

Forochet 2

Orcs hit the headwall of the bay and died. Benedict dropped bodies down the bluff. The first few only fell a short distance and got caught on crags, for the bluff was steep but not sheer. The next slammed into the first. As more dead orcs fell, their weight built up, and with their limbs unlimbered from torso's by Benedict's sword, soon masses of them gave way. A pile of a dozen broke an outcropping and slid. They left a black and brown smear on the mud. Another ledge broke on the right, and dead orcs tumbled down pathway. Underneath Benedict the pathway curved back and forth, and half a score of dead orcs crashed into the curve of a switchback. The earth gave way behind them, and near frozen dirt fell as well. A cornice shattered, and dumped the bodies in ice. Blood froze.

"Benedict, we're coming!" yelled Gerard and ran through their fleeing sailors.

He harangued the men, called for help, and grabbed people by the shoulders, spinning them around to face the cliff. But their eyes were empty. They uttered no defense. One man, someone Gerard had marked before for fearlessness, he picked up and held before him, trying to reach the sailor by shouting. The sailor did not respond. Slack jawed, in Gerard's hands his head shook and hung on a flaccid neck, but when the bearded man put him down the sailor found his feet and ran.

"They are not princes of Amber," said Bleys, running up behind.

"I know him. His name is Trace. He's no coward," said Gerard.

"But no prince of Amber."

Gerard scowled. Bleys ran ahead, dashing up the twisting pathway towards Benedict, and vaulting over piles of corpses. Gerard followed. Along the way he picked up a sword. Someone had thrown it from the top of the hill, and it stuck in a drift. The blade was short and heavy, meant for close-work below decks. Little dips on the cutting edge remembered old notches, polished out by patience and a whetstone. The leather handle had been worn smooth, and turned black by sweat and skin oils.

The corpses were freezing when the clouds opened into snow. Fat slow flakes turned even blood white. Bleys crawled to the top, and saw Benedict alone, standing on a defensive platform with orcs all around him.

Benedict was tall, whip-thin, one-handed, and so strict of face that he looked gaunt. He wore orange, yellow, and brown, and carried a heavy sword in his left hand. His right arm ended in a stump, wrapped in leather and tan fabric. He looked like none of his brothers except in the power of his gaze. Bleys laughed while he fought and Gerard scowled, but Benedict slew orcs like he solved math problems.

Below the rout had turned mad. Those from land ran screaming into the water and clawed at the ship sides, ignoring ladders as they tried to crawl their way in. The sailors toiled furiously, dragging their comrades aboard. No ship was ready to sail without leaving men in the harbor, but long piers stood empty. Two fresh jetties stuck out from the rock beach, neither more than twenty feet long, but high above water. They were empty.

Bleys looked back at Benedict, and the black mass of orcs.

"Damn, I wish I could put some grace to this," he said, and red-cloaked Bleys charged.

Bleys dashed over the lip, Gerard followed, and three princes of Amber stood on the headwall together. An unending army of orcs marched against them, one the brothers had seen from above stretching across the high plains from lands they did not know had been called Eriador. The forts burned down, and orcs crawled

over the walls, covered in as much ash as their own filth. Men still clambered into boats in the harbor and fell like stones on the decks, half dead. The skeleton crews worked like madmen, but their crewmates climbed freezing and wet onto the decks as snow fell. The princes of Amber slew orcs.

When dead orcs lay in piles like loose rocks on the high mountains, the princes of Amber killed more. When bodies in iron and leather lay so thick on the ground there was no telling blood from dirt, the princes of Amber killed orcs. When the sun had set behind clouds but fallen torches still burned with the red, lidless flame, when the orcs tired, and still Benedict, Bleys, and Gerard slew, finally the horde paused. They drew back, and the three princes of Amber waited. The sun was setting behind the clouds, but they were too thick for its motion to be seen. The gloom merely deepened as the princes waited.

