

## Caine and Julian in Arden 2

Shortly after Julian discarded one ring into the river, and before Caine had surrendered the other two, one on his finger and one in the small bag, to Benedict, two of the sons of Rilga had ridden through Arden and talked as they often had. Though Caine didn't show it, he was surprised again to see how lackadaisically Julian hunted before the quarry had been spotted. Julian hummed. On either side of the river great packs of dogs sniffled through the underbrush, throwing branches aside. Fallen trees posed no problems; the hounds lifted and dragged burned trunks of old pines like they were nothing. The trees often broke, but the hounds merely dragged them about in more pieces. Sometimes the Stormhounds bayed to their comrades across the Mellengroth, who bayed back excitedly, but the calling of dogs dwindled when they didn't find their quarry. They sniffed and searched the steep banks of the river, finding nothing.

Likewise Julian's hawks circled, some high, some low, and often sailed so close to the rippled surface of the fast moving river that their wingtips cast dovetails of spray. They perched, called, and only once did Caine see one dive.

Without looking Julian said, "Fish."

Caine waited, and the bird emerged with a silver-scaled perch. It ate on the bank, and a few others, brown-feathered with black bands, joined it for a meal.

If the woodsman guided mighty Morgenstern with the reins, Caine didn't see it. The sailor didn't even think Julian used his knees. The horse, big enough that Caine's head was level with Julian's stomach, seemed to know his own pace and followed the dogs. His eyes were black, his mane white, and Caine's horse, Flow, seemed skittish beside him.

At the first set of deep pools Julian dismounted and explored the depths with a silver lance. The hounds did not stop and searched in widening circles. Julian explored the south bank of the river and remounted to cross north, letting Morgenstern find a pathway through rapids. On the far side he probed the depths again and returned.

"That's something to keep in mind," said Julian, rejoining Caine. "That ford, there? The water pulls sediment as it lifts over those rocks, so the darkened patches of the river look deeper than they are. I don't know if our brothers know you can cross there."

Caine nodded. "I forget some times how well you know Arden."

Julian shrugged. "I live here. I go to Amber but live here. The rest of you live in Amber and visit shadow. Only Llewella and I have truly left."

"What about Martin and Merlin?" asked Caine.

Julian snorted. "Hardly even of the blood, and just enough of Oberon in them to be rightfully traitors. Random may associate with such ilk. It's a sign of weakness."

"And yet the Unicorn gave him the Jewel," replied Caine.

Julian halted like a stick had been jammed through his bicycle spokes. Twice he attempted to reply, and each time ground to halt with involuntary muscle twitches moving his face. His eyes widened and squinted; his cheeks tightened to open his mouth, but that didn't come. Julian was still groping for an answer when Caine continued.

Caine said, "Random's also the only one of us who's married. To a blind girl. Odd, isn't it? She's some Rebman bloodline."

"His marriage means nothing," said Julian, struggling.

"Oberon was married many times," said Caine as if he was agreeing with his brother. "Ruled Amber for years. Random got married, and the Unicorn gave him the Jewel and throne. I don't think any of the rest of us ever did, even in jest. Given what I see of my sailors, I'd expect one of us, Gerard or Corwin maybe, to have gotten drunk and put a ring on a stripper at least once."

He added like he was thinking out loud, "Probably Gerard. The fleet remoras would love him: big, powerful, stupid."

"You're not speaking highly of the institution," said Julian with his cheeks pursed together.

"I'm not a fan of it. I'm also not the King of Amber."

"Maybe you're just not a fan of women."

If Julian had sought to get a reaction, he failed. Caine rode on, and the only energy he expended was keeping his horse pointed in the right direction.

"Where are you going?" demanded Julian. "You've got something on your mind."

"One hundred percent of my kin who have been married have been the kings of Amber. If that insane story from insane Dworkin is accepted, then the father of the Pattern and sire of us all was never king of Amber. He mounted the unicorn, wrote the Pattern, and never wore a crown. But he never married.

"Random is nothing, nothing!" —he paused— "But King of Amber, and the only thing that little shit has ever done is put a ring on some remora from Rebma." Echoes of his words fell away into the trees and river.

When Julian did reply, he was cautiously mild. "You speak like being unmarried is keeping you from the throne."

"It feels that way," said Caine. He sighed. "That merely bothers me. I don't like Random, and I don't like this notion you get married or you're gay. I understand continuation of the bloodline, but there's quite a few of us, so I don't think Oberon's lineage is in danger. But if the Unicorn is just a generic, idiot woman gushing over marriage, and as far as I can tell, that's the only thing Dad and Random had in common, then kingship is no more significant than whale and remora, united until the benefits run out."

