He waved vaguely at me and headed back towards the cave mouth. I took the path.

After a long walk I found myself in what could only be Arden. I was on the edge of a small glade. Slightly off centre stood a couple of small rocks, about waist height, from within which bubbled a small stream that fed the small pool in the centre of the clearing. Oddly, an apple tree stood amongst the oak and beech trees opposite the pool.

I had only been there a few short moments when I began to feel the tingling sensation that warned me someone was attempting to contact me using a Trump. Opening myself to it I found myself facing Random. He was still in the throne room, standing on the balcony. He told me he had to talk to me and suggested I come to him. I held out my hand and in a moment I stood beside him.

He told me he had a task for me.

The mines that had been buried around the vicinity of Amber by Eric's forces were of a more dangerous nature than had originally been realised. They were apparently partly organic in nature, capable of reproducing themselves somehow to slowly spread over the whole countryside. They were also shielded against what Random called 'psychic detection', making it very difficult to safely locate them to allow them to be dealt with.

The dragons could deal with them by blasting them with fire or just stomping on them, but they existed in such numbers that it would take a long time and even the most hardy of the dragons would be injured after a while.

Most of the mines were in the farmland, and the farmers wanted to get back to work; it was not a problem of food shortages, just that they were eager to get back to work.

In short, Random wanted me to get some people together and go into Shadow to find some person or persons to deal with them. Considering the magical and technological sophistication of the devices, some place where both magic and technology were very advanced would be the best place to start. He said it would probably not be worth trying to locate the original designers; they would be far too difficult to find, probably having been hidden in some way by Eric.

He authorised me to make them a number of offers, from simple offers of land to making them landed nobility in Amber, lords if you will.

He did warn me it could take several months to locate individuals suitable for the task.

I considered declining the task; after all, had I not done enough for Amber so far without a real rest period? A holiday was in order at least. I had places to go, and I still wished for that long talk with my mother. But then again, the threat of the mines was quite serious, and if I could help, how could I not? Even if it did require a long period of fairly intensive travel through Shadow.

So, naturally, I was all but obligated to take his assignment.

Random seemed pleased I had accepted, and bid me to begin preparations. As I took my leave, he offered me ownership of some sort of tavern or similar building in the city below; I called back that I would prefer a house instead, and went to stand on my favourite balcony.

As I regarded the fine view before me, I considered who would be most useful for the task set me. Naturally, the first people I thought of were Morianna, Zatharuss and Victor, so, shuffling through my deck, I drew out my Trump of Victor and set about concentrating on his rather blocky visage.

Once we had come into full contact, he told me he was travelling through Arden to locate the dragon folk to help with the mines. I told him that we would probably be going on a little journey soon, but that we would talk about it again when he had completed his task. He said he would Trump me when he had, and closed the contact.

Random called over to me, suggesting that I hurry a little more; reports of more injuries had just been brought to him. I asked him if there was someone or some people who would know who was in the castle and who was not. Random gestured at the pages as one immediately began to relate who was where; Julian was in Arden, Gerard was in the castle somewhere and so on. About ten or so were mentioned, even if it was only that their locations were unknown. Morianna was said only to be 'in the castle'.

I asked after Zatharuss and was told that he last been seen leaving Arden by a Shadow Gate with two horses and some supplies. When I commented in an off hand way that he still had his Trumps if he needed them, I was told that he had in fact left them with a Ranger before leaving. So now he could not contact any of us, and without a Trump of him we could not reach him without actively seeking him out in whatever Shadow he found his way to.

He would not be joining us on that endeavour.

I headed out through the doors on my way to attempt to find Morianna, and lightly caught the arm of one of the pages as he passed me at a run. I asked him if he knew where Morianna was specifically or if he knew of someone who might. He shrugged and suggested I try Trump. The 'normal' normal route finally gave way to the Amber Way as I pulled out my Trump of Morianna.

However, she was not accepting contacts at that time; the cool feeling remained unchanged. I resolved to try again later.

I turned on my way towards finding some lunch and found the delightful Fiona walking towards me. She smiled and told me that I could take our meeting as accident or as design as I desired. I reciprocated her smile with one of my own and said that I preferred to take it as a pleasant accident. She smiled at that, of course.

I meanwhile was naturally concerned about what she wanted with me. With ease born of much practice I kept a pleasant smile on my face as she continued.

She handed me a small piece of grey stone about the size of a small apple, only flattened, suggesting I check the energy signature, whatever that meant. Presumably she meant that I should attempt to exert the power of my mind upon it in order to determine something of its doubtless arcane nature. She then smiled again and turned to leave.

As she did I asked her if it would have worked. She turned back and raised a questioning eyebrow at me and I just said Eric. She looked at me for a long moment before smiling ever so slightly and asked if I had any glue before turning away one more and departing.

As I had pretty much guessed, I would get no concrete answer on the subject, and I supposed I would have been surprised if I had.

I had almost rounded the corner when one of the king's pages called me back to attend to Random.

