

Memories and the Pattern

Gerard was young and getting beaten by his father.

He was sixteen, and Random had fallen on the Pattern. Sparks washed over the little boy, himself not thirteen, angry, rebellious, furious their father kept this thing from him. Gerard couldn't see anything but blue fire and a black shadow within it, fallen down on the Pattern. Random was on his hands and knees, and he wasn't moving. Stopping on the Pattern was it. Gerard's little brother was going to die.

"Good," said Oberon, their father. The King hadn't wanted to be here and showed up late. "Maybe the next one will believe me when I tell them they're not ready. Maybe the next one will be ready."

"I don't think he's going to make it, Dad," said Gerard. Almost as scrawny as Random, the brown-haired youth chewed his lip.

"He won't. If he wanted to walk it, he would have trained instead of drumming all day like an idiot." Oberon looked down at his favored son. "Remember that, kiddo. You're not ready yet, so don't throw your life away. You'll walk the Pattern when you're twenty or so. Maybe thirty."

"But Dad, I don't think Random's going to get up."

The cave of the Pattern hadn't changed in all that time. Gerard knew Random the King watched him with Vialle, she who kept hiding snacks in his pouches. Benedict was there. Oberon wasn't. But the cave was the same, a great hemisphere with a ceiling as craggy and twisted as inverted brain matter cut out of rock and a floor as smooth as glass. It could be treacherously smooth if one wasn't ready.

In memory, that wasn't Random's problem. He hadn't slipped. He'd just laid down, halfway through the Grand Curve, and he was so close Gerard could have reached him. His black shadow didn't move, and the sparks spiraled as they rose, coming to a disk of spinning light. Already the sparks had formed a triple helix with another strand brewing.

"Tell your brothers," said Oberon. "Tell them I know my business, and if they disobey me—" he waved at Random.

And Gerard understood, a boy of sixteen hearing his father explain his baby brother was going to die. He understood, and yet his mind rebelled. He made a choice of ignorance over truth, and he stopped understanding. His head stopped. In an instant of decision, Gerard no longer got it.

"I'm going after him!" yelled Gerard and he dashed for the starting point, the tail of the Pattern that stuck out into plain rock. He'd circled with Random, staying close, and ran back, thirty degrees around the outside circle, forty five, sixty, and Oberon caught him by the barrels where they put their lanterns.

"The hell you're not!" yelled their father and snatched Gerard about the neck, slamming his head down. Gerard's skull bounced off the cask like his father's fingers formed a hinge. Oberon raised his right hand and dropped it, open-palmed, and Gerard saw more sparks than rose from the Pattern.

"Dad, he's going to die!"

"Who gives a shit?" asked Oberon. "Children are easy! You're worth ten of him, because he's just a warning to the others. Now stand up and say you're going to be smart."

"No, Dad. He's going to—" and the hand of Oberon caught Gerard again. His skull bounced off old planks.

"He's dead!" yelled Oberon.

"No, Dad! Not yet, he's not dead—" and Oberon hit him again, breaking barrels with Gerard's face, and smashing the boy to the ground. "Now I hope you've learned something."

"Yes, Dad," whispered Gerard on the ground.

"Good."

Oberon walked back towards the door. He got to the Grand Curve again where Random died slowly. The helix of Pattern-fire reached for him, and it was so dense the boy's slight form was nothing. Blue light burned the silhouette even from Oberon's eyes.

The King of Amber turned his back on the Pattern and made for the door.

"I learned I'm stupid," said Gerard quietly.

Oberon paused and looked back. Gerard had put his foot down on the Pattern, and the blue sparks washed over his feet.

Oberon watched his son make it to through a few easy curves, low sweepers and hit the First Veil. His motion slowed to nothing, and to Oberon it looked like both of his kids had halted.

"You idiot," whispered the King and left, shutting and locking the door behind him.

The idiot strove. Time was agony. Gerard saw his sixteen years of play, almost as little as his brother by Paulette, playing with him as bastards in the courtyard while Oberon's real kids played in the library. He was whip-thin, underfed, and yet somehow Dad's favorite. Random was smaller, smarter, and filled with rude words. Sometimes the two boys sat in a corner and just swore, cursing, until Gerard ran out of vocabulary and Random could talk a mile a minute. That was how Gerard learned what a damn was, who a shithead was, and how to fuck. The cooks beat them with spoons, but Oberon snuck Gerard a few toys on the side. Random got kicked and learned more swear words.

Gerard broke through the First Veil, and he knew something again. He got it. He understood. Gerard was not ready for the Pattern. Corwin, Caine, and Julian had waited until they were decades old. Benedict was already older than centuries, maybe millennia. Gerard was sixteen and what Random called a pissant. He was going to die too.

