

## Julian and Caine in Arden

"Go after it!" yelled Random to Caine, waving at the receding dragon. Tall Caine in black and green stared imperiously at his little brother for a moment, but the king had already turned to the others.

"Julian, can you follow Bleys?" asked Random.

"If he's left Arden—" replied Julian when Benedict cut him off.

"Of course he has. Can you do it?" their eldest brother asked.

Julian considered him with an expression like the face of murder. "How do you expect me to track him? Do you see boot prints?"

Random continued swearing, ending with, "Help Caine track the dragon. If it's a dumb beast, kill it. If it's a menace to Amber, kill it. Otherwise find out what it was doing in the city and where it came from."

Turning away from the two sons of Rilga, he took a small deck of tarot cards from his pocket and shuffled out Fiona. Connection came almost immediately.

"How is she?" asked Random.

"She's been sedated and is currently receiving intravenous fluids. It's been fourteen hours here. We're not out of danger, but she lives."

Around his half-sister's head, Random could see white walls and low, uncomfortable chairs. A sign beside her indicated Receiving was down a hall to the left, and Out-Patient Services was around the corner. Fiona sat with her hands folded, and an old magazine in her lap. The title read, "Women in Modern Art."

"She went through a window, so that's to be expected," admitted Random.

"Random, she's wearing a ring."

The king paused. "That's nice?" he said, accenting it like a question.

Fiona looked displeased. "Random, her ring came from the shadow of Cirdan the Shipwright, from which we recently returned. Nine wraiths attacked us and were slain. Bleys took their rings. That was the fight where Gerard and Benedict got injured. Speaking of Gerard, he's here and getting examined for his hand. He's exhibiting signs of leprosy without showing any pathogen, which is downright odd. But the girl is wearing one of the Nine rings. Bleys said he was going to throw them into the sea. How is that possible?"

"About Bleys, you know that dragon? It was chasing him. We found them before he came to harm, but he started screaming something about thieves and disappeared. He vanished like Brand used to do, Fiona. How did he do that?"

"He can't. Neither he or I went through the living trump ritual."

"He did."

Fiona had long ago developed the sexy stare and used it instead of a blank expression when she was thinking. Her lips pursed artfully, and her face smoothed. Random hated it. He wasn't pleased to see her doing it now.

She asked, "Was he wearing a ring?"

"Probably. You know your brother. He likes flashy things."

Random glanced down. He wore Vaile's ring on his left hand, and his right thumb didn't either. He couldn't see his right fingers because they were behind the trump, a large card more than twice the area of a playing card.

He added, "I can ask the others."

"Please do."

"Why don't you come through? We need to find Bleys, and while I understand he can't do what he just did, he did it anyway."

"I can do that if you want," said Fiona. Random mouthed, 'but' even as she said it. "But time here flows faster \_\_\_"

"It will be fine. You can return," and Random offered his hand.

In shadow, Fiona rose in the waiting room and reached into the air before her. She stepped and disappeared, and her magazine fell to the ground.

Fiona stepped into Arden holding Random's other hand, and flipped it over. His wedding ring was simple and elegant, gold with a single piece of jade. It had worn a spot on his left ring-finger, and his hands were tanned around it. On Random's other hand, the one that held the trump, he wore an even less adorned ring about his ring finger. It was a plain gold band with no ornamentation at all.

"It's lovely," said Fiona. "Where did you get this?"

He stared into space for a moment before saying, "I don't remember. Shadow?"

"It's very nice." Fiona released his hand.

She turned around and saw Benedict and Florimel. The other brothers had already gone. Fiona walked directly to Benedict and said, "Gerard is being investigated for loss of feeling in his arm. No results are in, but they're looking at his hand."

Benedict nodded. "I'll ask him about it."

"Certainly." Fiona turned to Flora, smiled warmly, and took her hand. Without a change in expression, she flipped Florimel's hand over and revealed a small, unadorned gold ring around her right middle finger.

"It's lovely, dear. And you weren't wearing it when we set out this morning," said Fiona.

"Is this an elaborate way to ask to borrow it, sister dear?" asked Flora.

"Oh God, no."

"This is nice and all," interrupted Random. "But I still want to know where Bleys went."

"And I tried to tell you I don't know, and I can't find out easily."

"Try harder," instructed Benedict.

Fiona turned to him with a beautiful smile. She looked over his shoulder. "Where did he disappear?"

"On top of the redwood. Where the root's spread," said Random.

Fiona hiked up her skirts and leaped up the tree, skipping from branch to trunk. Ridges in the bark formed steps under her feet, and on top, she walked to the root-mass and sat down. She pulled out her own deck of trumps and started casting fortunes. Benedict joined her and stood watching with his arms folded before him.

Fiona drew and cast The Tower five times.

