

# Advancin' Amber



by Kelly Ishikawa

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We hadn't heard of the Three Quarters. We were just a mix-matched gathering of nobodies who were promised a share of ill-gained gottens. We would raid a remote mountain town of some valuable antiques.

It'd been a long time since I had done work like this. I was fortunate in my younger days of plundering, and was currently living happily, if modestly, in retirement. But my peg-leg was needing replacing.

It wasn't an everyday peg-leg. This was a magic peg-leg granted to me by a sea-sorceress on one of my many adventures. It was bound to me seamlessly, and moved and felt like a real leg. Like, I said, I had been fortunate in my days of plundering. But attending to a special leg like this would require more than my retirement would provide. It was either this job, or that everyday peg-leg I'd avoided for so long.

Anyway, it was only one of the Three that was summoned to stop us. It appeared right as we got to the town. It just materialized out of thin air. The "Pleurminéral Palais" they said. Yes, it was clearly a wall of magical, petrified tree.

A cloud of glittering dust obscured the town. When we tried to go through it, we ended up elsewhere. It's strange magic brought us to what appeared to be outer space. I saw asteroids, and stars. Going *around* the palace was impossible. We would have to go *through* or *over*. It didn't seem outrageously insurmountable.

We were equipped for the mountainous area, so we had climbing equipment. We got it all together and approached the Palais. It had stone steps, going up part way. We could then use the outcroppings and bridges above to get us close enough to the top for our grappling canons to do the rest.

But we never got to the stairs.

As we approached, great cracks began forming in one area of the petrified tree. A pink ooze, just like resin from a live tree, began to bleed from the fracture. *Magic* resin, I later learned, that still flowed in an ethereal state from within this stony monolith, imbued with the spirits of the beings that once guarded the Palace, when it was a living tree.

Those beings were ants. Ants the size of small men, who walked on two legs. In days long ago, they had wielded weapons in service of the tree's proprietor.

Now this spirit-filled resin flowed from cracks to protect the petrified tree. And as the cracks grew and large slabs of rock fell away, we saw that some of the resin had hardened into beautiful pink amber. Amber in the shapes of ant-beings. These organic gemstone forms fell to the ground before the Palais, and stood to face us.

But these were no mindless drones. The spirits of those old guardian ants were within the amber before us. There was no vacancy in their bearing as they advanced. They first stepped with caution, looking us over. I am sure I sensed fear in a few. Here and there they drew together in groups. Not marching formations. I think we were seeing old friends drawing courage from one another.

We couldn't beat 'em. Though half the size of us, they somehow had insect-quickness, even with the strength and hardness of their amber forms. Oh, a few of them were split open. Their crystal debris seemed to release a vapor. Spirits, I was sure, returning to the tree to be formed into guardians another day. The other ants would've lamented any permanent damage, and I

saw none of that. Don't ask me how I knew they weren't sad, with those bug-faces. Maybe it was their body language.

We gave up. The Advancin' Amber watched us retreat. We wouldn't be taking anything from the town.

But I didn't leave empty handed. Magic resin? Something that healed trees? The sun gleamed through the broken piece of amber I had taken. Could something be made from this to heal my leg? A few men ahead of me had stopped and were pointing at the Pleurminéral Palais' ramparts.

There stood the queen of the Advancin' Amber. Kraggberry Krrumble, mighty clamberberrienne, bearer of The Mantle and Edifice. Crystal horns framed her face, rough gemstone seeds crowned her wild hair. She looked right down at me and my piece of pink crystal, and I was sure she would be sending her soldiers after me.

Instead, she hoisted up a mug in salute, as the glittering dust obscured the palace. The shards of amber that littered the ground began to fade away. But the one in my hand did not.