Gerard got stupid and kept walking.

The Second Veil was murder because Oberon didn't love him. Oberon had use for another son, one he could raise right to show those bitches he was better than them. Their kids came out wrong, but Gerard was going to be right, and it was all Clarissa's fault, whose family hated Corwin's legitimacy. It was Moins, some piece of fish-ass, who somehow thought bearing a kid, a useless daughter at that, gave her airs. Dybele, who at least knew she was just a lay and would shut-up about it. And Paulette, who dumped her kid when she learned Random wasn't going to get his mother a queenship or even a princess consort.

Gerard came out stupider, because he didn't know nothing mattered any more, and he walked for Random.

Into the Grand Curve the air no longer burned in his but kissed his lips with fire. The sparks of Pattern-fire were no more harmless but scalded him. They got in his eyes, burned his fingers, tore his hair. They shredded his face. A vortex burned, one Gerard unlearned even scared Oberon, a force more powerful than their father at the center of the universe. It burned in a circle and consumed Random. The little boy would ran didn't run

any more, but lay on the ground, crying. Their father was gone.

Gerard stormed the helix of Pattern-fire, picked Random up, and bludgeoned his way through the wall of the Unicorn's power with nothing but sheer, stupid will. On the far side Random was still crying and Gerard wasn't strong enough to carry him, but he did it anyway and hit the Third Veil.

He saw the future. In walking the Pattern, Gerard was remade in his own will, and he was remaking himself without knowing the truth. He wasn't defying a reality he understood; he was turning it off in his mind. Oberon wouldn't love him, their family didn't matter, and Gerard was making himself ignorant by doing so. He was making himself less in his head, and his father only respected power.

"If I refuse to be great, than I shall be Gerard the Lesser, least of he who walked in and he who walked out. But I will walk out," whispered the big kid to his crying brother, and charged the Third and terrible Final Veil.

Random had never admitted he heard that, and they'd never spoken about it since.

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Now was later. Like in his memories, Gerard exited the Grand Curve. He'd forgotten it all. Stupidity made him forget things. He'd forgotten how his family worked, how they thought, who they were, and who they weren't. Stupidity and delusion are closely tied, and he had found them when he wanted them, his first time through the Pattern. Now he carried a bag of rings through the Pattern while his siblings Random, Benedict, and Random's silly little wife Vialle watched from the doorway.

"Hey, Random!" yelled Gerard between gasps. He'd soaked his shirt and trousers. His steps slowed even as the resistance lifted. The pause between the Grand Curve and the Third Veil wasn't like between the earlier veils, just an instant of breathing space and a few steps between agonies. Gerard took the moment to talk as his feet plodded. "You remember the last time we did this?"

There was a long silence.

"I remember," called Random slowly.

"Do you remember?" repeated Gerard.

"Yeah. I remember," said Random.

Benedict glanced at them but deemed it beneath his notice. He turned back to gasping Gerard striving for the center of the Pattern. Vialle understood something else, but didn't know what. She put her hand on her husband's arm.

He took it in both of his and put his fingers through hers.

"I know what he's asking, and yeah, I remember," he told her in a voice so low he was talking to himself. Vialle understood then that inside Random's self, she was there.

"Good!" yelled Gerard.

Random said nothing but squeezed Vialle's fingers.

"How is your hand?" asked Benedict.

Gerard held it up, and the bandages had rotted away. His skin steamed with blue mist. Fires jumped from the pattern to his body and sizzled over flesh, burning in fractal lines like wildfires on the prairie. Underneath the searing of skin lay fresh pink flesh.

"It hurts, like frostbite is wearing off and I'm feeling again. Imagine pins and needles, where the pins are on fire, the needles red hot, and they've got razors for friends. But I feel my fingers again!" and Gerard wiggled his fingers.

"What an odd way to put it," said Benedict to Random, but the brothers did not further discuss.

The sparks were over his head now. He was within them seeing nothing but what he'd brought to the pattern. He had memories and his family. Defy it as he would, on the Pattern the blood of Oberon was who he was. What he had done on the Patten was him. Now he kept walking, and resistance built in the final test, the Third Veil. Resistance built until it felt as if Gerard had planted himself before a wall and tried to walk into it. He moved by atoms, the uncertainty of his position, whether he was moving at all, spread forward and within it Gerard's will pushed against the final veil. He was who he was, his family was who they had always been, and he had nothing but what he brought with him. And what he had brought with him was a bag of gold rings.

A power lay on Gerard that didn't try to fight him. It didn't overpower the strongman of Amber, nor wrap him in orcish metal. It lied to him and showed him power by visions, and as the Pattern burned the gold, rings begged him to listen to what they had to say.

