

Chapter 12

In the center of the Pattern Gerard sat back on his heels. He'd amazed many old and experienced coaches with that move. To say nothing of the splits, few people he'd trained with over the years had expected that simple and casual flexibility, even in places where sitting on one's heels was the way sitting was done.

If there was something that disappointed the son of Oberon about creation, it was that in all of shadow the ancient masters of combat rarely won against young man-hippos. It was so disillusioning. Old sifus on mountains should be masters of all forms of combat and obliterate young, foolish mortals. They rarely did. Young hippos won. Could anything be sadder?

Gerard was now older than any of his senseis, and he was still a man-hippo. Such was the difference of Substance over Shadow.

Thinking back he only had about five hundred years of really serious hand-to-hand training. Maybe eight hundred if he included physical training because there's a technique all its own in throwing trees at people. But in the spinning disillusionment carousel of life, Gerard wanted to find someone who truly demonstrated the superiority of technique over youth.

Ganelon had. Gerard laughed. That had been perhaps an unequal fight. Good. The old wolf had known something. Gerard lamented his father's passing and was glad he was dead.

He knew his mind wandered because he did not want to make the choice in front of him. He sat at the center of the Pattern, and with a thought, albeit one tied to a definitive act of will, he could order the Pattern to send him anywhere. In Substance or in Shadow, the Pattern was an omnidirectional trump without need for another end. He could order it to send him to a Shadow of his desire, perhaps where short dark-haired women yearned to sleep with large bearded men.

Or, he thought, he could do his job.

Corwin and Bleys had sank half Caine's fleet in their doomed attempt on the throne, and much of the rest had been destroyed by creatures of the black road. Officers and sailors had been butchered. Amber needed ships.

Gerard, knowing himself not a terribly smart man, had learned fighting by finding someone better at it than he and asking. He aimed to improve the Navy the same way. Legends of one Cirdan the Shipwright bubbled through shadow until reaching his ears, and the prince thought nothing of seeking him. That had not ended well.

"Benedict, a question for you," called Gerard, still seated in the black center of the Pattern.

The other four, Benedict, Random, Vialle, and Fiona, paused. Benedict spoke.

"Ask!"

"Do you have any interest in heading back to Forochet?" called Gerard.

Silence invaded the Pattern hall, or perhaps reclaimed its home. This place measured dialogue in words per century.

"The original purpose of going there was to speak to the Shipwright," said Random when Benedict didn't swiftly respond. "You've all said there were no trees where you went. Nor did you see any signs of shipping."

"Yes," agreed Gerard. "But we came at it from the north. We left from Messemar's arctic forests when they said they could lay ten keels that year and deliver the first vessel ten years hence. We didn't bother to come round to temperate climes because Julian and Caine wanted Fiona to demonstrate how quickly she could traverse shadow.

"But so we arrived in the north. Forochet was almost icelocked, and one wouldn't expect to find a shipwright up there anyway. Rumors put this Cirdan someplace called Beleriand, but we didn't find that, and heading east we landed in Forochet because it was convenient. There the orcs found us before we found Cirdan.

"My point is that we still need ships. Corwin and Bleys sank half of ours, and the Courts of Chaos did their best to get the rest. Fiona has immense powers of shadow walking, I'll not dispute, but I can just tell the Pattern to take me to Cirdan!"

After a long pause among the others Benedict said, "Yes, but not alone."

Now Random and Fiona looked to their tall eldest brother.

"Gerard is correct. We do need ships, and we should seek out the greatest ship makers of shadow to make them. Cirdan may be one. But do not go alone, Gerard. Wait."

Gerard nodded but looked impatient.

"Then let me find the rest of those rings. Nine there were. Five are in the bag. I'll have the Pattern send me to one of the others," he suggested.

"Don't— don't do that," said Fiona, waving her hand. "In Forochet I spoke with Bleys and he said he was going to get rid of them. If he's dropped them into the ocean, you'll accomplish nothing but dying if the Pattern sends you there."

"But Bleys was wearing one in Arden," replied Gerard. "And he disappeared much as Brand used to. If the ring gives him power, there's no reason he would discard it."

"It is shadow, and unlikely to affect someone of Amber blood," replied Benedict.

