PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Tanda Post by SisyphusX on 05/08/2004 at 12:28:31

You are in the midst of walkabout - the long, slow, aimless journey to go nowhere and everywhere until you find yourself. The only difference is, you have all of Shadow to essay - all conceivable realities in which to sojourn.

You have as of late been spending some time in more technologically advanced Shadows, to give yourself at least a breadth of education in the more technically advanced forms of combat. You are currently employed as a mercenary in a fortress in a Shadow that has only recently discovered gunpowder, and it is greatly affecting the entire world in the redefinition of range, of lethality, and of protection. You are serving as an auxiliary base defender in a forward attack base as a country that has embraced gunpowder invades a country that finds it too 'honorless' a weapon. You have a somewhat primitive flintlock, and you are on the battlement, an observer and sniper.

The horizon is calm, and quiet. The actual infantry is away on an assault of a nearby town, and only a skeleton crew mans the walls of the forts. Most are mercenaries, and are as loyal as their next paycheck.

It is then that you feel what you have not felt in some long time. A warm and buzzing sensation forms behind your ears - a Trump contact is being attempted. You briefly reflect on what you might say, and how long it's been since you've felt this, but then relax and let your mind open to the contact. You are surprised to see a face you're not all that familiar with, but have seen a few times.

You have a mental image of a dashing young man with fiery red hair, standing in the corner of Amber's Royal Library. He appears calm and assured, but you feel a brief moment of more than a little anxiety through the psychic bond of the contact - then it is gone again. As the contact stabilizes, he sits down and picks up a champagne flute.

"Greetings, Tanda. My name is Bleys. We've met one or two times, but only briefly. I am, as you may know, Gerard's brother. He's...busy at the moment, but he's asked me to contact you to give you some information and to make a request.

He takes a sip and listens patiently for a response, after which he continues.

"I see. Well, here's the situation. I believe that the Amber Royal Family may be...under an attack, of sorts, anyway. There are more than a few disappearances of late, and we've not heard anything from several of our siblings in some time. Caine and I have become concerned by the fact that so many of our extended family are away in Shadow. Therefore, we are formally extending an invitation to you, Tanda, to travel to Castle Amber and stay here for a while, at least until we get sorted out what's been happening and who's behind it. You would have no responsibilities you do not want, and you would be free to see or not see people as you deem fit. All we really want to do is have everyone nearby, in case of emergency. However, I regret to say that I shouldn't pull you in through this Trump contact - there are ... concerns about that. But if you start off now, you should get here sometime today, I believe. Are you amenable to this hopefully short diversion of your travels?"

From his facial expression and gestures, you perceive that he knows more about this situation than he's letting on - perhaps more than he's told anyone else, either. He also, despite his casual sip of champagne as he leisurely reclines in a soft chair, is nervous. VERY nervous - he might even be restraining a shudder. The psychic sensation you perceive through the contact is sharp and confident, however.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Tanda Post by Tanda on 05/08/2004 at 12:31:33

I wonder at the strange sensation of anxiety I had felt as the contact formed. But it was gone, possibly nothing. I listen to his words, watching the man I hardly know, but would like too; the dancing light from a candle to his left catches the spins of ancient books around him and reflects in his blue eyes. I did not have a chance to see Amber's library when I was there, so long ago - perhaps next time.

At the mention of my father, I tense, then slowly relax as he continues speaking, and I can't help the surge of curiosity when he says my father wants to pass on information, and a request. What could my father possibly want from me that I would be willing to give?

As he sips from the long frothy glass, I say, "It is good to see you, uncle," and a smile touches the corners of my mouth. "I am curious as to my father's news, please tell me more.'

He continues.

My focus leaves the battlements and the scorched grassland beyond the walls of the keep. I take a step back on reflex. Questions clamber for attention as I assimilate the information he's giving me, and a cold sliver of fear drips down my spine as I study his face, his expressions at odds with his laid-back conversational tone and apparent confidence.

When he finishes speaking, I remain silent for a long time. "What has happened?" I ask, after a while.

"Perhaps nothing." He takes another sip of champagne.

If it's nothing, then why does he want me to come to Amber? And if it is something, why would I be safe there? Nothing has bothered me for years in Shadow, and I want to continue my studies in this place. There is a shout from my left - Marcus announcing the return of the infantry, his voice less enthusiastic than normal. The fight must not have gone well. I want to find out why, but before I open my mouth to bid my uncle farewell, a thought occurs to me. It troubles me more than the results of the battle.

"Why can you not take me through this contact?"

Bleys pales slightly, although it may just be the Trump contact wavering, loosing definition for a second, then steadying again. "As I said," he gestures with his free hand, palm up, "there are concerns about Trumping to Amber itself. But it will be sorted out soon. Just being cautious, really." He watches me for a moment and seems to decide to tell me more. Possibly knowing it would make me want to come to Amber, or perhaps just a lucky guess. "None of us has managed to contact Benedict in the last two weeks," he said, and I wanted to go to Amber right then and there.

Booted footsteps from my left, accompanied by shouts and cries of alarm, tell me the infantry have not arrived alone. I shake my head at Bleys. "I have to attend to matters here first," I say. Bodies rush past me, someone grabs my arm and I yank it free, pressing myself against the walls of the tower, out of the way as much as possible. I hold my uncles gaze, and eventually he gives a slight nod.

" Don't dally too long, Tanda. I appreciate that you need to hone your skills, but that might wait for another day." He looks away, and I see again a strange flutter of anxiety cross his brow. I do not know my uncle, but I know of him, and for it to trouble someone like Bleys this visibly is most unusual, and I am concerned, especially so with my mentor one of those considered missing.

I shout before he breaks the contact, "Wait!" One of the men running past on the rampart stops, but I ignore him. Bleys focuses on me again. "Tell me what troubles you, uncle.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Tanda Post by SisyphusX on 05/08/2004 at 12:31:53

Bleys takes a deep breath, his expression tensing and then relaxing. "Very well. I suppose I have no proof as yet that the Trump are compromised. I

A shot slams into the wall, an inch from your left ear. Shards of stone are thrown like shrapnel, and they cut you in several places on the side of your face. You wince in pain, and your concentration is thrown asunder. The contact is gone.

