

AMBUSH IN AMBER

Corwin. Brand. Bleys. Benedict. Caine. Julian. The Princes have vanished, without a trace, from Amber, Chaos, and the Shadow-worlds alike. Newly crowned King Random must find them—for Amber's magic is failing; the real world, of which all others are but reflections, is in danger.

Random's only clues to his brothers' whereabouts are a set of mysterious paintings—canvases of twisting illusion and visual paradox; paintings that draw viewers into them. Literally. And to save the Princes, to stop the conspiracy that threatens his throne, Random must search in the shadows of Shadows—

By entering the worlds within the pictures . . .

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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

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SEVEN NO-TRUMP

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I wish to thank Douglas Hofstadter, author of Gödel, Escher, Bach, for his brilliance, and Roger Zelazny for letting me play in his world. Thanks as well to Bill Fawcett for his great encouragement, and to my parents for their profound support.

This book is dedicated to Michelle, Catherine, and Heather. May they continue to dominate my life.

INTRODUCTION by Roger Zelazny

FASCINATING. SEEING ONE'S own characters disposed and propelled by the will of another. When I began writing *Nine Princes in Amber* I had no idea that it was to be the beginning of a series, let alone a series which would produce spinoffs such as the computer game, the board game, and a book such as this.

When the arrangements were made for the creation of this volume I did stand still mentally for a time and attempt to assess the problems its author would face. I was certain it would not be easy, dealing with someone else's characters, themes, and settings this closely and at this length. It would have to involve considerable thought with regard to the original author's intent in all of these areas—preserving the characters' integrity by means of behavior consistent with what had gone before—and it could not produce any major upheavals or discordant departures from the preexisting story line. In other words, it would pretty much require a smallish but significant incident apart from the general flow of narrative I've been running.

And I know this sort of thing isn't easy because I have myself written stories set in other authors' universes—such as that of Fred Saberhagen's berserkers or Larry Niven's carefully wrought world of *The Magic Goes Away*. Still, there is a difference between

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using the same background and premises as another writer and actually using that person's characters. This sort of enterprise is also different from a collaboration, in that the characters in a collaborative effort are yours as well as the other party's while they are in the process of development, their behavior subject to discussion and mutual modification. There was no such joint endeavor with this book; there was no communication at all between the author and myself during its composition.

All of these thoughts must have passed through Neil Randall's mind as well as my own, however, because he was obviously determined to do it right. Also, I feel that he likes my characters, which must help a lot. For I am pleased with what he has done, and in reading his "Afterword" I came to feel that he had done even more than duty required in the amount of thought he had given to the project. And for this I am grateful.

It is impossible to guess whether people reading this book will be familiar with my original series, so I'd better talk about it a bit. Amber is the real world from which all others take their form. These other worlds contemporary Earth included—are referred to by the Amberites as "Shadows." The palace of Amber is set atop a mountain called Kolvir, overlooking the city known as Amber and facing an ocean to the south. A forest called Arden lies largely to the north of Kolvir; there is considerable farmland to the east and northeast, as well as to the west; there are numerous seaside communities in both directions as well as inland cities. The entire kingdom is referred to as Amber.

Since time out of mind Amber had been ruled by a king named Oberon—a lusty, near-immortal magician and warrior, said to be descended from Amber's founder, Dworkin, a half-mad exile from the Courts of Chaos, the other pole of universal existence.

Oberon had had many wives over the centuries, and numerous children. Nine of his sons and four of his daughters figure in the original Amber series, which consisted of five books: Nine Princes in Amber, The Guns of Avalon, Sign of the Unicorn, The Hand of Oberon, and The Courts of Chaos. Oberon's son Corwin is the story's narrator. Corwin had been living on the "Shadow Earth" (i.e., our world) for several centuries, suffering from amnesia, employed mainly in the military with occasional interludes as a songwriter. It was when a head injury suffered in an auto accident began the restoration of his memory that his troubles started. His sister Flora had also been living in this world to keep an eye on him for their brother Eric. Corwin and Eric had never gotten along well. (It was in a fight with Eric that Corwin had suffered his original injury, which had caused the amnesia.) When my story opens Oberon had been missing for some time and Eric was preparing to take the throne. Now, of all times, he least wanted Corwin to recover and return. Corwin and Eric actually have a lot in common. They're both big, tough, intelligent, ambitious warriors.

Corwin, his memory still impaired, manages to fool Flora and their younger brother Random—an itinerant musician totally lacking in political ambitions into believing he has recovered his memory entirely. He persuades Random to take him home to Amber. On their journey through Shadow, Corwin encounters his brother Julian, the warden of Arden, and his vicious hunting dogs, the hellhounds.