Slowly nine horses picked their way through the crowd. These bloody stallions had fur black as orcs, but shot through it spikes and nails driven through flesh into harness. On their backs hunched shrouded riders. Wind tugged the tatters of the clothes. They wore long cloaks and carried dark swords. Their fists and feet were mailed in cunning black steel. Benedict's fortifications smoldered, and the riders stopped in a line, facing the princes of Amber.

Gerard took a step back and glanced down over the edge. "Whatever madness is down there has taken them. The men on land run in circles and scream. Those on the ship have fallen out of the rigging and they hide below. I see eyes looking up through the hatches. Those were brave men who cower."

Benedict nodded slowly.

The Nine drew their swords and saluted. Their chipped and jagged blades had been magnificent, but the edges sported burred steel, oozing some dark fluid that had crusted in their scabbards and broke on the draw. It matched their tattered robes and the fraying straps of their saddles.

The three returned the salute as one, and the Princes of Amber waited. The Nine lowered their swords. The orcs drew back and watched, holding tall beacons that cast more smoke than light.

It was the horses who screamed first. The black animals shrieked, and the riders spurred them. The Amberites dove in different directions.

Benedict went down between the legs of two horses, cut their forelocks, and the horses crashed into piles. He rolled upright behind as a third dark rider reared before him. The eldest prince of Amber spun his fat blade in midair, and while it hung, Benedict snatched the horse's hooves and yanked as he kicked out the rear legs. The horse fell to De-ashi-barai, landed on top its rider, and Benedict caught his blade to slay them both.

Beside him Gerard simply punched the first horse dead, smashing its face open like a rotten fruit and unseating the rider with his fist in an explosion of gore. He parried another coming at him, spun his blade and trapped the other's, and swung his free hand wide. It passed right through the rider and stove in the horse's skull on the backswing.

Other black riders charged, got destroyed, and Bleys stepped through a pile of falling robes as dead men and horses crashed to the ground. He joined Gerard in ganging up on one, cut the rider apart, and by the time they emerged from the pile of dead horses, Benedict was done. Nine horses lay dead, and their riders collapsed into piles.

"They are the rings," said Bleys, reaching down and picking one up with the point of his broadsword. "See this? It is the rider. The rest is shadow and a horse. Take the ring, and they can't reform."

"Don't touch them," said Gerard, holding his fist. "I touched one, and now my hand hurts."

Bleys nodded and started flicking gold rings into a bag with the point of his sword.

"That wasn't what I— oh, whatever." Gerard sighed and looked back to the ships.

Benedict ignored them and looked at the orcs. Frozen in their circle, their torches were dead. The other two princes had collected half the rings before the orcs screamed again, and this time they ran, shrieking, the way they had come. They crashed into the smoldering walls, eschewed the paths, and burned themselves on the few great beams that thus far resisted cold. Benedict waited until the last of them was gone and looked at his brothers. His left hand opened and flexed into a claw. He made a fist. His sword hand felt like it was cramping, but overlaying that was an odd numbness.

Bleys tucked the bag under his shirt, and Gerard looked over the bluff edge.

"The people are waking up. The sailors are climbing up above decks," he reported. He looked back at his brothers. "Go easy on them."

Bleys shrugged. "They're not princes of Amber."

"Come. They're retreating, but they'll be back," said Benedict, and he looked down the long plains.

The Blue Mountains rose to the west, but they deserved the name gray or brown now. Ash covered their peaks and molded their frosted heads. Further south the stumps began. First it was pine trees with narrow trunks, but beyond them elm, oak, and beech stumps filled the plain. They looked like a horde themselves, cut with axes instead of saws. The felling had been done crudely, and many stumps bristled with splinters. Some of the trees lay rotting among their roots.

Benedict looked back.

"I don't think we're going to find this Cirdan the Shipwright here. I don't think we're going to find any shipwright, and those orcs will be back. They're driven by something, something greater than this—" He poked a horse corpse with his blade. "And that whatever will not stop. Let's go."