You realize, to some astonishment, that the soldier who grabbed your arm moments ago has just saved your life by pulling you aside again.

"Get your head in the battle, soldier! The enemy is here, and you can't stand around! Pick up your weapon and defend the base! We can still fend off the assault, if we act now!" He rushes off around the wall, alerting the sentries to the enemy snipers that are setting up to pick off the defenders on the walls.

You curse the intrusion, but your mind immediately sets to interpreting the battle scene. It appears that the country that was being invaded has negotiated an alliance with a third country nearby - one that has much less compunction about using this newfangled gunpowder. The attack force retreated back to this forward base, but it looks like they have done so somewhat irrationally. With their experience, their better equipment, and especially with their fortified position here, the battle should not have degenerated as badly as this. It is clear to you that they had not expected any return fire on their attack, and that their morale was broken by the few casualties inflicted on them.

You quickly evaluate your options.

- You could just walk through Shadow, leaving this behind. A part of you knows it to be illusion in any case, or perhaps hopes it to be.

- You could jump down into the yard of the fort, rallying the men into a counter-assault. Now that the enemy is within the walls, it will be difficult, and there will probably be many casualties. It is a touch-and-go situation; you don't have strong confidence in the outcome. And you yourself will be in the thick of the fighting. You have confidence in many situations, but have not dealt much with the parameters of fighting enemies with guns before.

- You could stay on the battlements, sniping at enemy troops and shouting encouragement. Your flintlock is a single-shot weapon, but you have four of them pre-loaded at your defense post in addition to the one you carry. You know that at least one of the snipers was shot at his post, so there are five more rifles at the next station, perhaps five to seven yards away. But there is little cover. You would either need to run, at high visibility, or crawl, at low visibility but much slower.

These are the tactical basics - there are any number of unorthodox options and strategies that also flood past your mind in the brief seconds it takes to evaluate the chaos below.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Tanda Post by Tanda on 05/08/2004 at 12:32:22

It would be so easy to leave. Move to a place where this battle, this fort did not even exist, and forsake these people, whose lives I did not truly belong in anyway. Gunfire smoke billows up over the battlement and I choke. My eyes sting. I blink, trying to make out the soldiers below. There are many of the enemy, pouring through the open gates, and mixed among them mill our own disillusioned soldiers. Captain Fredrick stands behind the near gate, his lips moving and fragments of his attempts to rally our troops drift up to me, but his cry for men to close the gates are entirely futile, considering the numbers of enemy soldiers pressing against the walls outside.

Would it be enough to affect the probability that my side will be defeated; create a chance they will win? Possibly. And I want to try, because the moral of the main army will drop if this outpost falls. But with my time in this place limited by Bley's troubling message, I need something to speed up the winning process.

I sit back against the wall of the keep. The noise level rises, the ring of steel on steel joining the crack of gunfire as swords are brought to bear in the close confines of the yard. Shards of rock shower down on me as enemy snipers take pot shots at our positions along the battlements. I look around. My eyes fall upon the entrance to the tower before me, and I smile as a plan begins to take shape.

It's about to get considerably louder in a minute... if this works.

I crawl across the walk way and through the doorway. Inside to the right I find a half a keg of pellets and an almost full keg of gunpowder. Carefully, I tip what I reckon to be the right about of black powder over the pellets and seal the keg with the wooden lid. I roll it outside, keeping low as I cross back to my station, then look down into the yard.

"Captain Fredrick!" He looks up and sees me. "We need to shut the gate!" He gives me a look that says, what the hell do you think I'm trying to do, and starts to turn away. "Sir! I'm going to give you a diversion," I yell. He nods and I scramble back to the wall and the loaded keg.

With one glance at the gate. I rock my homemade petard -complete with special ingredient. Picking it up in both hands. I get my feet under me, and in one smooth motion I push up, heave the keg over the wall, and bend down to grab the nearest gun. Shots ricochet off the walls around me. Before I can stand and take aim, however, the keg explodes - enemy fire doing my job - and lethal shrapnel is sprayed in all directions. I drop to the ramp;

the concussion shakes the walls of the fort. Cries of fear and agony fill the air. The smoke is so thick I can't see more than a few feet and the smell of burning gunpowder makes me gag. There's no time to waste. Leaving my gun, I scramble to the edge of the ramp and jump down into the yard.

Captain Fredrick has several men pushing on the heavy wooden gate, it moves so slowly I figure bodies must be in the way. I can't see what's happening at the other side. I sprint across the open archway, leaping over enemy and comrade alike, their still bodies painting the pale yellow sand a deep crimson.

No shots are fired - the enemy momentarily stunned - but as I reach the other side and round the gate, barked commands come to me from outside. Leaning my shoulder against it I begin to push, there's a thud as another body slams against the solid wood next to me. "Jez," I gasp, and the man who's just hurled himself at the gate grins, then his face contorts as he strains, boots digging into the ground. Together we get it moving, sweeping the vard clear in a wide semicircle. I kick an arm out of the way and the gates slam shut. As I turn and draw my sword, I hear the rasp of the bar being shoved into place. Captain Fredrick calls us to order and we move forward. The stranded invaders are fighting what's left of our infantry in the yard, but cut off from their fellows and surrounded, they surrender forthwith.

There's no immediate retaliation from the rest of their attack force; they had no siege equipment with them, obviously they had not been expecting such a reckless retreat from our infantry.

(OOC: If the above happens, then this is what might follow, unless you say otherwise! 😕

In the general chaos of bellowed orders, herding of prisoners, dragging of the dead and tending of the wounded, I make my way out of the yard and between the barracks and mess hall. I begin to shift. First the people, then the walls, and then the scorched land are lost; I walk until the sky is cold and blue and my boots brushed clean by long, mauve grass.