Later, Corwin meets his other brothers and sisters: There is Gérard—a very big fellow, and incredibly strong—who is in command of Amber's naval forces. Gérard is the most honest, straightforward, and friendly member of the entire family. Yet he is on very good terms with their swarthy, somewhat sinister brother Caine, possibly having something to do with Caine's love of the sea and the fact that he is also a highly ranked officer in Amber's navy. Then there are the three redheads in the family—Bleys, Fiona, and Brand. Bleys is a mercurial, highly talented individual who, with his sister Fiona, seems given to political intrigues. The same applies to their (then) missing brother, Brand. Brand is the most enigmatic of the lot, ambitious, brilliant in his way, and also a student of dark magic. And then there is Benedict—tall, lanky, straight-haired, lantern-jawed—a military genius and a master of weapons and hand-to-hand combat. Benedict seems completely loyal to the throne, no matter who might occupy it. He also seems without ambition beyond his command of Amber's military forces, and mainly desirous of defending the realm at any price.

In addition to Fiona and Flora, there are the sisters Deirdre and Llewella. Deirdre seems particularly attached to Corwin. Llewella—of a greener than olive complexion, with green highlights to her hair spends considerable time in the undersea kingdom of Rebma, a mirror-image of Amber beneath the ocean.

There you have the cast of characters. I am not about to summarize the somewhat complicated plot they experience, but a few other features of the story may be in order: First, the Pattern. In a great stone grotto far beneath the palace of Amber there is a glowing, swirling design set within the floor. Only a person of the blood of Amber can walk its entire length. Anyone else attempting it will be destroyed by the forces which are unleashed when one sets foot upon it. But even a person of the royal blood will be destroyed by doing it incorrectly. Once one steps upon this design one must follow it to completion; and it is death to leave the line one is following. It is a difficult thing to do because one meets increasing resistance in passing along its ways. There are certain attractive benefits to be gained from doing it, however. Walking the Pattern to its completion is what gives the Amberites their power over Shadow.

the Amberites their power over Shadow. An initiate of the Pattern can walk among the shadow worlds at will, passing from one reality to another. (A very fast passage on horseback from one such place to another is referred to as a "hellride.") Also, one can be transported even more speedily to any point in the universe one desires immediately upon completion of the Pattern, when standing at its center. All that is required is imagination and an act of will. It is the Pattern, Random decides correctly, which might restore Corwin's memory fully, and he takes him to walk it shortly after their return to the kingdom. But it is not the Pattern in Amber to which he conducts him-for there are two others. The Pattern is imitated in Rebma, the image of Amber beneath the sea, and also in Tir-na Nog'th, a city floating in the heavens, which only appears upon occasion. (Tir-na Nog'th is a very strange place, peopled with spirits and random psychic forces which may as easily deceive as enlighten one who comes seeking knowledge or power.) Corwin walks the one in Rebma.

Then there are the Trumps. These are magical decks of cards, created by Dworkin, depicting the family members and certain selected locations. To concentrate on any one card will ordinarily activate it, putting one in contact with the person or place depicted. The cards are normally used for communication among the highly mobile family members, and they can also be used to transport a person physically into the presence of another.

These are some of the special features of the world of Amber. There are others, but they do not really figure in the present narrative.

None of the family members is overly trustful of the others, and an external enemy emerges as well as an enemy in their midst. This promotes an unwilling alliance among the Amberites, on the one hand, and an increased suspicion on the other. These family tensions carry over into the present story.

If I were doing a book of this sort I believe that my greatest problem would not lie so much in the plotting as it would in attempting to approximate the original author's tone—that is, his attitude toward the material. It is, therefore, another signal of conscientiousness to me that, in addition to learning and playing a variation on a large body of material, Neil Randall has also worked to achieve a state of sentiment similar to my own in dealing with it. For this I can only say, Good show.

INTRODUCTION AND RULES TO CROSSROADS™ ADVENTURES by Bill Fawcett

For the MANY of us who have enjoyed the stories upon which this adventure is based, it may seem a bit strange to find an introduction this long at the start of a book. What you are holding is both a game and an adventure. Have you ever read a book and then told yourself you would have been able to think more clearly or seen a way out of the hero's dilemma? In a CrossroadsTM adventure you have the opportunity to do just that. *You* make the key decisions. By means of a few easily followed steps you are able to see the results of your choices.

A Crossroads[™] adventure is as much fun to read as it is to play. It is more than just a game or a book. It is a chance to enjoy once more a familiar and treasured story. The excitement of adventuring in a beloved universe is neatly blended into a story which stands well on its own merit, a story in which you will encounter many familiar characters and places and

discover more than a few new ones as well. Each adventure is a thrilling tale, with the extra suspense and satisfaction of knowing that you will succeed or fail by your own endeavors.

THE ADVENTURE

Throughout the story you will have the opportunity to make decisions. Each of these decisions will affect whether the hero succeeds in the quest, or even survives. In some cases you will actually be fighting battles; other times you will use your knowledge and instincts to choose the best path to follow. In many cases there will be clues in the story or illustrations.

A Crossroads[™] adventure is divided into sections. The length of a section may be a few lines or many pages. The section numbers are shown at the top of a page to make it easier for you to follow. Each section ends when you must make a decision, or fight. The next section you turn to will show the results of your decision. At least one six-sided die and a pencil are needed to "play" this book.