Gerard dismissed him. "If I, a son of Amber, eat, I'm full whether the food is of Amber or shadow. If I'm too hungry to walk the shadows and eat food of shadow, can't I then walk shadow again? Amber and shadow are not wholly different, or have you forgotten what we learned of Dworkin? Are we not, after all, only first of shadows but among them?"

The Amberites outside the Pattern glowered at this, and Gerard was treated to identical expressions on two of his brothers and his sister. Only Vialle looked different, but her expressions were always hard for him to read.

"You're unusually savvy, Gerard," grumbled Random.

Gerard replied, "Thank you," blandly.

The big man added, "But I don't think we should waste the effort I've expended walking this thing. We still don't know where or if Cirdan lives, nor if these rings are actively malicious or merely dangerous elements out of shadow. I have no idea where Bleys is. There's a dragon in Arden, though that's the least of our concerns because Julian will take care of it as soon as he finishes screwing around. We're still wrapped in problems, so I think I should—"

"You're right," interrupted Random.

Gerard stopped talking, confused.

"You're right, Gerard. Go to a shadow of desire and find out what's wrong with your arm. If it's cured, walk to a place to prepare an expedition to Forochet, one undertaken with seriousness. Benedict, go down and find the men and women who went with you last time. Rally up a crew and meet Gerard. If his arm is well, you'll walk the Pattern next. If not we have a more important issue than ships. Fiona, go with them. Find out what malice or danger is inside these rings, and I expect you'll need to go to their place of origin to find out. Bleys has one. Three are missing. Find out what they are. And Gerard!"

"What?" the other yelled back.

"Don't die!"

They vanished from the Pattern hall, and the fires of the tracery burned low, embers under the castle.

#

It rained in the City of Amber. The storm didn't seem to come with a source, but engendered itself in water and cold, dumping nothing but chill and bitterness on the city. Wind threw muddy spray at the buildings. Dogs whined until their masters let them in. It fell on the just and unjust alike.

Pandemonium raged through Central Navy Receiving Hospital when LtA Dracken arrived. Civilian and military police argued jurisdiction in the hallways, doctors yelled at administrators, and two of the nurses were crying. Dracken pulled rank and bullied his way into Cpt Armist's room, stopping in the doorway.

"Oh, Captain," whispered Old Broke, soft and mourning. The big man on little legs slumped over, and he leaned against the wall.

"You all right, sir?" asked one of the military police asked, a younger Seaman. Seaman Ransky had worked morgue duty for years and transferred out on a 'Peace of Mind' reassignment. That got him gigs like this. He squatted by the bedside with the victim, taking notes and sketches. He didn't move anything, not even Armist's hand that hung from under the covers and dangled by the dark space under the bed.

The room was in bad shape. Armist had thrashed and fought before she died, and tied herself in knotted sheets. Her arms and legs had turned purple and bulged around the ties. Brain-splatter covered white linen. The fireplace poker lay next to her, still crusted with the Captain's skull. Seaman Ransky hadn't moved it, and Dracken intuited the metal poke with a hook like half a fleur de lis had been discarded, its job done. Armist had survived Forochet, she'd survived the float, she'd come home and survived the knife attack, and—

It was worse in harbor or in garrison. It hurt Dracken's soul when he thought his sailors were safe.

"I thought she was going to make it," whispered the LtA. "After that attack and her getting mugged, and somehow she survived, and— Ah, jeez."

The old sailor looked crumpled. Ransky saw Dracken as his uniform, a shirt fallen off a hanger and standing on starch and ironing alone.

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir, we— Yes, sir."

Dracken knew the cops. None of them had anything to say. He walked out and leaned against the wall. A pair of nurses had another patient on a wheeled chair, less sophisticated than what Dracken had seen in shadow but more comfortable. The boy in it looked like hell. Better than Armist, but as close to dead as a man could get and live.

The patient looked up at Dracken. His eyes were dead and flat.

"You all right, son?" asked the Lieutenant Admiral.

"You're dripping," said the dead-eyed patient.

Dracken looked down. He was. His rain-gear was soaked, and he'd splattered dirty rainwater on the floor. His gloves felt like bags of water.