Then I turn to look at the man following me and raise my eyebrows at him.

"Hey," he says, looking shaken by the changes I'd made in the short walk. He swallows and rubs the dark stubble on his chin; dark brown eyes dart around then settle on me. "I've always got your back, girl, you know that."

"Not this time. Damn it, Jez! Look, I have no time to take you back," and I think the hellride to Amber may be too much for him to bear. "This place is safe; the people know nothing of war or guns. Stay here and I'll try to come back for you soon." He laughs and shakes his head, but I cannot take him with me. Can I? I hadn't wanted a friend, a partner, but he had become one over the last three months. I walk away. Jez follows. My thoughts turn to finding a suitable mount, and within minutes we enter a crude, abandoned camp site where a large grey horse is tethered to a tree. I mount and look down at the mercenary.

"It is a perilous journey," I say after a moment, "that will tear at your mind in ways you cannot imagine. You may not survive it," and as I speak I hold out my hand. "Come if you wish to, I will not stop you." I could not abandon him here if he did not want to stay.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Tanda Post by SisyphusX on 05/08/2004 at 12:32:51

Jez looks back up at you. "The only person I know here is you, and you're leaving. The only way I got here is with you, and the only person I know who can leave is you. So," he says as he puts his toe on the side of the stirrup and leaps up behind you on your newly-acquired horse. "I think it will be best if I continue to travel with you. Besides, who else is going to look out for you?" He twists his hands inside the saddle straps to hold on tightly. "Ride on - I choose to ride with you, wherever that may lead."

You sigh gently, and look back to stare into his eyes. They are full of trust and respect, and you do not know what to say to them. So, you look back to your horse, snap the reins, and begin the hellride to Amber.

Your horse gets up to speed, and you look around for a suitable detail to single your attention on. You briefly recall Benedict's words as he talked you through the process of hellriding. "In many ways, it is similar to swinging on vines. You seize a point, let go of everything else except an idea of where you want to go, and the surroundings will change significantly, except for the point you have seized. After a brief moment of stabilization, you release that point, and find a different point to focus on, and proceed appropriately. The skill of it is picking the objects to focus on, and being familiar with the Shadows enough to know which objects will propel you the fastest - to continue the analogy, knowing which vines are the longest.

You concentrate on a red rock near a dry streambed, and focus on that. The world shifts immediately, and your brow furrows in concentration and sweat begins to form above it as you mentally exert yourself for that first shift. You are now in a box canyon, instead of a flat and grassy plan. The sky is fiery red, the earth and the rock are pure gold, and the hooves of your steed clang along the path towards a wall. A fine golden dust blows in circular eddies, and there is a thin cry overhead as a bat-like bird, large and muscled, flies lazily overhead. Jez sucks in a lungful of air, and then coughs violently as he has apparently inhaled some gold dust. Your attention is occupied, however, by finding a detail of sufficient strength to focus on. As you approach the canyon wall, you see an insect flitting about gracefully. It is not metal, but apparently more normal. You instinctively bring your attention to bear on the insect and exert for another move of the hellride.

The world shifts again. You are now behind the wheel of a grey automobile, sleek and powerful. Your reflexes slip momentarily, as you are not yet accustomed to the more technological shadows. The insect is suddenly sucked out the open window and vanishes. You return your attention to the road, and instinctively swerve to avoid three cars. The sky is dark, there are tall structures of glass and steel in the distance, and the road is a smooth red material, as if it were carved into the ground itself as a single thing. As you careen down this busy boulevard at over 300 KZH (you are unsure what that means, but it's what the cool green digital display reads as you drive), you quickly scan for an appropriate detail. You fail to notice that Jez is sitting next to you now, with his hands tied up in the seatbelt. He coughs out a last particle of gold, and his eves raise up to see the windshield and the careening world outside it. He reflexively tries to raise his hands to his face and screams. You are getting somewhat winded, you hope it is not long now. Your eyes lock onto the silver carved bracelet of someone on the sidewalk - and you hinge upon that thing and 'swing' again.

You are back on your grey horse now. The ground is black, but there are many cracks in it that show through to an angry red undercurrent. The hooves of your horse make hissing sounds as they impact the surface, and your horse screams in pain - a fully-realized scream of a sentient being. The silver bracelet is being worn by a slave, an attractive male wearing thin leather straps, and he is tied to a stake, slowly and painfully burning to death on an exposed lava seam. The sky is black with a baleful bone-white moon, and you see in the distance a river of molten rock. There is a black craft on the river, a rather boxy-looking affair with a paddlewheel at the back. The lava splashes against the side of the riverboat as it moves downstream, but does not damage it. There are three high smokestacks, each belching forth a thick acrid green smoke and emitting a low moan of some kind. Jez has fainted away - you hope. Your eyes desperately search for any detail at all that is not evocative of the land of torment and pain this surely is. But your mind feels, just for a second, a powerful force of reality that shouldn't be here. Someone is here that is not from this Shadow, or -any- Shadow, for that matter. But you wave that distraction away angrily and seize upon a bright yellow lizard crawling out of a crack in the ground. You focus in on the lizard, and this hellish world flashes away...

You are in a jungle now, warm and humid. It matters not, however, as you are already bathed in sweat and your eyes are heavy, your mind aching and your muscles fatigued. The yellow lizard, scuttling across the leafy floor, scuttles away. The jungle canopy is total - you can see nothing else but green leaves and blue branches and trunks. There is no wind, but the leaves move quickly. They dart out to you and scratch your skin, and it has a mild sting to it. A few of these green tendrils strike Jez as well, who is sagging in the saddle - it is fortunate for him that he secured himself to the saddle straps. As you start casting about for details, you notice that your vision is somewhat blurry now, and that is not normal. But you light upon a detail that is a shining star of relief - you see an animal on the ground, similar to a fox in size and shape, that you have seen in Amber on one of your brief sojourns there. It was in the Forest of Arden, on the border to the Castle, and it seemed an indigenous animal to the area. This particular animal, however, appears to have been savaged in some way - the skin and flesh is flayed from the bone in places, and a sapling appears to be emerging from the heart. However, the face is currently undamaged - and you swing desperately on that detail and make a last effort.