The words "six-sided dice" are often abbreviated as "D6." If more than one is needed a number will precede the term. "Roll three six-sided dice" will be written as "Roll 3 D6." Virtually all the die rolls in these rules do involve rolling three six-sided dice (or rolling one six-sided die three times) and totaling what is rolled.

If you are an experienced role-play gamer, you may also wish to convert the values given in this novel to those you can use with any fantasy role-playing game you are now playing with. All of the adventures have been constructed so that they also can be easily adapted in this manner. The values for the hero may transfer directly. While fantasy games are much more complicated, doing this will allow you to be the Game Master for other players. Important values for the hero's opponents will be given to aid you in this conversion and to give those playing by the Crossroads[™] rules a better idea of what they are facing.

THE HERO

Seven values are used to describe the hero in gaming terms. These are strength, intelligence, wisdom/luck, constitution, dexterity, charisma, and hit points. These values measure all of a character's abilities. At the end of these rules is a record sheet. On it are given all of the values for the hero of this adventure and any equipment or supplies they begin the adventure with. While you adventure, this record can be used to keep track of damage received and any new equipment or magical items acquired. You may find it advisable to make a photocopy of that page. Permission to do so, for your own use only, is given by the publisher of this game/novel. You may wish to consult this record sheet as we discuss what each of the values represents.

STRENGTH

This is the measure of how physically powerful your hero is. It compares the hero to others in how much the character can lift, how hard he can punch, and just how brawny he is. The strongest a normal human can be is to have a strength value of 18. The weakest a

child would have is a 3. Here is a table giving comparable strengths:

Strength	Example
3	A 5-year-old child
6	An elderly man
8	Out of shape and over 40
10	An average 20-year-old man
13	In good shape and works out
15	A top athlete or football running back
17	Changes auto tires without a jack
18	Arm wrestles Arnold Schwarzenegger and wins

A Tolkien-style troll, being magical, might have a strength of 19 or 20. A full-grown elephant has a strength of 23. A fifty-foot dragon would have a strength of 30.

INTELLIGENCE

Being intelligent is not just a measure of native brain power. It is also an indication of the ability to use that intelligence. The value for intelligence also measures how aware the character is, and so how likely they are to notice a subtle clue. Intelligence can be used to measure how resistant a mind is to hypnosis or mental attack. A really sharp baboon would have an intelligence of 3. Most humans (we all know exceptions) begin at about 5. The highest value possible is an 18. Here is a table of relative intelligence:

Intelligence	Example
3	My dog

5	Lassie
6	Curly (the third Stooge)
8	Somewhat slow
10	Average person
13	College professor/good quarterback
15	Indiana Jones/Carl Sagan
17	Doc Savage/Mr. Spock
18	Leonardo dá Vinci (Isaac Asimov?)

Brainiac of comic-book fame would have a value of 21.

WISDOM/LUCK

Wisdom is the ability to make correct judgments, often with less than complete facts. Wisdom is knowing what to do and when to do it. Attacking, when running will earn you a spear in the back, is the best part of wisdom. Being in the right place at the right time can be called luck or wisdom. Not being discovered when hiding can be luck, if it is because you knew enough not to hide in the poison oak, wisdom is also a factor. Activities which are based more on instinct, the intuitive leap, than analysis are decided by wisdom.

In many ways both wisdom and luck are further connected, especially as wisdom also measures how friendly the ruling powers of the universe (not the author, the fates) are to the hero. A hero may be favored by fate or luck because he is reverent or for no discernible reason at all. This will give them a high wisdom value. Everyone knows those "lucky" individuals who can fall in the mud and find a gold coin. Here is a table measuring relative wisdom/luck:

Wisdom	Example
Under 3	Cursed or totally unthinking
5	Never plans, just reacts
7	Some cunning, "street smarts"
9	Average thinking person
11	Skillful planner, good gambler
13	Successful businessman/Lee Iacocca
15	Captain Kirk (wisdom)/Conan (luck)
17	Sherlock Holmes (wisdom)/Luke Skywalker (luck)
18	Lazarus Long

CONSTITUTION

The more you can endure, the higher your constitution. If you have a high constitution you are better able to survive physical damage, emotional stress, and poisons. The higher your value for constitution, the longer you are able to continue functioning in a difficult situation. A character with a high constitution can run farther (though not necessarily faster) or hang by one hand longer than the average person. A high constitution means you also have more stamina, and recover more quickly from injuries. A comparison of values for constitution:

Constitution	Example
3	A terminal invalid
6	A 10-year-old child
8	Your stereotyped "98-pound weakling"
10	Average person
14	Olympic athlete/Sam Spade
16	Marathon runner/Rocky
18	Rasputin/Batman

A whale would have a constitution of 20. Superman's must be about 50.