He sighed again. "In honesty, I'm disappointed our trip to Cirdan the Shipwright failed. More than half our navy was destroyed when Corwin the idiot tried to take Amber, and the shipyards, both ours and our allies', will not replenish our fleets for a century. It takes between ten and twenty years to lay a keel if you include all the planning, and half the shipbuilders in Amber are lazy fools, useless, and good only for skimming a bid for two percent. I'd heard great things about Cirdan. In the way rumors can move even through shadow, he was always spoken of as an artisan.

"As it is, I have to borrow ships from Gerard. That idiot Corwin annihilated half my force, I'm still doing maintenance on the rest, but Cirdan had offered a great opportunity. If his craft really were as good as rumor held, I would have upgraded every hull to that standard without having subfleets of legacy craft to haul behind. I wouldn't need to wait for Gerard's plodding intellect to work its way through a ship request before conducting big-mast floats. But we found no Cirdan.

"So now I have to go looking, but first my fleet needs to finish maintenance, because that will collapse if I'm not babysitting it, and the years roll by. But artists matter. A route to this Cirdan would bring vessels worthy of Amber to the navy when I'm away.

"Corwin never thought about that. Bleys never thought about that. They were fools. You can find anything in shadow if you go looking, but having a supply of it come to Amber by itself makes the True City great. I've got other things to do!"

The brothers had stopped their horses over a small gulch, wherein the Mellengroth tumbled over a shallow rapid. Young elm and oak grew on either side. Their branches were full of starlings and finches. Bracken still held redoubts among burned out stumps. The gulch narrowed to the east before cutting through a small cliff, and echoes of river water over the rocks, bird song, and their words blended into a slurry of sound that followed the river downstream.

"You made a sharp turn back there," said Julian.

Caine looked at Julian. "Hmm?"

"Random to Cirdan."

Caine glanced at the sky, and Julian could see his mind running back through memories. "Oh. No use in getting annoyed over the past. Done is done. Frustrating, but done, and I won't pick that scab. It doesn't help Amber. What about you? Most of your forest is burned. Do you want to find trees from shadow?"

Julian waved a hand. "What trees are better than the forests of Arden?"

Caine received a trump call then and surrendered the bag of rings and one he wore to the king. Somehow he forgot to mention the one cast into the Mellengroth.

Ahead one of the dogs yipped. To Caine it was no different than the other thousand yips a pack of hounds makes, but Julian waved a hand for silence. The other dogs yipped back. Caine waited. No great rush of baying erupted, just yips and barks. Julian frowned.

"Let's go see what they found."

Forward the trees thickened, and to Caine Arden seemed to grow dark. More and more burned hulks of ancient growth stood as testaments to the fires that had ripped through Garnath during the Patternfall war. These black skeletons defied moss and mold, and reached with scaly branches into their living brethren around them. The living drew back from the dead.

The pack of Stormhounds had broken into three basic groups, but Caine struggled to guess proportions. Maybe half of the total ranged the far bank of the Mellengroth, the north, and of the rest, some stayed close to Julian. Others had gone ahead, and these set up the yipping. As the brothers rode along, the dogs who stayed with them ran forward to the rest of the pack, sometimes baying, but after joining them would stop. Some ran back, and these hid behind Morgenstern's hooves and whined. Their ears sagged; their tails drooped.

Julian's hawks dropped, one by one, and clustered on the branches of a great dead elm. For a moment Julian stared at them, and Caine had the oddest impression his brother was glaring at the birds. Julian went so far as to draw his horn and blow. A faint, quickly smothered, yelping went up from the hounds, but the raptors didn't move. They hid their heads under their wings and shook on the leafless branches.

Julian tightened his gloves and adjusted straps on the mail around his waist. Caine loosened his sword in its sheath. With his horn hanging and the lance in his hand, Julian took Morgenstern's reins from where they hung on the saddle bow and lead the way forward.

The woods darkened, and even the living trees looked black. A spreading oak cast a shadow over the brothers, but before them they spotted bright daylight. As they rode, clouds passed overhead. By the time they got to the edge of the tree's shadow, a thick nimbus cloud turned the bright sun to shade, and they rode into darker shadow from there. Behind them the sunlight returned and made their forward path among the pines seem darker. Caine noted an abundance of beetles and centipedes on the ground, and wondered if this was normal for the woods. If it was, it was why he preferred ships.

Forward still more, and they found dogs whining, hiding, and soiling themselves in fear. They passed the last line of trees to emerge onto the riverbank. They were perhaps three miles from the site of their earlier conversation.

Here the Mellengroth had dug a circular lagoon with high rocky banks. The river tumbled down a set of step rapids, but the foam died upon hitting the pool. Instead thick lilies and lily pads covered the surface with tiny ferns between them, so thick the water itself was nothing more than a black field under the green. Wasps, spiders, and snakes nested around the clearing. For a moment Caine thought the place had somehow managed to catch a snow until he realized that only spiderwebs dusted the water plants, and fat cocoons dotted the surface of the lake. Some of them still struggled with spider-prey.