You are in Arden. The animal you are staring at is quite alive, and darts away quickly at your sudden arrival. It is still light, but you can tell that it will not be for much longer. The forest around you is still and quiet. You rein in your horse without thinking to do so, and it pulls up short in front of a large tree. The horse is calm, but its breathing is ragged and it has sweated almost as much as you have. Jez's limp form, shifted by the sudden stop, sags to one side and slides off the horse's back. His legs fly over and land with a thud on the ground as he is still suspended by his wrists from the saddle straps. It looks extraordinarily painful. Your vision is still somewhat blurred, and you could easily faint if you did not resist the temptation. But you have arrived in Amber - the One True World.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Tanda Post by Tanda on 05/08/2004 at 12:33:21

Kicking my boots out of the stirrups, I swing my leg over the horse's neck and drop to the ground. I have to grab for the saddle pommel as the forest around me twists and my vision swims. The dizziness recedes after I take several deep breaths, letting the crushing pain in my head take centre stage. Sweat drips into my eyes and I blink it away, but this does little to clear my fuzzy vision.

Ignoring my own discomfort, I turn and grasp Jez about his waist so I can lift him and undo the straps holding his wrists. It's awkward, but I manage to free him. I ease him carefully down onto the blanket of leaf and moss covering the forest floor and drop to my knees next to him.

He looks bad. His sun-darkened skin is tinged with grey and he is wet with cold sweat. I press my fingers against his neck. His pulse is fast and weak.

"Stay with me..." my whisper seeps into the dusky night closing in around us. I'm not sure if my vision is worsening, or merely the light fading fast, but it is now difficult to see more than a few feet into the trees on any side. I struggle to keep my eyes open, but they fight me. My thoughts return to the last time I lent over his injured body. "No...'

Why did you come with me? You would have been safe in that Shadow.

I laugh; it's a hollow and desolate sound. Falling silent, I rub my eyes with one hand, then press my thumb and forefinger to either temple. My mind is too tired to start thinking through reasons why I might have wanted him to follow me, and how I may have unconsciously made him do so.

I blink several times and focus on the shallow, but angry slashes across his face; the skin around them has started to swell. There's a canister of water hanging from the saddle. I reach up and take it, sloshing some of its contents over the wounds, cleaning them as much as I can. He's touchened from a hard life - I can only hope he will be okay. I dare not think on the state of his mind, or his grip on sanity after the nightmare I've taken him through, and I cannot consider how he will feel towards me.

There's nothing else I can think to do - I have to get him to the infirmary in Amber.

Bleys! He was in Amber last we spoke. I reach for my pocket and notice my hand trembles. Irritated at my weakened state, I shove it into my pocket and pull out my card case and remove the Trumps. I leaf through until I find Bleys. My eyelids are heavy and my head bows down. I jerk upright; force myself to focus on his static features.

(OOC: I'm assuming Tanda is too tired to use the Trump and that something else is affecting her concentration. If she is able, then Bleys may possibly answer. Otherwise, the following may happen...)

at his fiery hair at his eyes - there's a sparkle in their depths. I'm sure the temperature of the card drops. I wonder if he will still be in the library. And wonder about the force of reality I'd felt in that blazing place where a slave did suffer a long and tortured death. I hear again his hopeless cries for redemption. I feel the searing heat of lava beneath my horse's hooves as we galloped by.

I shake my head, angry at my lack of concentration. I realise my eyes have closed. Wrenching them open, I look intently at the inanimate card. Had I truly felt the beginnings of a contact, or just imagined it? I decided walking might clear my mind - at the very least it would get me closer to Amber. Perhaps one of Julian's patrols will find us, or I will try Bleys Trump again and reach him, whatever, I have to do something and staying is not an option without medical supplies. I slip the Trump in with its fellows and put my case back in my pocket.

It is almost dark. Starlight filters through the forest canopy, but still it will be a difficult hike. I drag myself to my feet and sway slightly. Pausing for a moment, I then take the reins, wrap them about my arm. I feel unable to mount and hold Jez's limp form, so I pick him up in my arms like a babe - the world wavers and slips about me as I do so. I take several deep breaths then begin the long walk.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Tanda Post by SisyphusX on 05/08/2004 at 12:33:58

As you hold Bleys' Trump before you, trying desperately to focus on it and open a contact, you sway slightly, but maintain your balance. There is a ripple in the image of Bleys, standing easily and with good humor - and then your somewhat weak mental presence is cast aside. Your contact was deliberately refused, and your confused and affected mind is staggered by both the mild impact of the disruption of energy and by the dire implications of the refusal.

It's early evening in the Forest of Arden, and the temperature has dropped a little. A cool wind rustles through the trees and relieves you a little as you trudge ponderously through the forest. You realize that you have only the slightest memory of the Forest, and given the depth of the canopy here, you have no chance of seeing the stern side of Kolvir that might guide you to Amber. But you know you must remain conscious, and you have no option but to try, so you continue moving. You desperately look for any feature, any trace, that might indicate where you are and where you should go. Jez rustles a little, and his features have taken on a paler shade that alarms you. You increase your pace as best you can. The grey horse whinnies as it easily keeps up with you.