DEXTERITY

The value for dexterity measures not only how fast a character can move, but how well-coordinated those movements are. A surgeon, a pianist, and a juggler all need a high value for dexterity. If you have a high value for dexterity you can react quickly (though not necessarily correctly), duck well, and perform sleightof-hand magic (if you are bright enough to learn how). Conversely, a low dexterity means you react slowly and drop things frequently. All other things being equal, the character with the highest dexterity will have the advantage of the first attack in a combat. Here are some comparative examples of dexterity:

Dexterity	Example
3 or less	Complete klutz
5	Inspector Clousseau
6	Can walk and chew gum, most of the time
8	Barney Fife
10	Average person
13	Good fencer/Walter Payton
15	Brain surgeon/Houdini
16	Flying Karamazov Brothers
17	Movie ninja/Cyrano de Bergerac
18	Bruce Lee

Batman, Robin, Daredevil and The Shadow all have a dexterity of 19. At a dexterity of 20 you don't even see the man move before he has taken your wallet and underwear and has left the room (the Waco Kid).

CHARISMA

Charisma is more than just good looks, though they certainly don't hurt. It is a measure of how persuasive a hero is and how willing others are to do what he wants. You can have average looks yet be very persuasive, and have a high charisma. If your value for charisma is high, you are better able to talk yourself out of trouble or obtain information from a stranger. If your charisma is low, you may be ignored or even mocked, even when you are right. A high charisma value is vital to entertainers of any sort, and leaders. A different type of charisma is just as important to spies. In the final measure a high value for charisma means people will react to you in the way you desire. Here are some comparative values for charisma:

Charisma	Example
3	Hunchback of Notre Dame
5	An ugly used-car salesman
7	Richard Nixon today
10	Average person
12	Team coach
14	Magnum, P.I.
16	Henry Kissinger/Jim DiGriz
18	Dr. Who/Prof. Harold Hill (Centauri)

HIT POINTS

Hit points represent the total amount of damage a hero can take before he is killed or knocked out. You can receive damage from being wounded in a battle, through starvation, or even through a mental attack. Hit points measure more than just how many times the hero can be battered over the head before he is knocked out. They also represent the ability to keep striving toward a goal. A poorly paid mercenary may have only a few hit points, even though he is a hulking brute of a man, because the first time he receives even a slight wound he will withdraw from the fight. A blacksmith's apprentice who won't accept defeat will have a higher number of hit points.

A character's hit points can be lost through a wound to a specific part of the body or through general damage to the body itself. This general damage can be caused by a poison, a bad fall, or even exhaustion and starvation. Pushing your body too far beyond its limits may result in a successful action at the price of the loss of a few hit points. All these losses are treated in the same manner.

Hit points lost are subtracted from the total on the hero's record sheet. When a hero has lost all of his hit points, then that character has failed. When this happens you will be told to which section to turn. Here you will often find a description of the failure and its consequences for the hero.

The hit points for the opponents the hero meets in combat are given in the adventure. You should keep track of these hit points on a piece of scrap paper. When a monster or opponent has lost all of their hit points, they have lost the fight. If a character is fighting more than one opponent, then you should keep track of each of their hit points. Each will continue to fight until it has 0 hit points. When everyone on one side of the battle has no hit points left, the combat is over.

Even the best-played character can lose all of his hit points when you roll too many bad dice during a combat. If the hero loses all of his hit points, the adventure may have ended in failure. You will be told

so in the next section you are instructed to turn to. In this case you can turn back to the first section and begin again. This time you will have the advantage of having learned some of the hazards the hero will face.

TAKING CHANCES

There will be occasions where you will have to decide whether the hero should attempt to perform some action which involves risk. This might be to climb a steep cliff, jump a pit, or juggle three daggers. There will be other cases where it might benefit the hero to notice something subtle or remember an ancient ballad perfectly. In all of these cases you will be asked to roll three six-sided dice (3 D6) and compare the total of all three dice to the hero's value for the appropriate ability.

For example, if the hero is attempting to juggle three balls, then for him to do so successfully you would have to roll a total equal to or less than the hero's value for dexterity. If your total was less than this dexterity value, then you would be directed to a section describing how the balls looked as they were skillfully juggled. If you rolled a higher value than that for dexterity, then you would be told to read a section which describes the embarrassment of dropping the balls, and being laughed at by the audience.

Where the decision is a judgment call, such as whether to take the left or right staircase, it is left entirely to you. Somewhere in the adventure or in the original novels there will be some piece of information which would indicate that the left staircase leads to a trap and the right to your goal. No die roll will be needed for a judgment decision. In all cases you will be guided at the end of each section as to exactly what you need do. If you have any questions you should refer back to these rules.

MAGICAL ITEMS AND SPECIAL EQUIPMENT

There are many unusual items which appear in the pages of this adventure. When it is possible for them to be taken by the hero, you will be given the option of doing so. One or more of these items may be necessary to the successful completion of the adventure. You will be given the option of taking these at the end of a section. If you choose to pick up an item and succeed in getting it, you should list that item on the hero's record sheet. There is no guarantee that deciding to take an item means you will actually obtain it. If someone owns it already they are quite likely to resent your efforts to take it. In some cases things may not even be all they appear to be or the item may be trapped or cursed. Having it may prove a detriment rather than a benefit.

