

Forochet

“Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men, doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.”
~JRRT

Bleys looked to Caine and said, "I never thought I'd see the day."

"You never think. That's your problem."

Bleys winked at him, fiery red hair blowing around a face consumed by its own cleverness. Black-haired Caine looked back as if he expected that wink, he expected the smugness, and had deigned it beneath his dignity to adjust his reply to avoid it.

Snow piled up in cracks in the rocks. Broken stones fallen from the mountain in ages before lay jumbled, wrapped in frost with many years of ice stuck between them. The ice stuck to the rocks, and the rocks were stuck in ice. Gerard had kicked one and called it solid. Now he stood on the eastern face of the cliff, looking down into valleys still orange and gold with sunset. He was acutely mindful of the dwindling sun behind him.

Gerard stood taller than either of his brothers and smiled less. His beard was short and coarse. The fire had burned it unevenly, and now he was almost clean-shaven on the left jaw and shaggy on the right. Flames in hair burn in patches. Deep wounds to the beard reached his face on both sides, but where he'd sheltered his head with an arm while running, his sideburns reached his neck.

Bleys tried to get Gerard into their joke, and the big man ignored him.

"Oh, come! You have to admit this was unexpected. Benedict defeated?" Bleys moved forward to the edge of the cliff with his brothers.

"Benedict isn't defeated," said Gerard and Caine in eerie unison.

That did surprise Caine, and he looked hard at Gerard. The big man didn't look back.

"Benedict isn't defeated," repeated Gerard. "He retreated. You wouldn't say he lost a boxing match because he blocked a punch instead of attacking."

"It is foolish people who think retreating is defeat that lose wars," agreed Caine, finding a way to still sound like he was arguing. "That's why you don't lead, as if your failure on Kolvir wasn't enough."

Bleys winked at him again.

They dressed as differently as three men with the same tailor could do. But Ersertchiel was the best tailor in Amber, and Amber was the only city that mattered, and no one would wear lesser threads. The stitching, cutting, and seams were all the same, tucked under the fabric and hidden behind their belts.

Bleys preened in the wind. His red cloak flapped; the tails of his yellow jacket fluttered. He paid a fortune for his shirts to be dyed white and boots blacked. Against the mountainside with spiderwebs of white snow over brown rock, Bleys stood as the sole source of bright color. The ledge looked down on the white bay of Forochet, and Bleys stood alone as the only color in the sky.

Caine wore tall heels to keep his feet out of shit. So long as people dumped their chamber pots in the street, high boots would remain in fashion. Unlike Bleys' red-felt tights and trousers, Caine wore fitted calf-leather breeches. He could swim in them if he had to. He could fight in them and often did. His cloak was grey, his shirt was brown, and the only consideration he paid to the biting cold was a vest of the same leather as his pants. He wore long hair back under a three-pointed hat. Both he and Bleys carried swords, solid, one handed things heavier than rapiers. Rapiers let you beat the first guy. It was the other fifty behind him and the rocks, shields, mail, and stray clubs they carried that beat the rapier.

Gerard stood on a higher rock, a round-headed boulder stuck to the ledge by ice as much as stone. It formed the highest part of the ledge and yet the most exposed. The big man wrapped himself in fur, and the shapeless ruff made him less of a human figure than a great round ball. Caine's clothing was cut to fit him well, and Bleys' cloak flapped like fire burned. Gerard was just a great mass of ermine and boar hide, bear skin, and perfectly stitched lion. He'd taken to wearing a mane after the man's previous owner had tried to eat him. Gerard didn't carry a sword.

"They move better than we do," said Gerard. "In the cold. It doesn't slow them down as much. Benedict's men retreat carefully, picking their footsteps, but the dark guys run, jump, and fall."

"That's going to make retreating awfully complicated," agreed Bleys.

Gerard ignored him. Caine listened and chose not to reply.

"Gentlemen," said a new voice, their sister Fiona, as she crested the ledge.

A winding stairway of short dwarf-steps climbed these Blue Mountains. In cleverness the dwarves had cut the stairs so the lips rose higher than the creases, and each step slipped a little back, into the stairway. Even with the wind blown snow, only the most exposed parts of the stairway formed an ice-slide down.

Fiona's hair was red as Bleys, and they had the same nose. They might have the same eyes, but hers squinted. Fiona maintained men foolish and skirts provided the best defense against the cold, and in sheer weight of fabric, she was winning against anyone but Gerard. Her outermost layer of mink hide turned the fur out at the seams to show the quality, but the rest of it was fur in. The long dress stopped just above her black leather shoes. Above the waist she was wrapped in silk and wool, magnificently cut in climbing ivy patterns, and as bulky and voluminous as Gerard. Her upper body looked like a ball on a cone. Only red hair and white face caught the eye; her red hair flying and her face turning pink.

"Why are you here?" asked Caine.

"You should have trumped me," said Bleys. "I would have brought you in."

"Thank you, but no," she replied to her full-blooded brother. "I chose to walk. How does he do?"

"He's retreating," said Gerard.

"Why?" asked Fiona.

"He's got a reason," said Gerard.

"We don't know," said Bleys. He gave a big grin. "But the enemy is coming very quickly."

"Have they come to the ships?" asked Fiona.

"Look yourself," said Caine.

Fiona did and stood beside Gerard on the great mountain head. He didn't move aside for her, but there was plenty of space. On higher footing she was as tall as Caine or Bleys, and Gerard might as well be more mountain.