You hear a rustle off in the distance. You eagerly turn, hoping to hear more detail. And you do - but it is not reassuring. The rustle grows louder, and becomes a rumbling. You hear the snap of branches, the tearing of plants, and even the crack of heavier limbs. As you hearken to these indications, you piece together a dim memory from having been in Arden once or twice before. Nobody who has visited Arden is unfamiliar in some respect with the sounds you are hearing. These are the flitters of Morganstern, fabled mount of Julian, and he is galloping in earnest through the Forest with abandon. But there is a quality to the sound that throws a chill upon your heart. There is no discipline in the path, there is no orderly measure to the gait, not even one of deliberate speed. The sounds of breathing that come lightly upon your ears are...uneven and ragged, strong and wild. No horseman would allow his mount to behave so uncontrolled - they would have been thrown by now. Something is very wrong with the sound of Morganstern, and the sound is getting closer - at a terrifyingly fast rate. The grey horse with you is already spooked, and his hooves go up and down quickly as he changes footing. As you shift Jek uncomfortably, you estimate that you have less than a minute before Morganstern will at least reach you, if not pass you by at near-top speed.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Tanda Post by Tanda on 05/08/2004 at 12:34:17

My breath catches. What could have affected Morgenstern so, that he would deliberately damage such beauty as that of the trees around me? What has happened to Julian? I could not believe he would ride Morgenstern with such recklessness. Thoughts crash through my head as Morgenstern swaths a path through the forest. It is too much! Bleys' refusal and what it could mean, Julian's unknown circumstances, Jez's dire and worsening state -I must push them aside to focus on the immediate.

I think to climb one of those majestic trees - jump down onto Morgenstern's back as he passes, and try to slow him, calm him. Or mount my own steed, give chase, perhaps catch him, then bring him to a stop.

Ridiculous! Shaking my head, I try to clear my confused and absurd thinking. I am in no state to attempt such feats, and even if I were, it would be impossible to remain on his back for long enough to attempt to slow him. Beside, how could I hope to keep pace with such a creature! No. Find another way.

I stagger to my left, dragging my horse with me. His eyes are rolling and my arm throbs, the reins pulling tight as he tries to wrench his head free. With the ground quaking beneath my boots, I almost loose my already unsteady footing. The crashing, cracking, and splintering is so close I fear there are only seconds before Morgenstern is almost upon us.

Several paces on is a wide bole of a tree. I stop. The world slips around me as I bend and lay Jez on the ground next to it, hoping it will offer him some protection. I drag in several deep breaths, only just maintaining my balance. I spare him only a glance before straightening and turning to my horse. The grey stallion rears and tries to twist free. I grab the reins. Risking a glance over my shoulder, I can see only blurry images of the densely spaced trees beyond, but among them a grey shadowy bulk looms - I know it is Morgenstern. He will pass us by, very close to where Jez lays. The sound of his approach is thunderous. My body trembles with the land. It is as though his hot breath already washes over my sweat-streaked face.

I struggle for a moment with the reins, finally unwrap them from about my arm. Holding them tight in my right hand, I reach over with my left to grab the sleeping blanket rolled up behind the saddle. It unfurls as I yank it free. The horse screams in terror and I let go of the reins - he bolts to my right, away from the horror bearing down. I continue to bring my arm around in an ark, the blanket rippling through the air.

Cover his head, animals calm when darkness surrounds them.....

Then the shadowed boughs explode apart. I let go the blanket into Morgenstern's path as he rips through the trees.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Tanda Post by SisyphusX on 05/08/2004 at 12:34:56

It all happens in a second.

Morganstern, eyes wide and seemingly blazing, bursts into the clearing, seemingly surrounded by a cloud of splintered wood and scattered leaf. He has no saddle, and no rider, and he has not a little blood on his hooves and his snout. The sheer rage and insanity in his gaze almost startles you to stillness, but you have no time for these subtleties. You cast your riding blanket forward, still gracefully suspended in the air, and it adheres to his head as it lands, so fast is Morganstern moving. You hear a guttural sound, nearly a roar, emerge from under the blanket, and he turns left, straight into you. You reflexively dodge left, and your right knee is clipped by his hoof as he passes you. Your leg buckles and you stagger, reeling with sudden pain. A loud crash, nearly an explosion, sounds behind you as Morganstern smashes head-on into a medium-sized tree - a thick deciduous tree with broad leaves. Everything in the clearing is pierced by small wooden shrapnel, and a gigantic chunk of wood is cast into the air. It rises twenty or thirty feet, away from the point of impact - and, you realize in an instant, most likely to smash into the tree at whose foot Jek fitfully lays. You scream as you pull yourself to your feet, and dash forward the few yards that separate you from Jek. You push toward the tree with your good leg, and painfully raise your injured leg onto the surface of the tree, and kick off into the air. Your great skills at instantaneously analyzing motion, impact and structure are suddenly stretched taut as you choose the one best place to strike the wooden meteor as it hurtles downward. One great last effort, and you connect your steel-tipped boot against a crack in the center of the block. It splits into three smaller parts, and each one spreads away from the tree - and away from Jek. But this last exertion has taken all of you - your consciousness is already slipping away as you return to the forest floor. The last thing you see is Jek's pained expression, and the last thing you hear is the fearsome sound of Morganstern heading off again into the forest, as you fall back ...

Your eyes open tentatively, not sure what to expect. It is quiet and still, and you feel a slow movement underneath you. You are laying face-up, the sky above is a soft blue, and you feel the whispers of a breeze. You are in no pain, but you are a little groggy. You start inventorying your limbs, and you feel them intact, but somewhat splayed over a hard surface. You raise your head to examine your environment.

You are in a small rowboat, perhaps big enough for three people. You are laid out on the bench nearest the bow, legs dangling over the side of the boat. On the middle bench, there is a small, worn wooden box, opened to reveal a variety of metal hooks, some ultra-thin wire, and a few worms.

On the widest bench, facing you, sits an old man, a little bent with age. He is wearing loose blue robes, sandals, and he is holding a fishing pole, line drooped into the water. His eyes are calm, his beard black with tinges of soft grey, and he is faintly smiling. He sees your stirrings and places the fishing pole into a notch near his bench. He picks up a canteen from behind him and offers it to you.