All magical items give the hero a bonus (or penalty) on certain die rolls. You will be told when this applies, and often given the option of whether or not to use the item. You will be instructed at the end of the section on how many points to add to or subtract from your die roll. If you choose to use an item which can function only once, such as a magic potion or hand grenade, then you will also be instructed to remove the item from your record sheet. Certain items, such as a magic sword, can be used many times. In this case you will be told when you obtain the item when you can apply the bonus. The bonus for a magic sword

could be added every time a character is in hand-tohand combat.

Other special items may allow a character to fly, walk through fire, summon magical warriors, or many other things. How and when they affect play will again be told to you in the paragraphs at the end of the sections where you have the choice of using them.

Those things which restore lost hit points are a special case. You may choose to use these at any time during the adventure. If you have a magical healing potion which returns 1 D6 of lost hit points, you may add these points when you think it is best to. This can even be during a combat in the place of a round of attack. No matter how many healing items you use, a character can never have more hit points than he begins the adventure with.

There is a limit to the number of special items any character may carry. In any Crossroads[™] adventure the limit is four items. If you already have four special items listed on your record sheet, then one of these must be discarded in order to take the new item. Any time you erase an item off the record sheet, whether because it was used or because you wish to add a new item, whatever is erased is permanently lost. It can never be "found" again, even if you return to the same location later in the adventure.

Except for items which restore hit points, the hero can only use an item in combat or when given the option to do so. The opportunity will be listed in the instructions.

In the case of an item which can be used in every combat, the bonus can be added or subtracted as the description of the item indicates. A +2 sword would add two points to any total rolled in combat. This bonus would be used each and every time the hero attacks. Only one attack bonus can be used at a time. Just because a hero has both a + 1 and a + 2 sword doesn't mean he knows how to fight with both at once. Only the better bonus would apply.

If a total of 12 is needed to hit an attacking monster and the hero has a +2 sword, then you will only need to roll a total of 10 on the three dice to successfully strike the creature.

You could also find an item, perhaps enchanted armor, which could be worn in all combat and would have the effect of subtracting its bonus from the total of any opponent's attack on its wearer. (Bad guys can wear magic armor, too.) If a monster normally would need a 13 to hit a character who has obtained a set of +2 armor, then the monster would now need a total of 15 to score a hit. An enchanted shield would operate in the same way, but could never be used when the character was using a weapon which needed both hands, such as a pike, longbow, or two-handed sword.

COMBAT

There will be many situations where the hero will be forced, or you may choose, to meet an opponent in combat. The opponents can vary from a wild beast, to a human thief, or an unearthly monster. In all cases the same steps are followed.

The hero will attack first in most combats unless you are told otherwise. This may happen when there is an ambush, other special situations, or because the opponent simply has a much higher dexterity.

At the beginning of a combat section you will be given the name or type of opponent involved. For each combat five values are given. The first of these is the total on three six-sided dice needed for the attack-

er to hit the hero. Next to this value is the value the hero needs to hit these opponents. After these two values is listed the hit points of the opponent. If there is more than one opponent, each one will have the same number. (See the Hit Points section included earlier if you are unclear as to what these do.) Under the value needed to be hit by the opponent is the hit points of damage that it will do to the hero when it attacks successfully. Finally, under the total needed for the hero to successfully hit an opponent is the damage he will do with the different weapons he might have. Unlike a check for completing a daring action (where you wish to roll under a value), in a combat you have to roll the value given or higher on three six-sided dice to successfully hit an opponent.

For example:

Here is how a combat between the hero armed with a sword and three brigands armed only with daggers is written:

BRIGANDS

To hit the hero: 14 To be hit: 12 Hit points: 4 Damage with Damage with daggers: 1 D6 sword: 2 D6 (used by the brigands) (used by the hero) There are three brigands. If two are killed (taken to 0 hit points) the third will flee in panic.

If the hero wins, turn to section 85. If he is defeated, turn to section 67.

RUNNING AWAY

Running rather than fighting, while often desirable, is not always possible. The option to run away is available only when listed in the choices. Even when this option is given, there is no guarantee the hero can get away safely.

THE COMBAT SEQUENCE

Any combat is divided into alternating rounds. In most cases the hero will attack first. Next, surviving opponents will have the chance to fight back. When both have attacked, one round will have been completed. A combat can have any number of rounds and continues until the hero or his opponents are defeated. Each round is the equivalent of six seconds. During this time all the parties in the combat may actually take more than one swing at one another.

The steps in resolving a combat in which the hero attacks first are as follows:

- 1. Roll three six-sided dice. Total the numbers showing on all three and add any bonuses from weapons or special circumstances. If this total is the same or greater than the second value given, "to hit the opponent," then the hero has successfully attacked.
- 2. If the hero attacks successfully, the next step is to determine how many hit points of damage he did to the opponent. The die roll for this will be given below the "to hit opponent" information.
- 3. Subtract any hit points of damage done from the opponent's total.
- 4. If any of the enemy have one or more hit points left, then the remaining opponent or opponents now can attack. Roll three six-sided dice for each

attacker. Add up each of these sets of three dice. If the total is the same as, or greater than the value listed after "to hit the hero" in the section describing the combat, the attack was successful.