Gerard said no. He stumbled out the far side, fell like Random had to his hands and knees, and made a gasping table in the center of Dworkin's work, the Pattern of Amber.

For a while he breathed.

"Are you dead?" asked Random.

"Let's not do this again!" replied Gerard.

Gerard thought about rings. He took the package out and lobbed it across the pattern. It smacked onto the floor and slid nearly to Random's feet. But Gerard was still thinking.

Nine there had been, and five there were here. Bleys had one. The girl from where the dragon had arisen had had another, but that one was in the bag now. Four others remained at large.

Fiona entered the cavern running, dress lifted. This was, she would never admit under torture, the failing of dresses. She had to hike them up to get anywhere, and in that moment, her gut said, Don't Trump! But she arrived while Gerard lay at the center of the room, and Benedict watched, thinking of his own hand and the Black Breath with which his hand was inflicted, though he didn't know the name. Random yelled Gerard needed to do more cardio, like the big lug he was, and Vialle yelled encouragement.

"You did it! Have a snack!" yelled Vialle, and the king of grim Amber wrapped her in his arms from behind.

"Is he done?" asked Fiona. "Are they clean?"

"Hell if we know. There're the rings," replied Random and pointed at the bag on the ground.

Fiona didn't touch it. She stared.

"How's your arm?" repeated Benedict.

"Good, good. Throbs a little. Feels like I hit a wall with a hammer. The rest of me feels like I hit a wall too, but the arm isn't bad. It's not numb like before."

Fiona looked back and forth, and her eyes narrowed. Her beautiful face turned suspicious and hard, but almost instantly turned back to a practiced smile, one of such clever work its mastery was in how natural she appeared. No one saw her intermediary expression for Fiona was not an amateur. Corwin had glimpsed this skill of hers but never understood it, never employed it himself, and anyway, he was gone.

A sense of presence came, and Fiona blanked her mind. She fanned her cards. None caught her thumb like opposite-pole magnets seeking each other across space. The attempted trump call vanished. Her face betrayed nothing.

One thing Fiona had taught young Flora, many years, feuds, and a few murders ago, was that one could think very hard while smiling, and other people had a tendency to ignore this possibility. Smiling took one out of their time. People tended to think of others in terms of themselves, and smiling was the ultimate way to deflect someone's attention back to themselves. Fiona had often thought Flora had ignored her until noticing that through the regencies of Eric and Corwin, Flora had somehow always wound up on the winning side. What's more, she'd done so while never doing more than being pretty and occasionally smiling.

Fiona often wondered if she was as blind as her brothers, or if awareness of their blindness had blinded her as well. She knew she played mind games with herself, but this one she wasn't sure if she was winning. She was closer to Florimel than any of the others, but they didn't really like each other.

Outwardly smiling while Gerard gasped and her brothers watched him, inwardly she decided the rings were the most important problem for her to deal with and inspected them without touching. From her purse she took a small mirror with an intricate tracery behind the glass, a silver pattern within the silver backing that reflected light so finely it was normal invisible. Now, in the presence of the Pattern of Amber, that silver pattern on her mirror glowed like submerged phosphorescent algae under breaking waves. Fiona examined the ring bag from all directions.

Finding nothing, she used a small stylus to tease the cashmere bag open. She examined the rings once more or, more accurately, examined their reflection in her mirror. The bag still lay on the rough cavern floor, and she had to crouch uncomfortably to get a good angle.

Again finding nothing, she took a deck of trumps from her purse as well, and slid them under the rings one at a time. Instead of the major arcana, those bearing the faces of her family and home, she used intricately painted cards of the minor arcana. She ran through the deck right-side up and reversed.

By the time she was done her siblings had come over to watch, and Fiona grimaced to realize they would learn something of her methods. It was unavoidable. She met Random's gaze and glanced at Vialle's blind eyes. She noted Benedict's clinician's expression, and exhausted Gerard sitting at the center of the Pattern.

"They're clean," Fiona reported.

"You don't sound confident," observed Benedict.

"How much confidence to you expect?" she demanded, putting her accoutrements away and standing up. "It is magic out of shadow, and there was an evil will on them. The will is gone, but I've never trusted them.."

"Would you wear one?" asked Random.

In a fit of pique Fiona reached down and grabbed the bag, and poured gold rings onto her palm. She jiggled them around like marbles, all five at one time. A vision of Bleys hit her, her brother carrying a bag of nine gold rings in shadow, one for each of her brothers in Amber. She poured them back into the cashmere bag.

"There is no will upon them, but they are still very dangerous. Don't touch them unwisely."