Julian looked at the river for a long while before saying, "This was not like this before."

Sticking out of a floating log in the dead center of the mere rose a gold-handled sword. Spiders were already hard at work on it, but Caine recognized it anyway. Bleys had carried it that morning, and he'd seen it in the dragon later.

Caine nudged his brother and pointed. Julian nodded.

"Good morning, my lords, Princes of Amber!" whispered a voice without a source, emanating from the air or water or earth underfoot. "Sons of Oberon, Lords of Order, Great and Glorious of Amber, true North Star for all Creation!"

The voice was so deadly serious that Caine at once thought it was laughing at him. He squinted his eyes and waited.

"Yes," agreed Julian, nodding.

"Please bear my deepest regards to your king," whispered the lake itself.

Caine did not react but Julian went white. Bugs scuttled underfoot, and one touched Morgenstern. A great rat-eating centipede brushed the white horse's hoof with long pincers. Morgenstern killed it with a stomp, leaving its fore and aft body segments sticking up from the hole like a splash of endoskeleton.

"I'll let him know," said Julian.

"Tell me, Lords of Amber, what bidding of his brings you here to see me?"

"Show yourself, wyrm. Rise," said Caine.

After he spoke the lake remained quiet save the clicking of bugs and the buzz of their wings. The floating log with Bley's sword suddenly turned and sank, jerking weeds and lilies after it. More rushed in, and scattered greenery over the black water until it was as before. Spiders set to dusting it white.

Julian nudged Caine and pointed. A long disturbance pushed the pond-life and vanished. Caine nodded and pointed to the other side of the black mere. Another floating log had arisen, and it wore wide ferns like a hat.

"Hello, wyrm," said Julian.

The log rose further, streaming water and dirty pond creepers, hanging roots from surface flowers, and muck. It rose entire, and underneath the water fell in rivulets. Dead shark-eyes blinked.

The dragon had a head like an armor-piercing arrow, a long narrow triangle with cheeks that pointed out behind it. Julian thought of vipers. It had black scales with red edges, black eyes, and even its gums were dark, so deep a red as to look black as night. It had three sets of teeth. In front were two long fangs that lay flat against the top of its mouth but lowered when it opened its jaws. They were on some kind of biological hinge, for as the dragon talked, those two slender fangs dipped and retracted with mesmerizing fluidity. Behind the venom-injectors, it had short, fixed teeth with hooked tips, and behind those, small, narrow triangular fangs pointed back towards its throat. On the tip of its snout, it had the scale pattern of reptiles that can close their nostrils.

"Hello, Lords of Amber," whispered the dragon, and the spiders fled its presence.

Caine looked down. The centipedes had gone underground, and the wasps hid in their paper hives. Beetles climbed dead trees and found shelter in crevice and bore holes. None of Julian's dogs had entered this ring of foliage, and even the hawks stayed away from overhead. A malignant weight pressed down on the lake and its environs. It pushed against Caine like foul will. It reminded him of a trump which sought contact when he had blocked his mind. Around the edges of his mental shield he felt skittering anxiety that came before dread, and knew that to pay attention to them would only open the door. Instead he looked at the dragon. Fear tried to get around his shields like the claws of dirty beasts, and he thought of the centipede pincers under Morgenstern's hoof. They still waved and wiggled unnaturally.

"I am Spait," said the dragon. "And honored to meet you. Are you Julian the Great, Lord of Arden, rider of Dread Morgenstern, Master of the Stormhounds, and Keeper of the Pathways to Amber, and Caine?"

Julian knew Caine would not let himself be baited so; not icy composed Caine. He didn't even look sideways, but so did not see Caine's nostrils flare, his eyes widen, and the sturdy but bland Flow shift in place.

After all, thought Julian, this is Caine. He's not going to let some semi-articulate lizard get to him.

Julian said, "Lizard, come out of the pond if you can speak for yourself."

"Oh, Julian, Great and Mighty, I am not so great as you. I will remain here, out of range of your terrible spear, unless you lay it gently aside—"

"Why lizard, I do believe you damn me with faint praise." Julian smiled. "Don't you think, Caine?"

Caine took a breath, his neck veins bulged, but when he exhaled, he was cool. He stared at the dragon for several seconds before saying, in an utterly mundane tone of voice, "Yes. Let's kill it."

It was impossible to tell the focus of Spait's black, featureless eyes, but Julian thought it likely the dragon was looking between the two of them. The vile beasts of the forest remained hidden. Insects, bugs, and vermin had their uses, but none in this quantity and not so many above ground. A number of them should be preying on each other, and they weren't doing that.

The easiest thing to do, thought Julian, would be damn the river upstream. He could then ride in and put a lance through the wyrm. This thing calling itself Spait needed killing.