5. For each hit, roll the number of dice listed for damage. Subtract the total from the number of hit points the hero has at that time. Enter the new, lower total on the hero's record sheet.

If both the hero and one or more opponents have hit points left, the combat continues. Start again at step one. The battle ends only when the hero is killed, all the opponents are killed, or all of one side has run away. A hero cannot, except through a healing potion or spells or when specifically told to during the adventure, regain lost hit points. A number of small wounds from several opponents will kill a character as thoroughly as one titanic, unsuccessful combat with a hill giant.

DAMAGE

The combat continues, following the sequence given below, until either the hero or his opponents have no hit points. In the case of multiple opponents, subtract hit points from one opponent until the total reaches 0 or less. Extra hit points of damage done on the round when each opponent is defeated are lost. They do not carry over to the next enemy in the group. To win the combat, you must eliminate all of an opponent's hit points.

The damage done by a weapon will vary depending on who is using it. A club in the hands of a child will do far less damage than the same club wielded by a hill giant. The maximum damage is given as a number of six-sided dice. In some cases the maximum will be less than a whole die. This is abbreviated by a minus sign followed by a number. For example, D6-2, meaning one roll of a six-sided die, minus two. The total damage can never be less than zero, meaning no damage done. 2 D6-1 means that you should roll two six-sided dice and then subtract one from the total of them both.

A combat may, because of the opponent involved, have one or more special circumstances. It may be that the enemy will surrender or flee when its hit point total falls below a certain level, or even that reinforcements will arrive to help the bad guys after so many rounds. You will be told of these special situations in the lines directly under the combat values.

Now you may turn to section 1.

RECORD SHEET RANDOM King of Amber

Strength: 11 Intelligence: 13 Wisdom/Luck: 9 Constitution: 14 Dexterity: 13 Charisma: 11

Hit Points: 23

Special Equipment: Trumps, Sword

Special Events

So how many of us are there? Other than me, that is? Eric? Dead. The only other one I'm sure of. And Gérard, because he's never left my side, much as I'd like him to sometimes. Corwin? No one knows where he is. Brand? Well, who knows what *really* happened to him. Caine, somewhere off in Shadowis, leading a navy or something. Julian, Bleys, and Benedict are all off in their own Shadows as well.

Not counting me, because I know where I am, or Eric, because he's dead, that leaves seven brothers. A nice number, seven. Very mystical.

Just what I need. More mystery.

I've often wondered what prompted the Unicorn to choose me as King of Amber. Of all of us, why me? Corwin was the logical choice, first because he'd been ruling in Dad's absence, and second because he's brighter than I am. Benedict is probably brighter still. Neither of them wanted the crown, to be sure, but so what? I didn't, either. At least, I'd never thought about it. So why me? What did I do?

The crown of Amber. King of the First Shadow. Ruler of *all* Shadows, if it comes to that. What a lofty post I've managed to land, after such a totally irresponsible life. Funny how these things go. I mean, even my sister Flora—good God!—was more decent than I was, and she's never had a whole lot going for her. And Gérard has always been more loyal than any of us. Even Julian, at the end, came through with as much maturity as any of us has ever shown. So, I repeat, why me?



All this aside, though, there is only one really important question. Why isn't anyone else here, and why can't I contact them wherever they've gone. It's almost as if they've ceased to exist, no traces whatsoever. Where have they gone, and who has sent them? Who wants them out of the way?

A little while ago, Amber was crawling with princes and princesses. Now there's nobody. Apart from the fact that I miss them, it's a wonderful time for an enemy attack. Is that what this is all about? Is Amber being set up? Maybe Corwin's behind it. Maybe he's finally sided with Chaos. Maybe . . . but I just can't believe it.

I need advice, and from someone with more brains than Gérard. Fiona's still here, but I can't get her interested in anything. And Llewella—well, Llewella is Llewella.

I wish Deirdre was still alive.

Even Eric.

If only I could find Corwin. I can't help thinking that he'd have better control of the situation, that he'd have been able to find out what happened. He always did, toward the end at least. He could piece things together, figure them out, just by sitting back and listening. Or so it seemed, anyway. I don't have his abilities, but I wish I did. I could use them now. I think I'm desperate.

I don't know where my brothers are, but I must find them, and I must find them now. Every bone in my body tells me Amber is about to die. I need their help. I can't defend Amber alone.

I open the top drawer of my desk and take out a deck of cards. Each card bears on one side the sign of Amber, the white Unicorn on a green field. The very Unicorn that crowned me. I turn the cards over and

Section 1

search through them. Tarot cards, they are called on one Shadow. But there they don't have the Greater Trumps.

No matter how often I see these cards, I am still amazed at the beauty of the Greater Trumps. Each card bears the picture of one of my siblings, and those pictures are more lifelike than any painting, any photograph, any motion picture. I touch the surface of each Trump, expecting (as I do every time) to feel the faces pictured on them. But I don't, of course. They're brilliant pictures, but they're only pictures after all, even if Dworkin did throw his entire being into creating them.

