

Journal 41 - in Amber, Rebma and Shadow

The next morning I awoke with a definite plan in mind. I packed my panniers and rucksack again, leaving behind the more fancy clothing I had bought in Houston and Mexico. Once that was completed I had breakfast and then went in search of the king.

The throne room had been cleaned up from the night before; the only sign that anything had happened were the tables nearest the main balcony. The pages, as usual, were the only people in the room. I asked the nearest where the king could be found, and he told me to seek him in his chambers.

Since I had been there before I found the way easily enough. When I knocked on the door it was soon answered by the lovely Vialle. She greeted me by name; quite how she knew it was me before I spoke I do not know. But then, no one is quite normal in Amber; everyone has hidden talents. She asked me if I wished to see the king, and I answered that if I had come to see her Random would complain. She smiled slightly and led me inside.

Random was relaxing in a big armchair reading a book when Vialle showed me into the living room. He asked me what I wanted, slightly apprehensively I thought, so I told him that I was interested in the latest developments from last night. He replied that Caine was well, or 'stable' as he described it. When I asked about that which was 'not Arden' he suggested I talk to Fiona about it.

He asked me how the engineers were doing, and I told him that as far as I knew they were settling in fairly well and spending the next few days testing and preparing their equipment.

I then told him that I was planning a little holiday for myself, but that I would tell him before I left. He remarked in a slightly testy tone that it would be a shame to break with family tradition. I nodded a farewell to Random and said my goodbyes to Vialle too.

My holiday was initially going to involve some work. It was, alas, unavoidable. First I would go and see Yvonne in Rebma, then I would go in search of Zatharuss. Then, at last (if all went well), I would get the opportunity to go back home to Bek in search of some very important answers.

Returning to my rooms I pulled on my riding coat and hung my panniers over my shoulders. I headed down to the stables and picked out a dependable-looking horse, with just the right blend of speed and endurance. Then, once saddled up, I took the twisting southern route down the mountain in the direction of the Rebma Stair, which I had since learned was known as Faiella-bionin.

I took more opportunity to look at the view as I slowly rode down the track. It was as magnificent as it ever was. I still wished I had some pleasant company and nowhere to go, but I really needed to go further afield.

Once at the top of the Stair I climbed down off my horse and slowly led it into the sea. It was a little jumpy at first, but soon got used to the idea of breathing water, before I did in fact. The walk down was long and rather tedious, but I got a good look at the flame-topped pillars this time. They were decorated with carvings depicting all manner of marine life and the strange flames burned brightly atop them. Peculiarly, my path was crossed several times by a wide variety of fish. It was still disconcerting, despite having been to the watery realm of Rebma before.

Across the seabed to the golden gates of the city I went. There I was stopped by two of the green-skinned soldiers I had fought beside before. When they asked me my business in their domain I told them I was intending to visit the Lady Yvonne. They let me pass, telling me to meet with Princess Llewella first.

I stabled my horse in the reversed stables and, after a few questions, found my way up to Llewella's chambers on the second floor of the castle. I knocked on the door and I heard Llewella's voice telling me to enter. Me specifically, by name. I must have looked rather daunted when I entered because she told me that she had not used some magic to determine who stood without her door; she had seen me approach from her balcony.

Her rooms were not unlike my newly acquired rooms in Amber, only larger and better furnished, with that 'lived in' look. She bid me to sit, gesturing at one of the padded

armchairs, and I did so. She then asked me why I had come to see her. Trying not to make it sound too much like I did not want to see her I told her that actually I had come to see Yvonne. She nodded in apparent understanding and went to the door, calling for a page. When one arrived she murmured some instructions to him and sent him on his way.

Returning to her seat she asked me what I had been up to of late. I told her that other than my recently completed mission I was looking forward to being able to take the opportunity to make my own decisions regarding where I went again. She smiled at the slight resentment in my tone and when I asked her how Rebma fared she told me that the castle and city had almost recovered from the effects of the war.

She asked if I wished for a glass of wine and when I answered that I would she took three glasses and an unopened bottle from a cupboard and uncorked the bottle, pouring into the glasses. As she took one herself and handed me another there was a knocking at the door as the page returned and announced the Lady Yvonne. I stood as she entered, her long black hair tied back into a rather severe looking braid and her dark eyes showing some small signs of sadness in their depths.

She smiled when she saw me and greeted me as von Bek; as she took the glass Llewella offered her I beseeched her to call me Ulrich, and she nodded and smiled some more as she sat opposite me. At least she could still smile, despite the lack of news either way.

On that subject she immediately quizzed me, and I could see the tiny indication of distress in her eyes when I was forced to answer in the negative. I did tell her that there were quite a few people answering some very pointed questions on that score, though. She smiled slightly to herself as she said that she would take him to task when he returned. Yes, it was definitely good that she could still smile.