"Retreating Benedict?" asked Bleys.

The other two didn't reply. Gerard lead the way, and the three princes of Amber walked down the pathway towards the harbor.

Trumpets blew on the sailboats when they were finally ready to leave.

Before the first ship sailed from Forochet, the first orc came back. Long trails of freezing blood smeared the rocks, and Bleys spotted him, creeping to the edge to watch. More came with night. The scions of Amber got them men ready and put food and water into them. They hung their heads in shame. Gerard shared a kind word and Bleys a joke, but Benedict shared nothing but discipline. They warmed those who had ignored the longboats and landing lines and swum to the ships.

Fiona arrived. She'd run from the high ledge and stopped to examine the battlefield, but otherwise hurried down. Julian and Caine met her. Caine had stayed to get the ships ready, and before Bleys could say anything, Benedict thanked him.

"That was the right thing to do," said tall Benedict. "We handled the fight, and we needed someone of the blood on board."

Bleys thought about saying something and didn't.

Julian dressed in hunter-green scales, hardened and anodized in the forges under Kolvir. Each scale lay loose and unpainted, but they turned verdant in any kind of sunlight. Under the clouds they lay dark. His armor rose to points over each shoulder, and mailed gloves hung at his belt. These were dragonscale, made like the rest, but the scales were smaller than fingernails. Like the others he carried a sword, and like Caine, Benedict affirmed him staying with the ship.

"It was correct," said Benedict, and Bleys swallowed hard at that.

A few more orcs appeared on the lip, and the six Amberites gathered to make a command decision.

"I say we abandon this place," said Benedict. "We came here looking for a shipwright, and in the three days we've been here, we've seen no ships. We saw nothing but cut trees and snow until those orcs attacked, and they're up there now."

Gerard nodded. "If this shadow has no ships, there's no reason for us to be here."

"The sooner the better," said Fiona. Since arriving she had watched the sky but would not say what for.

Bleys, Julian, and Caine didn't argue. Benedict announced he was going to trump King Random to tell him they were coming to find Fiona almost snatch his hand. She stopped herself, but stood with both hands open before him.

"Don't use those here," she said.

"Why? They're fine," said Benedict.

"Julian trumped us down from the mountain when the orcs attacked, and nothing happened," added Caine.

"You of all people—" Fiona didn't finish. "Just don't use the trumps here. They won't save much time anyway. I'll shift the shadows, and we can get to Amber harbor as fast as Random could run down to the bay and trump us through himself."

"Why?" repeated Benedict.

Fiona scowled. She didn't have the face for it, and the layers of cold-weather clothing made her look like a disgruntled teenager. She didn't relent.

"I don't know, and I don't like it. Let's just leave."

They didn't argue much, and soon the eight vessels of Amber put to sea. The few watching orcs did nothing. Lt Admiral Dracken told Benedict that they had lost no one. Many had taken sick of the cold; none had died.

As soon as they put to sea, Fiona brought the darkness. Night was already falling, but in an instant the sea turned pitch black. It spread behind and on either side until they sailed through a void marked by a single bright blue star in front. Each ship captain steered for the star while Fiona looked aft at the harbor, already gone to darkness.

"I want to be gone before real night hits," she admitted to Bleys. All of the others had other things to do and had gone to do them.

"Why?"

"Because I don't like those nine corpses."

"Don't worry." Her brother patted his pocket. "They were just shadows of their rings, and I've got the rings. The nine can't hurt us."

"Going to throw the rings overboard?" asked Fiona.

Bleys shrugged. "Probably."

"Do it in Amber," she said, indicating the black tunnel. "Where the seas are deep and shadows have no power. We'll be there in less than an hour."

Bleys nodded. "I'll hold onto them until we get there."

Fiona nodded, and the Amberite fleet sailed through darkness.