The cards are cold, as they should be.

The first is Eric. I don't know why I keep his Trump. He's dead, and every time I see his picture I miss him dearly. That's strange, considering I spent most of my life hating him, but that's the nature of brotherly love, I guess. I miss him, his handsome face, his blue-black hair, his bearded, smiling mouth. But he's dead. I put his card at the bottom of the deck.

The next card is a picture of me. Random, King of Amber. My costume is red, brown, orange, Renaissance-style, with doublet and hose. The card displays, with eerie accuracy, my dark, almost blueblack hair, and my black beard and moustache, which last week Fiona said was getting a touch of grey. I hope not. I hate grey.

Benedict comes next. He looks thinner than ever, even in his picture, and just as tall and angry. Long, straight brown hair, and that powerful jaw. Hazel eyes staring at you, piercing you. He has always scared me, but he's brilliant.

The next card has another strong jaw, and his

enormous strength is obvious. Gérard is a big man, and his small, well-trimmed beard and moustache show off his square face to perfection. His hunting horn hangs on a cord around his neck. Of all of us, Gérard is surely the most loyal to Amber. He remains with me.

After Gérard comes Flora in her green gown. Dressed in black to show off her long, black hair. Her blue eyes smiling, mocking, filled with mischief ever since she was small. She's been acting strange lately, distracted and disinterested. But she's done that before, and it usually means she is about to leave for a Shadow and establish a life of wine, men, and song. Especially men. I won't miss her.

Llewella's beautiful, jade-colored eyes stare at me from the next card. She's a peculiar one, she is. More forgiving than any of us, even Gérard, but less intimate as well. It seems she thinks herself above the rest of us—above our old, petty squabbles and our continuing distrust—and she may be right. She's a poet, quite renowned on some Shadows.

Turning over the next card, I see my sister Fiona, her green eyes setting off her perfect complexion, wry smile, flaming hair. Every man's dream. Corwin has warned me against her, saying she's about as trustworthy as a wounded cobra. I've no reason to disbelieve him.

Back to the men. At Flora's request—insistence, actually—I've looked into why Amber's succession is a male one, but I haven't found any answers. Corwin might know, but he had gone before I began to investigate. I suppose, as king, that I could change this law, but doing so would tamper with tradition and make even my own claim more difficult. Besides, I intend to have sons, and I want them on the throne.

Section 1

Once on the Shadow Earth I met Machiavelli. He taught me well.

If I could choose one brother to be standing beside me at this moment, I would choose Corwin. The man is truly one of a kind. As striking as he looks in his black and silver clothes, his cloak clasped by a brooch in the form of a silver rose, his looks have nothing on his brains. I don't think he's as smart as Benedict, and I'm sure he's nowhere near Brand, but he has a practical knowledge that is second to none. He would have made a great king.

What motivates Julian, whose card I now hold, I'll never understand. Once he was my worst enemy, but during the fight against Chaos he became a trusted ally. He even grew to like Corwin then, and that's something I was sure would never happen. It's almost as if he changed, all of a sudden, from an immature, self-serving idiot to a man concerned for the good of all. I didn't believe it then, and I don't think I do now, but the new Julian is a whole lot easier to put up with. Still, I'm glad he's away in Shadow. He's beginning to get self-righteous.

And now Caine. The dark one. Swarthy in all senses of the word. Wearing clothes as black as his hair and as green as his eyes, and always that stony expression. I don't think, over the past ten years, I ever heard him laugh. We thought he was dead once, even had a funeral for him. When he turned up alive, I wasn't entirely glad.

I've never known much about Bleys. I thought I did, when we were younger, but then I learned about his plot to take the crown, and I wasn't sure anymore. That incident really affected me. It took me some time to trust anyone after that. I still don't trust anyone completely. His blue eyes, his brilliant red hair, his thick red beard, that knowing, sardonic
smile-just the sight of him makes me shudder. Maybe he's behind all this.

Or maybe it's Brand. He was the villain of the last piece, but Corwin finally defeated him. We've counted him dead twice now, but he's always shown up again. And his card is still in the deck, even though it hasn't changed for years. Still the red hair, still the blue eves, still the green rider on the white horse. I don't like him. I never have.

That's it. All of us. Even the three sisters. Deirdre's card is the only one I've removed, because I liked her more than any of the others. When she died, something happened to us. Even though we settled the succession issue, we seemed to lose another bond. I think we all liked Deirdre, and I wish she was here now.

I hold each Trump before me and concentrate. For a time I just stare, but then I feel a click in my brain and the art begins to turn to reality. At least, that's what's supposed to happen. It's not happening now, though. One by one, I contact my sisters, but of my brothers only Gérard responds.

"Who?" he asks, apparently surprised. "It's Random," I reply. "I'm just admiring the family portraits." Then I pass my hand over the card and the connection is broken.