Farther north, the Forochet Sea ground icebergs into each other. Instead of crumbling they stuck together, building into great white masses on the dark ocean. Clouds prevented sunlight from getting through, and the white sea and dark sky marched together to beyond the four's vision. South of the ocean the Forochet Bay intruded into Arnor in a kidney-shaped extension of more water and ice. Most of the bay lay east of them, and that was where the fighting was. They stood on the north and easternmost tip of the Blue Mountains, a cold, dead range where nothing lived. Far ahead, further under the sunset of the east and further from the setting sun, rose the mountains of Angmar.

Across the high plains inbetween, a black snake of dark running guys came from the south. Every third one carried a smoking torch, black, dirty things that shed little light when they burned for the low hanging smoke they made. These southerners wore heavy iron and hide armor and carried hooked swords. Waist high snow didn't stop them. Mountain winds blowing sleet didn't deter them. The four watchers could not see the origin of their lines.

Just south of the bay the plains rose quickly, forming a tall headwall around the sea and eight ships of Amber that lay at anchor. Some distance forward of this headwall, Benedict had built his outer fortifications. Blocks of ice and dirt piled up in walls around the few paths down. Stubby towers watched from the corners. But Benedict's men were fleeing the forts, running quickly but falling often. They had a hard time getting up. White lines on black soil marked the paths, and fallen men were indistinguishable from frozen mud from the ledge.

"Who are those guys?" asked Gerard. "The black things that run from the south."

"Orcs," said Bleys. "Weak shadows. Less than mortal men. I'm astounded Benedict is having any problems with them."

"Stop smirking," said Gerard. "Taking pleasure in Benedict's suffering does not become you."

"What a positively un-Amberish thing to say," said Bleys and smirked even wider.

The black runners hit the outer fortifications and swarmed them. They climbed the walls like spiders. Oily torch smoke built up on the southern side for only a moment, enough to make a great stain over the running fighters. Orcish ropes pulled the walls down, and wind blew the smoke through. It spilled over the snow and leaked towards the headwall above the bluffs.

"He's fired the forts," said Gerard.

As Gerard said it, blue, white, and red flames erupted in the crumbling fortifications. These glittered with phosphorus, sparkled, and reached upwards. The oily black smoke from orcish torches wrapped around the flares, and seemed defeated. Orcs scuttling over the walls burst into flame.

And yet they came on, and more came behind. The orcs ran into the burning forts, caught fires themselves, and ran on until they died.

A new figure appeared, breaking out of the routed humans. Wearing orange and yellow, he left the panic hit the orcs alone. Orcs died. They fell in waves. They crumpled and collapsed. For an instant, the whole assault of torch-carrying orcs beyond number hit one man in harvest colors, and he held them.

The four above were too high to hear the screaming, and the orange and yellow figure stacked bodies while his men ran.

"Why don't they carry banners?" asked Gerard.

"They do: the torches. See how each torch is a single red flame? No lids or vanes? That's their banner." Caine pointed. His red-headed siblings nodded. Gerard still looked down at the fight.

"I don't think this is a maneuver," said Gerard. "Benedict's being routed."

"Benedict is being routed?" asked Bleys. He lost his smirk for just an instant, and in that instant, Bleys looked astounded. Then something else spread over his face. A grin of immense, prideful glee.

Gerard finally turned his head to look at Bleys. "He's committed himself to the rearguard. He's buying time for the flight. That's not a maneuver. That's Benedict not liking seeing his people die."

"The ships are raising anchors," said Caine. He pointed into the white and black bay. "They're taking on boats and throwing boarding ropes to land."

"They're pulling people out of the water," said Fiona. "Benedict's people are swimming for the ships. The boatmen are pulling them up."

"In that water," said Caine.

All four of them stood together on the edge of the rock now, looking down from the mountain to the sea.

"Why are the ships going forward?" Bleys demanded, looking at Caine.

"Closer to shore, less distance to swim," Caine replied. "See how they're readying the masts, but most of the crews are at the gunwales? They're in rout."

"I'm going down there. Who's down there?" demanded Gerard. "Julian?"

"Julian," said Bleys, looking down.

"Are you going to trump?" asked Fiona.

"Yes," said Gerard. He frowned at her. "It's the fastest way."

She didn't meet his gaze, but looked up. The cloud-cover lay unbroken. Normal holes and patches of blue sky remained completely absent, and even the wind that blew shapes in the ceiling couldn't break the gloom. It was just past noon and dark as twilight.

"I'll meet you down there," said Fiona. She dragged her gaze from the sky and turned to the stairway down, lifting her dress to run.

Gerard watched her, and his scowl deepened. He spoke to the other two, though. "We should go. He'll need us, unless you're hoping things go badly for him."

"Goodness no!" exclaimed Bleys. "Let's go rescue Benedict!"

Gerard almost ignored him. "Caine?"

"Let's go."

From an inner pocket, Gerard took a small wooden box and from it drew a stack of playing cards. They were a little larger than gaming cards, the size of fortune-telling tarots. He shuffled one out and held it before the cloudy sky. Looking north, Gerard's horizon was a line of grey clouds over black water, the line where the icebergs ended. He stared at the green man on the card until he started talking to it, and behind him Bleys and Caine stood close by.

"We're coming," said Gerard, and he turned his body sideways so Bleys could see the card. The red-headed man walked off the ledge and into thin air. He disappeared without falling.

Caine followed, and vanished as well. Then Gerard stuck his hand forward, and his arm ended in a blur like he'd touched a fog. He stepped off the cliff as well.

A bit of rock and snow stuck to his boot, and it tumbled when he walked, thousands of feet to frozen ground and hard soil. It thudded into a snowdrift. There were no bodies.

The ledge stood empty, and on the long stairway down the back of the mountain Fiona carried her skirts and ran.