

The Rings Begin to Move in Amber

Obrecht watched beetles scavenge old cow droppings while he hid. Brown-shelled with black feelers, they bored small holes in the dairy-yard fence and rolled in marbles of dung. Obrecht tried to stay focused on the road, but the beetles would crawl on him with their filthy feet. Then he shimmied and danced while swatting the little bugs and tried to move as little as possible. The beetles ignored him but wouldn't avoid him, and he yanked his attention from the Forest of Arden to dung beetles and back.

He'd missed the dragon appearing, a feat he didn't understand himself, but had seen it scuttling down the hillside and entering the woods. He'd seen the king and his brothers and sister ride after it, and heard the brassy challenge of Julian's horn. He waited, and no one emerged. Beetles rolled cow-shit over his legs, and he smacked and swatted until an army could have marched from Garnath to Castle Amber unseen.

Paranoia only has to pay off once, thought Obrecht, and he crept over the back wall of the cow-pasture. The wall was old stone, waist high at best and mostly knee-high. It served to deter cows not people, and it did little for him. The thief slipped away.

This place called itself Greentown, and it existed within the City of Amber by virtue of clinging to Kolvir. Nowhere did Greentown touch metropolis, but if the roads didn't dead-end in some farm or factory, they wound about the hillside until drawn into the great thoroughfares of Amber. People just seemed to appear, spawned from the ether with their own backstories. Obrecht walked downhill on an empty road, and the first man he saw was yelling angrily at a bird with a hat. Obrecht assumed there was a reason. Back down by port, he stopped to think again. Bleys hadn't seen Obrecht's face, hopefully, and he hadn't given chase. I won't take risks with the Princes of Amber, he decided, but after an hour of hiding, Obrecht thought he was clear. He didn't know where Tatianna was.

He hiked southward along the coast, found a deserted place to wash in the ocean, and sat in the sun while he and his clothing dried. He didn't return to his apartment. He had no shoes or money. The sun shone warm, the waves beat eternal, and the thief from Amber allowed the wind to tug his hair. Waves beat rocks twenty feet below him, and Obrecht stared across the sea to a homeland that wasn't in this world. He couldn't get there from here. He didn't notice when he started twisting the ring on his finger. Nor did he hear footsteps, for there were none. Bleys wasn't there, and then he was. Obrecht, stared over the water, and the rough boulder he sat on dug into his butt. He shifted to make himself more comfortable and found Bleys behind him, waiting, and blocking him from running.

"Hello, thief," said Bleys with eyes narrow and smile wide.

Obrecht jumped.

He hit rocks and broke bones. He crumpled in a barnacle-encrusted hollow, waves crashed over him, and when the water stilled and he could breathe, Bleys picked him up by the shirt and picked something small out of the water. It was a plain gold ring.

"Now I have two again," Bleys said and climbed off the rocky coast. Up a steep bluff, on tall grasses that beat with the wind, he discarded Obrecht and examined his rings. The thief lay crying on the ground.

"Your attempt to escape worked about as well as I expected. Even the ring betrayed you and returned to me, it's rightful master. But, thief, I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here to help.

"You stole from me, and for that you should die. I'm going to let you live. Where did you get these?"

There was no torture, there was no interrogation, there was just throbbing pain in his feet and hands. Obrecht told Bleys everything. He told the prince of marking Cpt Armist, the robbery, knives in the dark, and dividing the loot. He told of Tatianna, their love nest, and dividing the loot. Bleys went over the numbers carefully. Eight rings had been in the bag when Ebrecht opened it, nine there had been earlier.

"Then she still has one," said Bleys.

"What do you mean to do with me?" asked Obrecht.

"Nothing. I never hurt you at all. Even all that," Bleys waved a finger at Obrecht's broken feet. "That was your doing. I wanted my rings, I got them, and as far as I'm concerned, we're done."

"But, what am I..." Obrecht trailed off. The pain hurt too much.

"What are you to do? I don't know. I don't really care, but it looks like you have a problem." Bleys climbed onto a high rock and took a small card out of his pocket. He lifted it, paused, lowered it, and spoke to Obrecht near philosophically. "The way I see it, you have choice. You can just leave. Endure your wounds. Don't rob people any more. But last I heard of Armist, she was in a hospital. It was near amazing that she lived. The rings have some small manner of power, so perhaps one kept her alive. It let her endure her wounds. Maybe you didn't stab her badly, so it might be nothing. But if you stabbed her a lot and she lived, then maybe the ring had something to do with that. I don't know how badly your wounds are. They look like they sting.

"I don't care, of course. I'm a prince of Amber, and you're a creature of shadow. But it seems like you could either find her ring, the one you stole from me, and hope it heals you. Or you can crawl off, maybe die, and be free of this whole affair."

Bleys looked at Obrecht and back at his card.

"It's no concern of mine. Good bye."

And Bleys stepped through air, holding his card, and his foot didn't come down on the far side of the rock.

Salt burned Obrecht's wounds. Rocks scraped his bare feet. Obrecht climbed to the roadway and staggered back to Amber.