"Hello. It's Tanda, isn't it? I don't believe we've met, although I have known of you for a long time. It's good that we can talk now, albeit in these bad times. I am Dworkin, and I am your great-grandfather." He slightly bows his head.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Tanda Post by SisyphusX on 05/08/2004 at 12:37:22

I lay still, studying his wizened face, and mentally walk through the gallery of portraits in the Library. Dworkin was there - unchanged in any way, even though the portrait is centuries old. I recall my father mentioning him briefly, when he had reeled off the events that had transpired in Amber and Chaos after he had abandoned mother and I. Still groggy, I sit up slowly, my movements deliberate as I expect pain, but there is none. My injuries and general condition were extreme; I know that as a fact, and this sudden change in circumstance disturbs me.

I reach up to touch my cheek - there are no scratches from the plants or wounds from the shrapnel. As I look around, I can see only deep, dark waters, the slight swell catching and reflecting the bright sunlight, dazzling and hypnotic.

He's known of me for a long while ... His words puzzle me.

I grip the sides of the boat as it lists slightly, and I shift to the middle of the bench. I've not been on the sea much - I may be my father's daughter, and I like to try new things, but oceans are a little too unsteady for me. After a moment, I focus on my great-grandfather and take the canteen he's holding out to me.

Before I take a drink, I regain more of my composure, and images flash through my mind like stills in a movie. Morgenstern... "What has happened..." I gasp. The riding blanket, poised in mid-air... "Why am I..." then a crumpled figure laying at the base of the tree... I start with sudden alarm, and the boat sways with the motion. "Jez! I can't be here! I need to get back to him, get him to Amber!"

Dworkin speaks in a calming and reassuring tone, and you feel an inner peace seep over you. "Relax, dear child - there is nothing to be done about it here. The only way you can be here is if you are ... separated ... from yourself in some way. Splintered, like I am now. You will not be able to aid this person you speak of for some time, I am sorry to say. But you inspect yourself for injury in vain - no harm can come to you here. As to me, I am both better and worse than I usually am. The parts of me that contain my power and my skills - those are elsewhere. The part of me that is my inner self - it is free and unhindered, as it has not been in ages - with a tranquility I thought I might never know again. The part of me that is my memory - it is here, in fragments, from time to time, I know your name, and I know your face, but I cannot remember with whom Crystal gave birth to you. I know Gerard was one ... the other name escapes me at the moment. Your mother's situation was such a tragedy - my memories seep with pity and a regret, but I do not know what it is." He pauses briefly. "Take a drink - it is merely spring water, and quite cold." He smiles beneficently, as only a great-grandfather can. "But it is good to see someone else here. I have been here for what seems like ages. It is calming, and the fishing is good, but I don't know where I am or what is going on. Tell me - what is happening? What are your last memories, and what is happening in Amber?'

Without thinking, I take a sip of water, and it is as he said it would be. I sigh out a breath after swallowing. He had asked me questions, and therefore I must answer them before asking my own, regardless of the surge of emotion I felt when he talked of my mother and father.

"I do not know what is happening in Amber, sir," I say softly, a little overwhelmed, as the realization of who I am speaking with sinks in. "I'm sorry I cannot tell you much, but I will say all that I know. My uncle Bleys contacted me not long ago, saying there are troubles there, and that Benedict, among others in the family, is missing." I pause and think back on my conversation with my uncle, and frown a little. "He was reluctant to take me through the Trump contact," I continue slowly, "though our link was broken by events at my end, and so I did not get to hear why he felt so concerned. But I wanted to return as quickly as possible. My comrade, Jez, followed and joined me on my hellride." Again, I pause as flashes of fire, searing pain, and desperate cries for freedom fill my senses. I take a deep breath and focus on his smiling and kind face.

"Please tell me what you meant when you talked of Crystal...and Gerard being one...my wits are not about me still, and I think I may have misheard you. Who is Crystal? And there was another?" My skin tingles and a nervousness settles within me, wondering what he is implying. How did he know my mother? How had he seen my face?

Dworkin frowns as you give him the information you have. "Hmmm. I wish I could remember more. There is a dire urgency that strikes me at what you say, but I don't know why. But what I can say is that I have probably anticipated some of these troubles. If and when you leave here, seek out my private quarters - Bleys will know where they are. I have more than likely left something of use in this crisis." He pulls out his fishing line, and casually recasts it. "I have no particular memory of concern about the Trump - I would think they are safe to use, at least for the time being." Your hand instinctively reaches for your belt pouch in which you carry them, but the way the pouch easily moves confirms that it is empty.

But he stares at you as you talk about Jez. "Wait a minute, there. You were hellriding - and then you were here? Not so, I say. Tell me what else happened. People don't just travel here - they are forced here." He takes the canteen back and takes a swig, then seals it and puts it on the floor of the boat.

After you respond, he continues on the previous line. "Crystal was your mother. She was relatively unique amongst the Shadow-dwelling parents of your generation, as she has borne two different children to two different fathers. I don't remember much detail of this right now, but I know that Crystal's story, your mother's story, is one of sadness, regret and misunderstanding. I know that I have seen you, when you were younger, but from afar. If I return to my home at some point, I might be able to tell you more - if I have command of my faculties, that is. And you should be wary, child, should you meet me in my fullness. I am as dangerous as it is said, and more." He has stopped smiling, and is quite solemn now. "Trust your instincts when you are around me. If you fear for yourself, do not show that fear to me, but realize that you are in grave danger. I am...a different person, in my wholeness.

He coughs and then smiles. "But where are we? I don't know. All I can tell you is that I awoke in this calm, peaceful place, and I have only parts of me here. I can occasionally feel other parts of me, distant and disconnected, but the sense is always fleeting, always teasing. I have an intuition that the part of me that is power and skill is engaged in a great struggle - one so terrible that it cannot be diverted, even to think. It draws upon my memories of training and uses my abilities instinctively. And so, the private memories and the part that is myself are left alone, if this is true. And if what you say is also true, I should not think you will be here long. Either your body will mend, and your spirit will find it again - or you will die."