"Oh, peace, gentle Lords of Amber, great ones of the world. Perhaps my own powers can give you something of worth, something that will restrain your hand," the thing Spait said.

Julian ignored him. The rapids flowed fast but shallow. First he'd need a coffer dam across the falls, and that would only take a day or so. Large trees could be felled and floated downstream by the river. East of here the river widened and grew shallow, and hounds or hunters would notice the dragon leaving.

Spait continued, "Let me tell you of mallorn trees, the greatest foliage of Middle Earth. Their leaves turn gold in autumn but do not fall until spring, when new life comes forth. Mighty Julian, will they not make Arden great and glorious?"

Julian paused in contemplation of hunting and damming. Something in him hungered for gold-boughed trees in a way he had never felt before and called to him of high forests along ridges. Spait's words had a power Julian had never felt before, a power of images poured directly into his mind, and Julian saw forests of gold with houses wrapped around trees. He saw massive cities held in white branches, and tiny living spaces, nothing more than platforms and windscreens, built on the crests of gold-wearing trees. He saw gold also in the hair of the woodsmen, and their long robes and gentle movements. Something great and old spoke to him in that forest, and a named appeared in his mind: Loth Lorien, the forest of mallorn. Julian saw a better Arden.

"You see them now," whispered sibilant Spait. "You see Loth Lorien and the elves. These were Cirdan Shipwright's people. Do you see the woods? He crafted ships beyond compare, ships of mallorn, a white wood, and from it made the greatest vessels of Middle Earth. I can tell you how to get Cirdan's ships and his forests, and if you spare my life, I will tell you something even greater. I will tell you of the White Tree of the Lineage of Nimloth, the trees of the great shipbuilders of Númenor. I can tell you of a seedling."

Surreptitiously Julian glanced over at Caine and saw him breathing deeply.

"These mallorn trees?" asked Caine. "Cirdan used them for his ships?"

"Yes," said Spait. "They are why his ships were beyond compare. With glorious ships like these, no longer do you need to worry when those others whisper about you in the dark."

"This White Tree, Nimloth. You know where a seedling is?" asked Julian.

"Oh, yes," said Spait.

The princes Caine and Julian leaned forward and asked, "Where?"

"Minas Tirith, Lords of Amber. In Gondor under the reign of Mairon the Wise, King of Middle Earth."

Julian started to say, "When can you show me the way to—" but Caine interrupted him.

"You attempt a very crude seduction, Spait."

Julian startled and looked over at him. Caine's shirt was unbuttoned to the chest hair, and he breathed deeply from the stomach. His legs wrapped around Flow's body like he was clutching the animal in the guard. Below first buttoned button, he was near a spasm. Above that, he was near indolent.

Caine said, "You don't really think princes of Amber would fall quite so easily? Look around you. What forest would you offer us? This where you live."

And Julian did look around, and saw the dead trees, the spiders and the bugs, the filth in the river, and the death in the woods. His world had been very small, a tiny circle of him and the dragon, but Caine pushed it back. Again Julian saw the havoc, the ruin of the glade, and the disease of Arden.

In the water, Spait smiled. He looked, thought Julian, an awful lot like a croc.

The dragon sighed. "Oh, great and mighty prince Julian, don't you want the rest of your kin to admire you? Don't you want them to realize how great you are? You've never been properly appreciated as much as you serve Amber. Let me help you show them how worthy you are with autumn trees in Arden."

Visions intruded again. A beautiful redhead, five foot two and sculpted, a sorceress of power, tact, and subtlety smiled at him, but she turned away, and her face became Spait's. His trees were dead. Better trees, Mallorn trees, would show them all. Julian's world contracted to him and the dragon, and expanded again, near violently.

Caine had spoken. He was still talking. "-wurm, we're too wise for your simple plots. We're sons of Amber. Goodbye. I will come back and kill you."

Julian's face hurt. He unclenched the muscles in his eyes. The dead forest seemed to lean in, lean out, and the white rider had problems figuring out what the world was.

"Come." Caine rode away, and Julian rode after. They put their heels to their mounts, and Morgenstern took the lead on his own, darting ahead of Flow without Julian's command.

Spait waited in his pond, whispering, and only Morgenstern's desire to run ahead took them outside the dead valley before Julian listened to more of what the dragon had to say.

Some distance outside, Caine slowed Flow and started bitching about horses in general. Morgenstern followed, once there was no doubt the big white stallion was ahead.

"Never liked these animals, but that was useful. They got us out. Benedict's retreat."

"What?" said Julian. His head was as full of cobwebs as Spait's vale had been.

"Horses and Benedict. I was reminded of that idiot Bleys. If Benedict retreated, I will, and damn Bleys's fool notions to the contrary. That is a very dangerous beast. We must kill him."