"Aye, son. I am. I walked, and it's raining out there."

"Old Broke, right?" asked the patient. "I worked the docks. They called you Old Broke?"

"Do not call me that, sir," snapped Dracken with excess formality.

"You walked here from the Navy yard, Old Broke?" asked the patient, and something caught in Dracken's chest. His heart felt like it forgot how to beat.

The patient looked down at Dracken's soaked shoes and even mud splatters on both sides. He looked up. Dracken noticed his eyes weren't so dead any more. Before he'd looked like a corpse, but now something animated those holes in his head.

Windows to the soul, the words came unbidden to Dracken's mind.

The patient looked down at Dracken's soaking wet gloves, dripping on the fresh-mopped floor.

"You walk well, Old Broke," whispered the patient with bright, cold eyes.

Maybe it was the wind and chill outside seeping in, or Armist's corpse, beaten to death, but Dracken felt cold: terribly, terribly, cold. A nurse wheeled the patient away but for some reason took him backwards.

Obrecht stared at LtA Dracken as the nurse took him to a different room, away from the excitement. He never looked away until Dracken turned and ran outside into the cold rain.

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Benedict, Master of Arms of Amber, currently one-handed and that hand inflicted with the Black Breath, climbed the stairs with his half-brother Random, King of Amber, his half-sister Fiona, a sorceress of some skill, and Vialle, Queen of Amber. They did not talk.

Random thought. Benedict heard his deep thought in the uncharacteristically slow and methodical placement of his feet. Usually the little bastard scampered, but now he strode. Vialle walked at his side and had taken his hand. Benedict wasn't sure if Random noticed. His gait hadn't changed when she did.

Fiona walked next to Benedict and neither of them said anything to each other. She walked in nonsensical finery, the ultimate indulgence of appearance over function. Earlier she'd used her hands to hold her clothing

while she ran. Fiona was the sort of twit to have boobs smithed into her armor before going into battle. She carried a cashmere bag of rings of power from shadow.

Benedict thought that if these rings of power, or any, truly were as dangerous as they appeared, someone would have sought them out in shadow and used them long since. He also distrusted that supposition. Applied to an invention like the stirrup, that train of logic said that stirrups were useless because if two little footholes of leather and iron were useful, they would have been invented before the chariot.

At the top of the stairs Random paused. "Can I make one request of you two before the next crisis hits? Can you please try to get along for once?"

"We are," said Benedict.

"Do you think you have telepathy to know our thoughts?" asked Fiona.

"Your Majesty, Caine lies dead and the Courts of Chaos send storms to Amber! We're doomed!" screamed the first butler who saw them.

"Goddammit, I ask— that was not a request!" yelled Random at nothing. He turned swiftly on Fiona and demanded, "Is he dead?"

She shuffled out her trumps again and found Caine's card. Her fingers brushed it. "No."

Random looked fast between the everyone, exempting only his wife from suspicion. He glared at the butler. "What do you mean a storm from the Courts of Chaos comes?"

"It rains in the city!" yelled the butler.

"But what's Chaotic about it?" demanded Random.

"It's really bad!"

In a language unknown to Amber, Vialle whispered softly to Random, "No murder."

Random glowered at her too. She didn't see, and if she knew, she ignored him.

"Fiona, are you still avoiding trumps?" Random asked.

She replied, "I'd like to."

"Then please escort my wife to Caine. I'll be along shortly. Benedict, a moment please. Vialle, I'll be with you soon."

He was wearing his crown, thought Vialle. She assented quietly, touched his arm, and took Fiona's. The girls departed, taking the butler with them.

The brothers stood alone for a moment.

"The way I see it, Dad would have either handled this himself or ordered you go instead. What do you think?"

Benedict frowned, but Random thought his brother's face just did that. Looking like he wanted to argue, Benedict instead agreed. "Likely. I can't guess what he would do now, but he did both of those many times."

Random nodded. "I think so too. Will you take care of this for me?"

"What, exactly, do you want done?"

"I want a naval party ready to head for Cirdan, including a few covert teams to recon Middle Earth. I'd like confirmation the storm in Amber is just a storm. What do you think?"