Llewella said then that so far all the scrys she had done had proved inconclusive and unhelpful. I look at her in my "curious and questioning" way and she told me that it was possible to use the Trumps as a means of scrying; in other (rather crude) words, telling fortunes.

She went on to explain how one shuffled the cards and then laid out six in a certain spread. The cards were then read; each position had a different meaning, and each card has it's own meaning, or usually several. The meanings attached to each card was a personal thing, she said; not everyone thinks the same thing about the image on each card, making every scry very personal.

One had to think upon a specific question or situation while shuffling and then deal the six cards out, in order, in their positions; The Present Situation, The Likely Outcome Of The Current Affair, the Pursuer, That Which Inspires, That Which Seeks To Manipulate and The Pivot. Which card ends up where determines the final meaning of the spread.

It was all very similar to the Tarot I had learned several years ago before joining the Revolution, and I said as much. Llewella told me that the Tarot was some form of Shadow of Trump. She also said that such scrys were some sort of combination of the subconscious, Trump and either the Pattern or Logrus working together in some arcane way to answer the questions of the "querent".

I asked her if there was anything else she could think of that might have been left out of my education. She considered for a moment before asking me if I knew how to determine the "time rate" of a Shadow, that being how time flowed in that Shadow compared to, say, Amber. I just shook my head, and she told me that it was as simple as Trumping someone in Amber a few times and keeping track of how much time passed between contacts for each of the people involved. Quite elementary really.

Yvonne then interjected saying that if I required any help in my search for Andreas I had the full backing of her House in the Courts of Chaos, if it became apparent that I required their help in some way. I was quite flattered that she held me in such high regard to promise me the assistance of her kindred in Chaos, but then it was probably also indicative of her desperation regarding news of her husband. She handed me four Trump cards and what I presumed to be another in a small envelope.

She showed me the cards, telling me who the card depicted in each case. The rather serious, sober gentleman in official-looking garb was her father, the head of the House; a slightly older looking man with dark, reddish skin was his under-secretary; a thin lady whose hair looked like thick rope was his accountant (she could give me any funds I required in Chaos, if necessary). The last open card depicted a burly looking fellow with what looked to be small horns; he was the head of House logistics. The card in the envelope was of the

House spymaster; it should only be taken out and used in dire situations. Apparently, the card was also made in such a way as to ensure that he would be aware of its validity.

She also told me to be careful with the cards; they were not widely available, especially the one of the spymaster, as if I did not already know.

Being trusted with this kind of thing worried me somewhat; why did she think I might need this help? Were people from the Courts involved somehow? Did she know for certain, or did she just suspect?

I assured her that I would take good care of them, and thanked her for the assistance in advance.

I was then told that Yvonne had some sort of dinner date coming up, and that Llewella had court business to attend to, which I took (rightfully so) as my cue to leave. I formally bid them farewell, and Llewella told me that I had free run of the castle whenever I wished. I thanked her again and took my leave.

I walked around the castle a little, trying to spot differences between this one and the 'original' in Amber. I could spot no obvious ones, other than the layout being reversed and all the strange mirrors, of course. The throne room was much the same, except that the main balcony where the illusionary gunman had stood overlooked the city of Rebma rather than down a mountainside.

On an impulse I decided to go and have a look at the balcony where the real rifleman had fired from. So I went through the door and started along the dark passageway. I had only gone a short distance when I saw a faint light swimming in the distance ahead. Was someone there? Or had some unknown person lit a torch along the passage somewhere? I clasped my beltknife tightly and proceeded onwards.

I found instead a strange side corridor where I was sure there was not one in the passage in Amber. I tried to see how long it was or where it led to but it seemed to turn slightly to the left, or perhaps it was the right. It was hard to tell, as the walls were covered in mirrors. Large ones, small ones, tall, thin, short, wide, square and circular. They were all reflecting each other, making the corridor seem both smaller and bigger than it probably really was.

I took a couple of tentative steps in and took a look in one of the mirrors. At first it seemed to be misted up, as did the others, but then I saw that it was more like a window behind which was a thick, roiling fog. It was damn peculiar.

I turned around to go back only to find myself confronted with more mirrors. The way in had vanished, leaving me facing another long stretch of mirrored corridor. I carefully took a few steps in that direction and was able to confirm that the corridor really was there. I was, it seemed, lost.

It was then that I noticed an image slowly forming out of the mist in the mirror nearest to me. Looking around I saw it materialising in the others as well. It was a man wearing a long, deeply hooded robe, standing feet apart, head down, arms in front of him, holding some sort of solid-looking pistol in his hands. He did nothing, just stood there.

