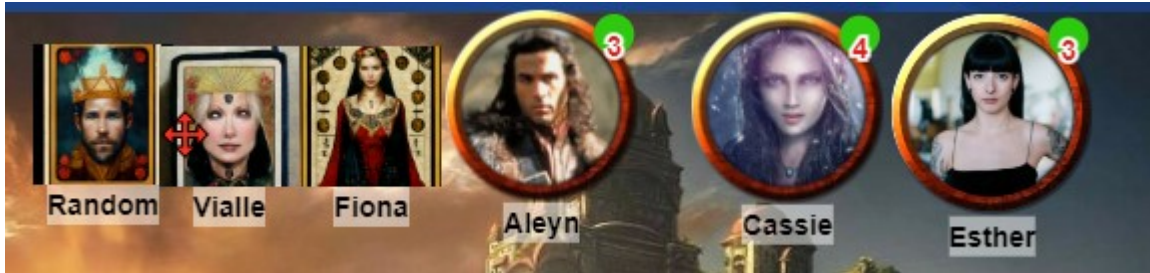


# Lost Child of Amber 003 – ARDEN

## Friends Old and New



The next morning, Fiona had arranged for them to meet with King Random. She must have told the story of Finndo's imprisonment and the fact that Caine had gone radio-silent, because he wasn't surprised when Esther and Cassie told their stories.

Esther remembered Random from before she left Amber – she had taught him some card tricks – he seemed pleased to see her, asked about her Mother – Elizabeth – and received the same cool evasion as everyone else.



He'd invited another man to attend the meeting. Aleyrn introduced himself as the second Trump Artist of the Royal Court and an Agent of the Crown. He seemed to be mid-thirties but his eyes were much older. "I'm not just an artist, I can handle a sword..." He withdrew a blade from his over-the-shoulder scabbard that had strange (disturbing) etchings along the blade.

Their options were to try and force a Trump contact with either Caine or Finndo, or to travel to this unknown Shadow called Britannia to investigate. Surprisingly Fiona and the King were keen for Cassie to make the decision – this seemed unusual given her youth and inexperience, but the two Elders exchanged a lot of secretive looks, nods and shrugs about it.

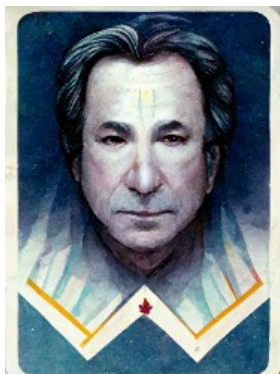
Cassie's final decision was to go to Britannia to investigate. In order to Shadow-walk to it she'd need as much information about the place as possible so decided to talk to Julian who was the third co-conspirator (along with Caine & Benedict) involved with guarding the Prison of Finndo.

The King made sure they each had Trumps for Caine and Finndo and then gave Aleyrn a Trump for Julian.

Before leaving Castle Amber, Cassie and Esther briefly sparred in a courtyard. Esther laid waste to the pot plants and was pleasantly surprised when Cassie defended with a reasonable amount of strength and considerable cunning. Aleyrn looked on with professional detachment – also relieved that Cassie's concerns that she "didn't know much about fighting" seemed like false modesty.

Aleyrn called Julian on his Trump and (by what seemed a herculean effort) held the contact open for long enough for all three to ride through to Arden. This saved about a day of travel getting out of Amber, far enough to begin Shadow-walking.

## The Hunter and the Hunted



They had interrupted Julian, fully armoured and mounted on his huge horse – Morgenstern, on a hunt. His hounds were pursuing some Chaos Beast through the forest. He had pulled ahead of his troops so they were alone with him in the depths of Arden.

He had known of the Imprisonment of Finndo and had been contacted by Caine when his brother reached the Shadow of Britannia. Caine had told him the mountain had collapsed a couple of weeks earlier and that his agent in the Shadow was dead – he'd investigate further and be back in touch soon. Caine failed to get back in touch.

Julian had seen a few details in the background of the Trump call – hot desert sun, landslide mountain, a stone fort with red-jacketed dark-skinned troops on the battlements. With these descriptions, Cassie felt she had enough to find the place – although it might take a few days, maybe even a few weeks.

Julian's hounds had been clamouring off in pursuit of their prey all this time but the sounds changed and began to get louder as the Chaos Beast had circled around and was coming for them.



A massive sabre-toothed tiger with golden fur leapt towards them. The pack of hounds were half a minute behind.

Esther reached out her hand and summoned a sword – its blade glittered with images of the Pattern. She just managed to keep her panicked horse calm.

Aleyn drew his Trump-etched blade and slipped off his horse, letting it scamper away.

Cassie calmed her horse but withdrew a few steps, drawing her plain new sword.

It attacked Julian but he swerved his steed aside and his spear opened its side as it passed.

Aleyn hacked at its foreleg, cutting it deep.

Esther brought her horse around behind it, circling to keep it distracted.

With that distraction, Cassie slashed it but her wound began to close almost immediately.

Julian couldn't get at it with the others surrounding the beast.

Aleyn managed to hack its head off and the beast fell just as the hounds came charging in. Julian called them to heel.



A few seconds later electricity crackled around the body and the head, then arced into the trees and finally struck Aleyn's blade. The man's eyes went white for a moment before the crackling faded.

"They are nesting in a cave a few miles North-West" Aleyn pointed... "near a stream and a lightning-struck tree".

He claimed to have seen it in the creature's mind as a result of the magical lightning field. Whether this was due to his Blade, some power of Aleyn's or some feature of the Chaos Beast is as yet unclear.

Julian knew the place and thanked him for the information. He would gather his Rangers and attack in force.

## Walking in Shadows



They camped overnight with the Rangers of Arden, meeting one called Jason who was Julian's son.

Equipped for the journey, they set off with Cassie concentrating hard to begin the Shadow Walk.

The first hour was a strain with nothing to show for it, but then she relaxed and took her time. Three hours later the gloom of the dense Forest was behind them, grassland and open skies lay ahead.



As evening came, she brought them to a medieval Inn and even showed a certain finesse by producing the local currency to pay for the rooms.

There was a Fair in the next town and at Esther's suggestion, Cassie arranged for there to be Warhorses available. She had intended them to be for sale, but instead they were a prize for a Grand Melee Tournament. Teams of four would compete (to Death or Surrender) and the winners would take the four warhorses as prize.

Esther "hired" a grizzled mercenary called Morgan. He joined reluctantly at first but became keen when Esther revealed she was "a witch". One of the other teams had a witch too – although she was a wild eyed, ragged haired pirate rather than a tall and regal soldier like Esther.



In the fighting, Morgan was badly wounded, but Aleyn cut down the Witch (with no lightning crackles this time) and the others knocked out their opponents with ease. Esther had used Spells to toughen herself and Aleyn and then another spell to find a weakness in her foe's armour. Cassie wounded her foe sufficiently to put him out of action. With his three companions down, the fourth surrendered swiftly.

*During the fight Esther had become very slightly wounded, blood running down her arm and Aleyn felt a slight tremor along his blade.*

Esther used yet more low-level magic to revive Morgan, and Aleyn stitched him up.

Morgan would be happy to offer his services if they want a fourth pair of eyes and an extra sword. He seems like an experienced mercenary and has learned a bit more respect for them now and even feels he owes them a debt.

They each now have a fine war-horse, much less likely to panic than the riding horses they got from Amber.