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In a cavern under the Castle of Amber, scions of Oberon gathered to watch one of their own do something all of them had done before yet remained the one thing they unilaterally feared. Gerard and Benedict spoke in the corner as the bigger one took off his cloak and jacket. Random stood nearby, and took Gerard's clothing as the son of Rilga removed it. Benedict told Gerard to be wary, talking about what he should do if the rings attempted to attack him. The Master of Arms mentioned where the rings could be discarded safely and where the footing would be secure if they tried to wrap illusions around Gerard's feet.

"It shouldn't be possible. The sparks that rise when you walk the Pattern should burn any shred of illusion away. But if they don't, and you look here, we can guide you with lanterns," said Benedict.

"And I'll be watching with the Jewel," said Random.

"Yes, yes," muttered Gerard.

"Did you eat enough breakfast?" demanded Vialle, poking him in his big belly. "But not too much? Are you hungry? Before you go, would you like a snack?"

"Remember this is the work of Dworkin and Oberon, and no power of shadow can interfere with you," repeated Benedict.

"I'm going to put some snacks in your pouch. There's fish jerky in here and some water," said Vialle.

Random didn't laugh. He smiled gently, an odd expression of tolerance wrapped in deep affection that looked unnatural by the blue glow of the Pattern of Amber. Gerard pushed them away, firmly with Benedict to show the tall, lanky man that his younger brother had power of his own. He shoved Random casually with something like competition. He tried not to knock Vialle over as she stuffed food in his belt pouch. The king smiled again and pulled Vialle away to stand beside him.

"They're in there," Vialle assured Gerard.

The big man nodded. Random handed him the small cashmere bag, and Gerard wrapped it in his sleeve, forming a band of fabric between his left bicep and shoulder. Nodding to Benedict, he walked to the start of the pattern, breathed, and waved his left arm, bandaged in gray felt until it looked like a stump. Benedict saluted with his own left, equally wrapped. Gerard put foot to the Pattern, and within his first three steps sparks rose about his ankles.

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In another part of Castle Amber Fiona lead Tatianna into a high room in a tower overlooking the sea. Calm waves rolled to shore as all things come to Amber, and the roil of the sea turned the ocean green. Far away a rain squall sat on the horizon, dumping its contents on the unmindful ocean.

"She should be in the dungeon," said Julian, following Fiona and Tatianna into the tower room. He crossed to the window that faced the ocean, floor to twelve-foot-ceiling glass that curved as the round wall of the tower circled. Curtains hung from the ceiling, pulled back, and tied in silk. He looked north, to the forests, and followed Mellengroth as it wound through the Shield Hills. One little dark spot looked different among otherwise healthy trees.

"We'll keep her here," said Fiona.

Fiona stood facing the others with the sunlight at her back, and it poured through the windows and turned her flame-kissed hair to an amber halo. The sun was crossing the zenith above, but the brilliance of the day and ocean climate flooded the room with refracted sunlight. She wore emerald green to set off her eyes, eyes the same color as the sea. Fiona was a small one, and Julian standing tall beside her in green and white mail made her look even smaller.

"You can think of it as a very nice dungeon," said Tatianna.

Standing back from the window, and the high tower that overlooked a steep drop down a mountain, her mocha skin turned to espresso roast, light in the hands and face, but loamy brown around her shoulders and neck. Faded trceries of scars lay almost invisible on her skin, patterns of burnt wood on walnut. She wore a hospital gown over scrub pants, both shapeless in an ugly little pattern of generic flowers. At least she'd gotten a shower and now smelled faintly of lavender.

"Very nice and dungeon don't go together," said Julian, still looking out the window and standing close to Fiona.

The last occupant of the room had said very little. Caine wore his colors, green and black, and a scowl as totemic as emerald and ebony. Fiona had noted that Caine, since returning with Julian from their hunt, had said very little.

Fiona considered bringing him into the conversation and realized she'd never liked Caine.

She addressed Tatianna. "You will remain here. You have your own personal area" –Fiona indicated a small bathroom tucked behind a screen– "if you're familiar with such areas."

"Thank you. I'll be fine." Tatianna smiled at her.

Caine glanced back and forth between them and left.

For a moment no one spoke. Julian tried to angle himself so he could see Arden, and Tatianna waited. Fiona looked like she would go on but developed a listening manner.

Her brother noticed. "What is it?"

"He's begun, and it's ringing."

"Ringing?"

"Ringing. There's a resonance–" Fiona paused. She looked suspiciously at the prisoner. "Everything is going fine. Why don't you keep an eye on her?"

With that suggestion she left, and Julian followed her out the door. They spoke briefly on the landing, Julian looking for information and Fiona not giving him any, before she departed, and he walked back in. He looked over the prisoner disinterestedly.

"Anything you want to confess or secrets you want to reveal?" he asked.

"Do you remember me, Julian?" asked Tatianna.

The prince glanced at her but Tatianna didn't think he saw her. He hadn't really seen her yet.

"I didn't call you Julian then. I called you My Lord. I met you once in Tentheth and once in Arden."