Then another figure entered the scene; a woman in a long white gown with full sleeves, with what could only be described as metal hair, came from the right side and passed the man on his left side. As soon as she passed him the cloaked figure raised his weapon and began firing to his right, in the direction the woman had come from. He kept firing, reloading and firing again.

A strange blackness began to seep into the left side of the mirror; it seemed as if it were that the man was firing at. When I looked around to see if the scene was being played out in the other mirrors I was shocked to see a similar blackness moving down the mirrored corridor towards me. That shook me more than the rest, I think.

I began to retreat from it, keeping an eye on the scene in the mirrors as I did so. I did not see how it ended, though, as I was forced to first run and then sprint to keep ahead of the black wall racing after me.

I failed, though. I felt a foul, cold sensation on my back as if a rotted corpse had taken a hold of me, and the world went as black as the grave.

I awoke with the suddenness of someone roused by a nightmare. I was somewhere warm, I knew that much, and wherever I was I was lying on green grass. I twisted my head round to see what was behind me and saw a stone wall.

My back and the back of my legs felt very sore, as if I had slipped down a slope of sharp stones. I rolled over to try and get a better look at where I was but was forced to roll straight back over because of the pain. I lay where I was for a minute or two until I realised that the sound I was hearing was the sound of a horse straining at the bit, wanting to be let free.

I carefully rolled myself up into a sitting position and gingerly crossed my legs. The horse I had taken to Rebma was tied to a nearby tree by the reins, and I sat on the edge of a large field. I carefully stood up and went over to the horse to try to calm it. I got a look at the surrounding countryside as I did so; rolling hills covered with fields, many filled with crops swaying slightly in the breeze, divided from each other by the stone walls like the one I leant on. In some of the fields I could see what looked like herds of sheep.

I cautiously checked my back and my legs to discover that there were a number of holes, big and small, in the back of my shirt and trousers that matched up with some very sore places. I untied the horse so it could graze for a while as I took stock of my belongings. I still had my watch, Trumps, knife and ring; my swords were still on the horse, as were the two or three changes of clothes I had brought with me. I decided not to change into them just then, however; I would need to have my injuries looked at first.

After a while I took hold of the horse's reins and led the way along the wall towards where I could see a gate in the distance. We went through the gate onto the road outside, and I decided to follow it, as it was likely it would lead to some sort of civilisation, perhaps a village.

The village was a simple little place, about a dozen small houses clustered around a crossroads with a few barns on the outskirts. I was met at the entrance to the village by a man who had the look of a law enforcer about him; it was partly the official-looking jacket he wore, and partly the small club that hung on his belt. He asked me if I was all right, and I told him I had fallen down a hillside. He seemed to accept this explanation and asked if I wanted any medical help. When I said yes he took me to see the village doctor, who was an old woman who lived on the edge of the village. He waited a few moments, to see if all was well, before leaving.

The woman took a look at my 'scrapes' before applying a particularly foul smelling salve to them. When that was done she let me use another room to change in; I chose some of the simpler clothing from my packs in an attempt not to appear too outlandish. Then I paid her for her help and took my leave.

Now my important needs had been attended to, I decided to try and determine if there was anything special about the place I had been brought to. I led my horse to the crossroads and picked the road that took me to the nearest place; Colchester, ten miles away. I walked half the way there and rode the rest; it was a nice warm and sunny day, perfect for riding. When I arrived on the crest of the hill that overlooked Colchester, I beheld a small town, grey from the stone it was made from and from the smoke that came from a more than a hundred chimneys. It was not a very nice looking place, so I rode around it.

I finally decided to Trump someone regarding my strange experience and predicament. I came to the conclusion that Llewella would be the best person to ask, as it had happened in Rebma. So I dug out my Trump of her and set to contacting her.

She greeted me when the contact was formed and I asked her what she knew of strange corridors that could be found off one of the passages off of the throne room. She said she had seen me go in there, and I described the strange, mirrored passage I had found and been lost in. She nodded in understanding and said that it was known as the Hall of Mirrors. It is supposed to appear randomly in Amber and in other places and show the one who finds it images and visions of the past, present and possible futures. The imagery is always personal and frequently obtuse in nature.

She also said that many people who enter it have been injured; others have not returned.

Hearing that, I told her of the black wave that had appeared. I also told her that I had turned up in Shadow somewhere; was that usual for the Hall? She told me that it has been known to happen. Some people attribute the Hall of Mirrors with a kind of intelligence, apparently; that it appears to people by its own will and ejects them somewhere significant to what they have seen in the mirrors. That they are left "where they need to be". She said she had been in it twice herself.

Then, as she closed the contact, she smiled and said that some also say that she controls it.

I considered what I had seen and attempted to make connections between the images and where I was. I could think of nothing that made any real sense. I supposed that I was still feeling the effects of being engulfed by the wave, and that it would come to eventually.