I found him talking with Morianna about an object she had discovered amongst the rocks below the balcony from where the cloaked gunman had jumped. I greeted her, and she told me that she had literally just climbed up that part of the cliff with it. It was, she told us, a small device of some sort that produced what Random called a 'hologram', a form of illusionary image; the image it created was that of our mystery rifleman. Small wonder then that no one had been able to locate him.

While she made her report I gripped the stone I had placed in my pocket and concentrated a little upon it. At first I was unable to sense little beyond that it was a piece of rock, but then something more became apparent to me and a sudden wave of emptiness and depression washed over me like a thick, heavy blanket. I shuddered in its grasp and Random looked at me rather concerned. He told me I had gone very pale all of a sudden.

I took the stone out of my pocket and told him I had acquired it and that it had an odd feeling to it. I suggested he do what he could with it, but he declined to do so. A good move, considering how it felt to me.

Her summary completed, Morianna asked me why I had been seeking her, so I told her about the mines and how I had been asked to gather some people together to find some people who could deal with them. When she asked me why I had sought her out, I simply told her that she had always proved useful before, and besides which we were friends and she was good company. She considered for a moment or two and agreed to come along. He said she would need time to prepare, so we agreed to meet in the throne room again in an hour.

As I was leaving I received a Trump contact; taking it, expecting it to be Victor, I found myself regarding my father instead. He handed back my sword through the contact but suggested I keep the one he had given me before the battle because it was of superior quality. He then broke the contact in a somewhat curt manner. Presumably he was busy.

My sword came with a note; it was a critical summary of the good and bad points of my blade in comparison to the one he had provided. While much of it was too technical for me to understand, the gist of it was that while mine was above average, his was the work of a master craftsman. But then, I had all but guessed that already.

Once again, before I could decide on a course of action I was halted by another incoming Trump. This time I found myself staring at a black-cloaked figure. He (it?) seemed to be staring right back at me. After perhaps twenty seconds I asked the figure what it wanted, but it remained silent. Eventually after maybe a minute had passed the figure stirred slightly and told me in a neutral-sounding voice that I should not have left the contact open so long; he (?) now had everything he needed. Then he broke the contact.

All in all a rather disturbing occurrence; presumably he meant that he had gleaned what information he needed to know from right out of my mind, despite the fact that as far as I was aware I should have been aware of such an intrusion. It really quite unsettled me, and I did not quite feel right again for a number of minutes afterwards.

I had just decided that I would need some sturdy clothing if I was going to be travelling and so would need the services of a tailor when another Trump contact made its presence known to me. However, understandably I did not feel like taking another at that time so I blanked my mind and concentrated on repelling the contact. After a short time it ceased, and I continued on my way.

My search for a tailor proved fruitless; the whole castle was in such disarray that no one had the time to tell me where I could find one, and they would probably be too busy when

I found them anyway. Instead I sought out the gardens, having heard the rose gardens and the tree-lined promenade were magnificent sights to behold.

Unfortunately, again, they were in a similar if not worst state than the castle was; bushes were ripped up, trees marked with blows from swords and some had even been roughly cut down and taken away. About the only thing that was untouched was a strange little area separated from the main lawn by a tall hedge. Just inside the entrance was a low stone bench, and it stood before an open space upon which was a thin layer of small stones, non larger than about half an inch in length. They had been raked in a pattern that was suggestive of water ripples, and several larger rocks about the size of a man's head were placed within the design. The smaller stones had been raked around these rocks in concentric circles, like the ripple a stone makes when thrown into a pool of water. Similar ripples had been made around a few pieces of branch and rubble that found their way in from the rest of the garden.

I sat and looked at it for a time and found it strangely compelling and relaxing. It must have been this relaxation that prompted me to take the Trump contact that followed shortly after sitting down. Fortunately, this time it was Victor, as I had been hoping. He was ready to talk to me, so I brought him through to the rock garden.

I told him about the mission I had been given and that I wanted him to come along. I also told him that it would probably take several months; at that point he said he had a Trump call to make and went over to stand by the entrance to do so. After a brief few words he vanished in a flickering rainbow.

I sat back and took the opportunity to rest some more, closely inspecting the rock garden in search of that moment of calm and relaxation I had briefly attained just before Victor had Trumped me.

Some time later, long after I had lost track of the minutes, the cool, niggling sensation of a Trump contact came over me again. It was Victor again, and he told me he had finished his business and was ready to go. I told him I was meeting Morianna in the throne room in perhaps ten minutes, and he told me he would meet us there.

I had one last thing to do before I left. I pulled out my card of Guin and concentrated on her delightful image. I was almost immediately greeted with an exuberant kiss that improved my mood immensely. She was pleased to see me, and I was just as pleased to see her. I had not had the pleasure of her company for quite some time. She asked me what I wanted, and I told her I had just wanted to say hello, as I had not talked to her for a while. She smiled, happy at the attention, I guess. I asked if she was up for a little trip, briefly mentioning that I had to go out into Shadow for a time, but she said she was too busy elsewhere. I asked her if she would be able to find the time to join me on occasion and suggested I Trump her when I was feeling lonely (she grinned wickedly) before winking and closing the contact.

Suitably cheered up I made my way to the throne room to join up with Morianna and Victor.