While Gerard walked the Pattern:

Caine knew he was far too smart to fall prey to the guile of dragons. That the large creature was intelligent, powerful, and evil did not bother him. Caine avoided swimming with sharks and sailing into hurricanes. The thing that worried him was that his siblings weren't wise enough to handle the dragon. Spait must be killed, and quickly, before one of his idiot brothers made a mistake.

Leaving the tower where Julian and Fiona kept the prisoner he paused in a window alcove to think and have a cigarette, and the thought inhabiting his mind was dragons.

The ground levels of Castle Amber still perched on the high sides of Kolvir, and where Oberon's house didn't rise into turrets, the ground falling away provided the same effect. This alcove was an enlarged casement, double window panes set into the outer wall some four hundred feet up a cliff on one side and down a short flight of stairs from the kitchens on the other. It had been quarried not built. Cutting of the stone made benches on either sides of the window, and housekeeping covered the seats with old embroidery. Caine didn't think the seats cushions, folded blankets really, had been washed in some time.

He smoked menthol cigarettes and flicked the butts into space. Wind tried to creep in his open window, and he let it because the wind blew clean and mild. It was warm with afternoon. Down below, Lesser Amber endured a rainstorm, but in Oberon's castle, True Amber dwelled in the warm airs above the weather. He wedged a wax candle between the window and the frame so he didn't have to keep sparking matches and stared at the rainstorm attacking the harbor far below.

The dragon Spait hid in Arden, but Caine couldn't see it. He didn't know which ribbon of silver was the Mellengroth. He didn't see a river with white fetid growth, like a cold sore, that Spait's mere had developed, but there were hills in the way. Julian would know which hill was which. Caine finished his cigarette and flicked it spinning out the window, harder than before, with power. It plummeted into the gray haze over the City of Amber, and Caine felt pleased he didn't have to live down there, in the city, unless he wanted to.

He lit another and stared again at Arden. He did see dark bits of forest but many of them. Did trees grow black? Probably. Surely some did. Julian would know.

Impatient with his own ignorance, he took out his trumps and shuffled them.

Gerard walked the pattern. The trump felt cold, but it rang. Caine could still see Gerard's form under blue sparkles, so his brother was approaching the first veil. Sympathetic fires gleamed within his cigarette cherry, turning it blue as well, and it rang like tinnitus.

Caine forgot about calling Julian and breathed for a while. His sense of self faded. His mind slowed. When the smoke died he did not light another. He imagined his mental armor, his old grudges, stray thoughts, wariness, and cautions flowing down his body like rivers to the sea. He let his self leave his body through his fingers and toes. He breathed in stillness, let calm replace Caine like the changing of the tides, and the cards lay heavy. His mind opened, allowing stray thoughts to wash in and out, and his hands began to move, shuffling his cards.

Sparks leaped from Gerard's card to Random's. He put his little brother aside. Benedict gleamed too. Caine shuffled his crippled brother out. He shuffled and shuffled, forming bridges and collapsing them, and dealt hands of nothing to shuffle them back in. Like the waves, his consciousness came and went, and at one point, he looked down at the cards in his lap.

Random, Benedict, and Gerard stood together in the Pattern chamber. The King and Master of Arms watched the other Admiral of the fleet walk the Pattern.

Was Gerard going for ships? Were they talking about him? What were they saying? What was so important Gerard was undertaking the Pattern? One of their brothers had died doing that.

But if the need was vital, Gerard would be one they could afford to lose.

But Caine might not be able to afford what Gerard gained.

Caine needed to know.

He lost himself in movement of his hands while sitting against the castle walls. His will, his intentions, and his thoughts vanished. His worries and cares drained like the tide. His armor dropped, and his mind opened. He saw Gerard finish the Grand Curve and assault the Third Veil.

He was completely unprepared when the card of Gerard flashed a final, brilliant time like captured lightning, and the deck itself screamed.

His hand burned, his ring-finger itched, and he felt like he was about to go mad. A splitting pain, a migraine come without warning and into him who'd never suffered from them before, shrieked and died. The agony boiled out of him, and the cry evaporated from the card. It wailed, but distantly, vanishing, and when it finally uttered no more, the cry didn't end with a coup de gras, but rather as if it ran out of breath. The cards went silent. Something terrible, old, and powerful had just suffered a horrible wound, and Caine, opening himself as he did to spy upon the cards, had had no defenses against it.

Caine opened his eyes shaking and lit another cigarette. It fell out of his mouth and burned his hands, and he dropped his deck out the window while smacking the butt off his skin. Trumps tumbled down the cliff face, spreading out and spinning edge on, knifing into the storm. Trembling like an old alcoholic, he beat the flame out of the candle with the last cigarette of the pack and broke it in half at the filter. He couldn't move his right hand, and he couldn't think. The left side of his face tingled.

A maid found him lying on the floor. She screamed for EMS.