I Trumped Random instead; when I announced to him that I was starting my holiday right then he pretended shock and raised his hands, expressing mock-fear at how he would survive without me. He then gave a little wave and told me to enjoy myself before closing the contact.

A plan in mind, I decided to seek out Zatharuss, or at least attempt to. I knew that he had left from Arden along a Shadow path, probably using his ring. He did not have his Trumps, and I did not have one of him. I knew that I could not quite find him directly by walking through Shadow to him, so I decided to start in Arden and work outwards from there.

I made my way to the Arden road my means of Trump and set out in the direction I had heard he had taken. Along the way I called out for a Ranger and, as expected, one all but materialised. I asked if he knew who had last seen Zatharuss, and he said he would find out before returning to the undergrowth.

I waited for close to a half hour before the Ranger returned, accompanied by another. I asked about Zatharuss, and the second told me the direction he had taken and which path he had left on. I thanked them both and continued on that way.

The rest of the day went well, and I made good progress (or so I hoped). I passed through a gate before encountering a particularly heavy storm that drove me to ground in a rugged little tavern just before what was probably supposed to be sunset. The stablelad took care of my horse and told me his name was James; ensuring he got his gratuity, no doubt.

The old woman in the entrance hall told me to sign the guest book when I rented a room. When she asked if I wanted any dinner I naturally said yes; she handed me a menu and I picked a robust-sounding pie and potato meal. She told me to see the cook about getting it made. She then asked me what I was selling; she appeared surprised that I was just a traveller. The woman handed me a bottle of red wine to take with me.

The cook came out to see me when I took my seat. I gave him my order and he set about preparing it. The wine was very vinegary, almost undrinkable really. After a relaxing quarter hour the cook returned and handed me my dinner, telling me to call if I wanted more. It was very good, so I had another two plates before going to bed.

The next day the weather had cleared up considerably. I paid for my bed and board, and asked if another traveller had been through here recently, describing Zatharuss. The old woman said that someone like him had been seen by one of the stableboys, riding along the road to the city east of the tavern. I thanked her and continued on my way once more.

Near to midmorning, after I had taken a gate on the road to another, close Shadow, I saw two riders on the road ahead. It was far too early to be Zatharuss, even if he had found a friend, so I approached warily.

I got quite close before I realised that one of the riders wore the distinctive cloak of a Ranger. So, in theory at least, I was amongst friends. I increased my speed somewhat to properly catch up with them and soon found I was in the company of another quite anonymous Ranger and Ansalom, the new chap in Amber. The Ranger said nothing but Ansalom nodded and said something like "may I ask where you are going?" I grinned and replied "you may ask" and from that point on everything just got steadily worse.

Neither of us was particularly forthcoming. His (yet again) lack of subtlety with questions just riled me all over again, and my less than complete answers irritated him as well. We were as bad as each other, really, but he started it with that first question, or at least the way he said it. After ten minutes neither of us knew more than we had before.

I tried asking him what he thought about Amber, trying to make him feel a bit superior by saying he had probably been in the actual place longer than I had but he said nothing beyond generalities encompassing fascination and opportunities. He must live in a very stark world.

The poor Ranger slowly looked more and more uncomfortable as we progressed (or rather did not). It got worse for him when he started filling up his pipe and asked if anyone

minded him lighting it. Ansalom turned to him in the middle of some open and empty obscure statement and rather firmly told him yes, HE minded. The poor fellow was forced to ride back a hundred yards and smoke there instead. I was tempted to join him.

Incredibly this went on for almost a week. It was not just that we travelled slower as a group; it seemed to me that Ansalom had not walked the Pattern yet, or at least chosen not to use the powers it gives. I could have made the same distance in a couple of days. Unfortunately, we were on the same path, for some of the way at least. We passed through two or three gates, stopping at the occasional roadside tavern we passed on the way, before arriving at some sort of waystation, situated amongst some rather pleasant, grassy plains with rolling hills in the distance.

I had surreptitiously asked in the taverns we had used if anyone matching Zatharuss' description had passed that way; two of them had seen him, so as far as I could tell I was still on his trail.

The waystation was manned by about a dozen soldiers in the livery of Amber, presumably some sort of checkpoint. They recognised the Ranger, and us when we introduced ourselves; it was more like Ansalom announced himself, like a visiting aristocrat. It transpired that Ansalom and his tormented companion were to remain at the waystation, while I was going on; they had seen Zatharuss quite a lot recently, and told me where they had seen him heading off to.

I waved an apologetic farewell to the Ranger (I never did find out his name) and suggested to Ansalom that he try going into politics. He said he would rather not, saying it was too dangerous. More than you know, I told him, and headed off along the road the soldier had directed me to take.

I was very glad to be free of Ansalom and his bland, reticent responses. It was like coming out from under a particularly oppressive cloud.