#

The brothers Caine and Julian had left before Fiona arrived. Putting his hounds to the chase, Julian rode great Morgenstern while his hawks flew above, and Caine rode Flow, one of the stable yard animals. They settled quickly into an old argument as the hounds split up to watch both sides of the river, heading downstream towards the ocean.

"You need to get your own horse, Caine," said Julian, watching the river surface for indications of particular depth. The hawks circled above.

"They're useless animals. Big, dumb, and inconvenient on a ship. Don't we need to go upstream?"

"No. This is the Mellengroth. It shoals not half a mile upstream of here, and a dragon wouldn't be able to cross without surfacing. I came from that direction, and the hounds didn't scent. They'd hit on a dragon."

"Is it in the river?" asked Caine.

"Not here. There are some pools up ahead it could hide in. How big did you say it was?"

"Ten to twelve feet around the breast, a hundred feet long. Most of that is tail. It's built like a serpent with four legs. No wings. One of the legs has Bley's sword in it, and I didn't see the beast run with it."

"If it's that size we can be sure it's not here," repeated Julian. "But we'll need to check the pools up ahead. Any sign it had gills?"

"Couldn't tell," admitted Caine.

Julian nodded.

"Here," said Caine, giving Julian something.

Julian took it curiously in gauntleted fingers. It was a small ring, gold and unmarked.

He looked over.

"We found them earlier. I have more. Flora and Random each took one."

"I'm not much for jewelry," said Julian, and Caine shrugged.

"Do with it as you will. Throw it in the river if you want. I won't be offended."

Testing him, Julian did, and it plopped into a standing ripple. Caine laughed, and they kept riding.

#

While Fiona glared at her trumps, Random asked Benedict of Forochet. The eldest brother had told the king this before, but with a special emphasis on the nine wraiths, Benedict repeated himself. He had gotten to the point where he, Bleys, and Gerard had slain all nine of the black riders when Fiona interrupted.

"No, you slew eight," she said.

For a moment Benedict regarded her. "They were all pretty dead," he said.

"Correct. There was one Bleys fought who did not immediately die. I struck him with a word of power from the mountainside," she said.

"Congratulations. You helped."

Fiona looked up and regarded him with a warm, gentle smile. "Aside from matters of veracity, the low and dumb tactics might interest you. The wraith was manipulating outcomes. Bleys inflicted two mortal wounds while I watched, yet the ringbearer was unharmed. It manipulated shadow, dear Benedict. It was shadow, and it manipulated it like we do."

"Yes, evil forces that manipulate shadows exist," agreed Benedict.

"And unlike the Courts of Chaos where you successfully executed the plan of our father, in Forochet these forces of shadow defeated you," replied Fiona.

"Both of you— God damn." Random stroked his face. "Fiona, do you think the wraiths could travel through shadow?"

"I don't know if they could. They didn't; they only controlled themselves," she replied.

Random sighed and shuffled out another trump. After staring at it for a while without saying anything, he put it away.

"I tried," said Fiona. "While I was trying to figure out where he went."

"So we don't know where he is, we don't know what happened to him, he's acting like a loony, and you think someone else in shadow has our own power?" demanded Random.

Fiona raised a hand. "Everything but that last part. I don't think the rings let one traverse shadow, merely control it within themselves."

"There is a place where shadow cannot go," said Benedict. "We keep it in the basement."

All three, Random, Fiona, and otherwise silent Flora, looked at him.

Benedict continued, "I have been thinking I need to walk the Pattern anyway. I want to speak with Gerard and see how he does, but I do not believe medicine of shadow will cure him. You imply these rings can manipulate shadows over themselves? Let us eliminate that."

Random thought for a while before nodding. He turned to Flora and held out his hand. "Give it up, or be prepared to walk the Pattern with it yourself."

Without speaking she dropped the ring on his palm. Random trumped Caine. "Caine, I need those rings. We're going to purge them in the pattern."

"Are you going to destroy them?" asked Caine.

"No. I'll give them back if you want. But we're going to wipe them with the Pattern to be sure they don't have any hostile influences."

"As you will," and Caine handed him a small bag. With a bit of reluctance he also took the ring from his finger and gave that to Random as well. The king thanked him and broke contact.

Random added his own, and gave the cashmere bag of four to Benedict. "Fiona, go to shadow and get whatever ring our witness wears. If she's awake, bring her too. Benedict, walk with her. You can speak with Gerard."

And Fiona nodded. She stood up, slapped fragments of bark off her hands, and descended the fallen tree-trunk with far more care than she'd scampered up. Benedict stepped from branch to branch as if walking across a wide field. The two of them walked around the base of the tree where the root-structure had been ripped from the soil by the redwood's falling. They did not emerge from the other side.