"I meet a lot of people in Arden. I live there," replied Julian.

The prince shut the door and stared out the window.

"What are you guarding me from, my prince?" asked Tatianna.

"Nothing. You're on your own," he replied.

"Then is there something to be guarded from me?" she asked. "I promise I don't bite."

"A dragon very nearly promised me the same thing," replied Julian and continued looking out the window with his back turned to her.

Tatianna watched him. With his back to her and face canted to the north side of the window, Julian's black hair hung long down his back, straight and ebony. It glittered over gleaming armor. The prince of Amber

wore a sword-belt studded with diamonds and ebony in platinum settings with a sword-hilt bearing Unicorns rampant.

The prisoner reached behind her and found one of the cotton ties that held the back of her hospital gown closed. She pulled it, and the top slumped. While Julian ignored her she took off her scrub pants. Her legs looked shadowy under the garish multicolored gown. When Tatianna stood up her gown fell down, caught on her breasts, and she had to walk very straight to keep it from falling off entirely.

"Are you sure you don't remember me?" she asked the Prince of Amber. "I remember you. You were so tall and rode a horse so white. In Arden you lorded over the trees, and your rangers made a royal feast. You were master there and in Tenthet."

"I am always a master of Arden," said Julian. "It is mine. Tenthet I recall. It is a shadow of mine, in the mountains. The people are wise, the cities high. Instead of trees, their skies have mountains and—"

Julian turned around and paused.

Tatianna walked to him slowly, but she didn't walk as he knew the word. Her hips swiveled while her feet stepped heel to toe. Only the line of tension between the gown sleeves kept the robe on, and that that line of tension came from just above her elbows. Tension and a fold of hospital gown crossed round breasts. She swayed more like slithering than walking and entered his personal space.

Defensively Julian put his hand up, and she stepped into it. His forefinger found her nipple as it poked against the fabric and she stretched with her next step, up and down. His hands received her as if he had not control over them. She stopped with her hands on Julian's waist and him cupping her breast.

"Prince of Amber," she whispered and looked up through black lashes both innocent and wicked. He could feel her breathing.

"Yeah?" said Julian. He was suddenly aware of how hard he was breathing himself.

"I came to you, Prince of Amber. Won't you come to me?" Her eyes were dark through thick eyelashes: Ledes's greatest work.

Julian put his other hand on her, and she yielded, dropping the rest of the gown. He carried her back to bed and mounted her at the top of Castle Amber. His mail made a silver and green pile on the carpet. In the distance the raincloud moved toward the city.

#

Obrecht collapsed in the doorway to Central Navy Receiving Hospital.

His face was ruined, his hand mangled, the man had walked ten miles on broken ankles, finally dragging himself along until paving stones ripped out his fingernails. He had passed two general hospitals, but with the sudden rainstorm sweeping out of the sky, no one had seen him. If they had, they hadn't done anything.

Nurses screamed. There is an odd way receiving people nerve themselves towards the horrors that can be visited upon the human body. None of the ER personal would have thought twice should Obrecht have arrived on a stretcher, nor did they shriek earlier when services brought in half a man bisected by a millstone. Yet Obrecht falling through the door unexpected, blood diluted in rainwater splattering the entryway tile like a red flood, shocked them. One fainted dead, and another shrieked twice.

They got over it.

With technology of the middle ages but knowledge of present day Earth, they ran blood bags and saline while wrapping him in gauss sanitized in boiling water. Doctors cut his feet open and rebuilt his ankles, dosing him with obba leaves from the shadow Menrath and jbu beans from Lo Ra. A surgeon molded bones from clay of a shadow that has no name in any of the tongues of men, and put the ceramic structure back into Obrecht's hands in a single operation. He lay like the dead.

It went down on the chart, the chart hung from his bed, and two big men, Corpsmen, carried the patient on a backboard to his room. Brutus and Hector, the staff called them. Brutus was an anesthesiologist finishing his residency, and Hector a bonesaw in Navy Pediatrics. Brutus hated necessary suffering, and Hector wanted to see his patients live. They both liked weights. They transitioned Obrecht from board to bed so smoothly his raspy breathing never varied and stole out the door on tiptoes. In Amber there was no machinery to monitor his breathing nor beep to break the silence. Other than the fury of rain that drowned noise, but also kept admitting quiet, the hospital was silent.

Obrecht's eyes snapped open, and he sat up like hurricane door on a hinge. His head turned to the door, his legs swung over the side, and his knees bent to put his feet on the ground. He stood up.

The hallway was quiet. Two nurses watched the floor from their station, but they had paperwork to do. The trauma patient waited. Soon he bent over and ran along the hallway, peering into doors one by one. There was no central air conditioning, so each room had a fireplace. From a cold one, he took a metal poker.

Armist lay sleeping and knew nothing until the slap of a bandaged hand over her mouth shocked her awake. Rain slammed the windows. The captain tried to gasp, but she couldn't move. Obrecht silenced her while the rain shower built into a storm.

When he checked her dead hands for rings she wasn't wearing one.