His words sink in, and I do not like it that death is one of the only ways out. There must be another means of return to my body. Questions tumble around in my head. I yearn to know whom else my mother has coupled with; I wonder if it would explain her mind's absence throughout my life, and if it led to my father's unhappiness. But there is no point in asking such questions now; he does not remember the answers. I will have to seek him out when I am free from this place.

My muscles relax further and I drop my elbows onto my knees. I will tell him of my arrival in Arden and events before waking on this boat, and perhaps it will trigger some memories of his own, make it possible for him to shed some light on our situation.

"During my hellride to Amber," I begin, and Dworkin rests his fishing rod down to listen, watching me as I tell my tale. "I passed through a shadow where plants moved towards us, they scratched our faces," I reach up to touch my cheek again, "but I kept going, ignoring my fatigue. I began to feel strange. My eyes would not focus and it was an effort to stay conscious. I do not remember it ever being so during a hellride before, and it seemed more than merely exhaustion from the exertion of travelling such a distance at such a speed. Despite this, I got us to Arden, and there I had to stop. I was in no condition to ride further. Jez was close to death and I knew he needed treatment. I tried to Trump Bleys, to gain fast access to the infirmary in Amber, but my weak attempt at contact was brushed aside, and I was left with no choice but to walk and carry Jez, hoping that we might meet one of Julian's patrols. We did not. Morgenstern came upon us with rage in his cry and insanity in his eyes. I thought to slow him by throwing a riding blanket over his head."

I hear again the enraged beast's maddened scream and a shiver runs down my back. "He roared his fury as his vision was obscured by my actions," I continue, "and he charged towards me. I managed to dodge, but his hoof clipped my leg." Reflexively I rub my knee despite the lack of pain. "He shattered a mighty tree as he galloped past us," I continue, "a large part of it flew into the air and I knew it would come down on Jez. I threw myself towards it, smashing into it with my boot and breaking it apart. I passed out as I hit the ground." An image of Jez's pale face stirs my emotions and for a moment, I feel a strong anxiety grip me, but it looses its hold before I truly register it.

I rest my chin in one hand and think on Dworkin's words as my eyes gaze out across the calm waters. He said that one must be forced into this place, and I could not imagine anyone being able to do such a thing to him. Maybe he created this scene for his inner self to dwell, and I am caught up in it inadvertently.

"Sir," I say to him after a while. "What were the circumstances that put you here? What struggle is the rest of you engaged in? Can you remember anything of what you were about before you slept and woke in this boat?"

He looks into your eyes, and you see both confusion and forthrightness. "No, I do not. I can only assume that such knowledge is needed by the other parts of me, and that I, as I am here, am merely...leavings...from the components needed." He slowly draws in a breath, and lets it out again. "I would not fear for yourself, however - my children tend to be of a resilient breed. I suspect you will recover, and soon." He pauses for a moment, and thinks. "My memories seem shattered right now - I can remember some of my ancient history, and some of the many years of Amber's years of peace and prosperity. It starts fading into meaningless images and scenes. I have the idea that a war was begun, and that it might have ended very recently, but I cannot piece it together. Then, there were a few moments of peace, and..." His expression clouds. "I have a sensation that something happened to me. Something gradual, and dark. The last memories I have are of a panic that overcame me..." He stops, and his brow furrows. "I have no wish to pursue it further - I fear I may disrupt whatever effort is being undertaken." He takes the canteen again, unseals it, and drinks deeply. But you can tell from the sounds and the effort he exerts to hold it that the canteen remains near-full. He offers it to you again, and you reach for it. However, both of you take a sharp intake of breath as your hand passes right through the canteen.

"Oh, dear."

My eyes widen and I stare at him, feeling my own panic rise. "What does this mean? Will I go back, or am I...dying?" I make another grab for the canteen and experience the same effect. My breath quickens. I desperately hope I am returning to my body - as he says, his line is resilient.

I reach out to him, wanting to touch his hand and feel reality. I want to ask another question before I fade entirely, if that is what is happening to me. "Where is your body, where did you fall asleep -

But you cut yourself off as you realize you are sinking inside the boat! Your feet are already right through the wood, but they move freely. As you gradually start to descend through the wood, you desperately thrash around, grabbing at anything - but it is all now vapor and illusion. Dworkin looks down at your face as you descend more rapidly, but he is smiling reassuringly.

"Silly girl. I never leave my home - not any more, anyway. Get Bleys to take you there when you get back."

And then you see the boat from underneath, the fishing line hanging down from one side. But it is not water you feel around you, but...nothing. You do not make ripples, you have no difficulty in breathing, and it is not cold. You see the boat and the surface of the water speed away from you more and more rapidly, and you turn your head to look downwards.

The sunlight fades away below, and you see naught but a faint blue-black emptiness. It is vast and all-consuming - there is no sign of shore or land in any direction. The sense of calm you had felt on the boat is slipping away, and you begin to panic. You make motions as if to swim, but the water is just not there. Your descent grows even faster - a brief look upwards does not even reveal the boat, except perhaps as a speck of shadow.

You lose sight of visual landmarks, as the whole world turns dim and black and full of shadow. Time passes for a while, and you don't know what is happening or for how long. You wonder if you are indeed dying of your injuries, and your mind reels for a moment in the endlessness...

..and then you feel something. A shudder passes through you momentarily. It seems to come from below you, and you look down. You see wavering, a fuzziness, but some kind of light is emerging from the mists below you. You see a rippling, but do not feel it. But then, as you watch, something emerges from the darkness away to one side of you. It is a line, a cord - no, wait, it moved. It is...a tentacle. Broad and thick, with gnarls of muscle and flesh. It stretches back up to the surface in a near-straight line, and it slightly waves and ripples as you watch it. You follow the tentacle back down and ...

It suddenly emerges from the depths. A mass of flesh and muscle, moving, undulating and shivering in the depths. You see the roots of many tentacles as it shoots strands to the surface, far, far away overhead. You scream in silence, and your limbs instinctively thrash about again, as if to swim, but to no avail. You continue plummeting towards it helplessly.