"I think Dad would never have asked me," the tall man replied, leaning ever so slightly on the word 'asked.' "I'll take care of it."

"I don't think he would have either." Random almost smiled. "Thank you. If there is a dragon, leave him alone. That's Julian's problem, and you-"

"I know tactics, Random."

Random almost smiled again but this time mirthlessly. "Then I'll leave it to you. Take care."

They stared at each other without blinking until Random walked away, heading after the girls.

The tall Master of Arms took himself to his chambers and donned a hook. It was a blunt, utilitarian thing that fit over his stump, the standard issue to Amberite servicemembers who needed one. He cinched it on with his teeth. The hook had no blades and a point as sharp as a pair of pliers, but like pliers it split in two. He could grab small things, pens, paper, a tea cup, and controlled it with small muscle movements in his forearm. With the hook and his numb hand, he swam into a sealskin cloak and produced a personal trump, one of the Second Naval Headquarters of Amber. First Headquarters was up here and served as more of liaison office than anything else. It was four rooms in a suite. Second was five buildings, two yards, and eight piers separated from the rest of the harbor by jetties.

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The nurses said Obrecht was doing really well, just really well. Maria, a heavysset woman who called everyone baby, said, "Oh, baby, you're doing so well. You'll be healthy in no time. I never doubted."

"Thank you," hissed Obrecht.

Obrecht remembered Maria screaming when he arrived, but he said nothing.

No one could tell day from night as rain fell on Amber, relentlessly drowning the city until the streets turned to rivers and stairways to rapids. In lower neighborhoods mud encroached on stone-paved roads. It formed a veneer over the flat stones that Oberon's architects had used to pave the roads centuries before. The wealthy, men and women, owned shoes with tall platforms under the toe and heel for just such weather, while the middle class merged with the poor by going barefoot. Barefoot people walked where they would, holding their shoes under the coats if they had them. Rich stepped from wide flat mud to wide flat mud, for most of the time those flats meant a great flagstone lay an inch underwater, and the nobility wouldn't dirty their boots unnecessarily. Sometimes there wasn't, and they sank into puddles.

Navy policy ordered patients got at least one hour of 'sunshine' every twelve, so while the military police cordoned off the hall where Captain Armist lay dead, Maria wheeled Obrecht to the terrace. An inch outside the roof water fell in a cataract. Beyond that the courtyard was dark with night.

Obrecht sniffed, and nurse Maria wondered if he suffered from nasal blockages. There was nothing to smell, for the deluge washed all scent from the air outside. Air inside the hospital was muggy with old smells Maria had long since tuned out: blood, cleaners, and rotting wood.

"Enjoy your sunshine, baby," said Maria. "We have singers coming by tomorrow, and I'm sure they'll want to visit you."

"Singers?" hissed Obrecht.

"Oh, yes. Singers. Because you're doing so well. You're going to be healthy in no time."

"Thank you."

Nurse Maria left him to his sunshine.

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In the forest of Arden a black spot grew among the trees, webbed by spiders, infested by vermin, and soaked by rain. At its center a curve of the River Mellengroth made a black lake far deeper than it appeared. The banks fell sharply like cliffs.

In the middle of this lake the dragon Spait appeared to sleep, floating on the surface like an innocent log. Other coils of dragonflesh wound about the pool, seemingly unconnected to the head. All lay still. Webbing frosted the water surface.

One eye cracked open just a slit.

"I thought you were faking, old wyrm," said Bleys, standing on the bank.

The dragon eye rolled over him, and over the undisturbed cobwebs behind him. No living thing but a spider could have moved through that without disturbing it, and Bleys was four legs short.

"Hello, mighty Prince of Amber," said Spait. He kept his mouth underwater, and his words bubbled up, seeming to come from everywhere in the lake all at once.

"I am. Now a little bird told me something, Spait. It told me your name, and it told me of your kind. It told me of your immense and insatiable hunger. It told me that it is hunger that dominates you and your ilk, and you will put all your immense power and guile to work to satisfy it. Now tell me, wyrm: do you hunger for the flesh of a Prince of Amber or two?"

"Oh great and noble prince, I am limitlessly curious about what else this bird has told you," said the dragon.