As you continue, you gain a sense of how massive this...thing is. The tentacles are as thick as the largest trees of Arden. The folds of muscle are as hillsides. The fleshy landscape extends as far as you can see - a rolling endless plain of living mass. And as you fall even further towards it, the flesh immediately beneath you shivers, folds, and tears into a gaping maw. There are no teeth, no tongue - just a dark channel into the interior of the monstrosity. Your mind freezes as you realize ... you are about to be eaten by whatever this is. And you barely have time to react.

And as you pass the threshold and enter the interior of the monstrosity, your mind rises to a white-hot state of panic and desperation - and then the blessed stillness of unconsciousness takes hold...

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Tanda Post by SisyphusX on 05/08/2004 at 12:38:05

Your eyes slowly open again, despite all expectations from your last harrowing moments of consciousness. However, your eyes immediately wish they hadn't opened - the light in the room is bright and painful. You move to cover your eyes instinctively - and then the fullness of the fatigue and pain in which your body is currently awash hits you squarely. You groan and swoon a little, but manage to both maintain your consciousness **and** lift your right arm around five inches before it falls back down. You suddenly feel a cooling and soothing touch to your face.

"Ah, Mistress Tanda." A physician, young and kind, is attending to you. "It's a pleasure to see you're awake. It was touch and go for a second. I've only seen the venom that you were attacked with once or twice, but it's similar to a snake found in Arden, and you seem to have responded well to the serum. Don't move - your muscles are still fatigued and your leg's in a splint. It'll need to stay that way, at least for tonight. It's not broken, but I think the only way you'll sleep all night is if that knee's fixed in position."

You take a mental inventory - you hurt all over, but none of it seems particularly serious. You have some cuts on your face, but there's a dressing on them and they no longer itch. Your leg is throbbing, your knee sore, but it's already less painful than when it happened...

Your mind rushes back to the fore, and in a breath you recall all that happened to you. The hellride...the plants...Dworkin...the beast...JEZ! You look around frantically, but the doctor stops you. "Calm yourself. The gentleman you came in with is alive, but there is nothing more I can do for him. He had received more the venom than you did, and his body is less resilient than yours is. He is, I'm sorry to say, in a coma. He might wake up today, or next week, or next year, or even never. There's nothing else you can do - rest yourself."

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Tanda Post by Tanda on 05/08/2004 at 12:38:51

My powerful emotional reaction to Jez's dire situation confuses me, and I wish to examine it further, but this is not the time. With great effort and reluctance I push my panic and concern aside; there is nothing I can do for him in my current condition. I have to trust this physician to do what is best. Relief flows over me - to be alive. But I feel disorientated by the sudden transition from plunging into the blackness, within the fleshy beast's gaping maw, to awaking in bright light and sterilised surroundings.

"How did I get here?" My voice sounds rough, and a fire burns in my throat.

The physician smiles calmly as he replies, "One of Ranger patrols found you, and I must say, they were quite concerned about your state of health, and especially that of your companion -Jez, you said? They brought you straight here. Really, Mistress Tanda, you need to rest and recuperate."

I lick my lips, they are dry and cracked. I taste blood. "Where is Jez?"

"He's in the room next door, and he is as comfortable as is possible. May I bring you some water?"

I try to nod, but don't quite make it. I groan involuntarily, and lay still. After a moment, I manage to simply answer, "Yes."

The physician walks quickly out of my line of sight, and I hear the tantalizing sound of water pouring into a glass - far less than I will want, as my throat is seared, my head feels stuffed with lead, and I can barely move. He returns to my side, and expertly slips his arm around my shoulders, supporting my head. He holds the glass to my lips - the water is blessedly cool and refreshing. He straightens the glass, allowing me to draw a ragged breath. I sigh it out, then nod weakly for more. This time, as he tips the glass, I drain it. He moves to fill it again, but pauses by the end of my bed as I ask him another question - my voice smoother, but still faint.

"Where is here?"

"You are in the infirmary, in Amber's barracks. Do not concern yourself with anything else - the palace has been informed of your arrival." His words are slightly muffled, as though heard from a distance. My vision swims, darkness threatening to descend upon me. I fight it off - there are more questions I wish to ask. I wonder what drove Morgenstern to madness, but I do not think the physician will know the answer.

So I stick to the mundane, yet essential queries, "How long have I been here?"

"You've only just arrived, really. You're lucky to have made it here so quickly after being attacked - that kind of venom acts fast and is difficult to treat if it sets into the system for long." I hear footsteps, and then he appears by my side, glass in hand. "It is now late afternoon. Drink this and rest."

I do as he asks, feeling more refreshed and less disorientated. Sleep still hovers close by, and I resist its comforting embrace for a while longer.

Re: PROLOGUE - Droplets of Blood - Tanda Post by SisyphusX on 06/07/2004 at 18:26:51

The physician smiles warmly at you as he sets the empty glass next to the table, then moves to the entryway. He sweeps aside a curtain, and outside the room you see the shadowy outline of a warrior. He is tall, skin a mild tan, and his hair a deep black, held in a ponytail. His face is different from most - features hard and angular. He is dressed in simple black loose fitting garments, with a few bands of a lighter and silvery cloth. He has a sword at his belt, hung in a manner to be drawn without delay or hindrance. And his eyes ... you make out the hints of a stormy grey, and they gaze at you with a combination of respect, concern...and a mild disdain he makes no attempt to hide. The warrior moves aside a short distance to

The curtain was only open for a moment, and swooshes closed behind him. Your mind swirls with questions and possibilities, fears and uncertainties. Who is the warrior? What attacked you near Arden? Whom did you sense in the Shadow of Hell? What is wrong with Morganstern? What has happened to Dworkin? You are finally overwhelmed by all of the questions and uncertainty, exhaustion and fatigue - you drop into a blessedly deep sleep. You do not dream of Dworkin, you do not dream of a monstrous form under the murky depths, you do not dream of Jez - you do not dream at all, you are so exhausted.