I wish the cards would turn warm. Then I would know they aren't working. But they're still cold, still smooth and cool to the touch. I don't know what's wrong. I've asked Gérard to help me find out, but he's discovered nothing so far. I'm not surprised.

Well, what now? What do I do? Dad would have been decisive, forcing something to happen. Corwin would have thought and thought until a course of action came to him. Brand would have destroyed everything and started over: maybe not a great solu-

tion, but at least it's a solution. Even Eric would have done more than just sit around and meditate.

I feel like Prince Hamlet.

Maybe Dad's ghost will walk in and tell me what has to be done. That's what happened to Hamlet. I'm going to close my eyes, and think about Dad. Come on, ghost. Come and tell me what to do. Make my decision for me.

Nothing.

Not even a rush of cold air.

I remember talking to a psychology student when I was on Corwin's Shadow Earth. He was extremely boring, prattling on about not very much as psycholo-gists normally do, especially students, but he caught my attention when he used my name.

"Random," he said, and I spun around. "You have a random personality. Random concrete." "What are you talking about?" I asked.

"It's obvious from the way you talk," he went on. "You never organize anything, not even what you're going to say. That's one sign of a random personality. Ordered people organize."

I nodded. "Obviously," I said. "And what about concrete?"

"Well, I'm not as sure about that. But it's got something to do with thinking in concrete terms. Not abstractions."

"You mean I don't think about Good and Evil, and

metaphysics, that sort of thing." "Sort of," he said. "But more than that, you do think about the details necessary to get things done. The problem is, your randomness often gets in the way of doing them. You're not very efficient."

"Maybe. But so what? That's the way I am."

"Do you want an assessment of your personality

efficiency? I can put it in black and white." He was determined to carry this thing through.

"Sure," I replied. "But let's not use black and white. Let's use"—and I gazed out the window at a traffic light—"oh, red and green."

He smiled. "See, that's what I mean by concrete. But the way you selected the colors was random."

"Fine," I said, getting annoyed. "Just get on with it."

"Okay," he replied. "Red and green. Like that traffic light out there, right?" Again he smiled, and I wanted to punch his face.

"Yeah, like that traffic light out there."

"Well." He thought for a moment. "You're certainly not red, because red would be abstract random. And you're not green, since that would suggest concrete ordered."

I shuddered. "But there are only three colors on a traffic light," I said. "That just leaves . . ."

"Right," he said. "Amber."

"Of course," I said, and I left.

But now, as I think about the incident, I realize that I might gain something from it. Granted, the man was a bit of an idiot, and if there really was a randomordered, concrete-abstract theory of personality he oversimplified it to death, but he was right about one thing. I know nothing about ordering. I wake up every day and take things as they come. I move from issue to issue without planning very much, and I always seem to be reacting rather than acting. Maybe I should order myself a bit.

Oh, God! I'm analyzing myself. And cheaply. At least Hamlet was profound about it.

Okay, King Random. Order yourself. Do something.

First, call in Gérard. He's not much, but he might help. Finding his Trump, I summon him to my side.

A few minutes later, Gérard comes in, smiles, and sits down. "Thanks for coming," I say. "I want you to work with me on this. Have you found out anything?"

"Not really," he answers. "Fiona's looked all over Arden, hoping to find Julian, but he's not there. And Flora did a hellride into Shadow Earth to see if Corwin is there, but if he is, he's not up to being found."

"Flora did that?" I ask, surprised.

"Yeah. Didn't even complain about it. I asked her if she'd do it, before she headed off to wherever she's going, and she agreed. I don't know how thorough she was, though."

"It doesn't matter," I reply. "I'm just amazed she did it. I'd have had a heart attack if she'd actually found him."

Gérard laughs. I like him, even if he isn't very bright. But then, we always like people who laugh at our jokes.

Gérard speaks again. "What do you want me to do?"

"I'm not sure," I answer, risking honesty. "I was hoping you'd have some suggestion."

My brother looks puzzled. "Me?" he asks. "But you're the king, Random."

"I know." I smile. "But I'm not Dad. I don't have a solution for everything. Not yet, anyway. Maybe when I'm older."

Gérard smiles. "I think this is an honor."

"Hardly. I'm merely picking your brains. I have some ideas, but I want to hear yours first." This last bit sounds forced, and even Gérard realizes it's not sincere. "Well," he begins, pausing to think, "why don't we bring one of the girls in? Fiona. Or Llewella."

"Why?" I ask.

"They're pretty smart. They might have some ideas."

I think about this for a moment. Then I respond. "No. I don't want them involved."

"But, Random, they're already involved. You asked me to start looking into the matter, and I've got them helping me. I've already explained that." He looks disappointed.

"Have you told them why you want their help?" I ask. I'm suddenly afraid that they might use this knowledge against me. Somehow.

Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown. There's something rotten in the state of Amber.

Where the hell did I learn all this Shakespeare? From Corwin, of course. And Flora. They've always been good at that.

For a while, I'm silent. Over and over again, I berate myself for not knowing what to do, but it doesn't help. I've spent so much time lately deprecating myself that I haven't had any time to make plans. It's a great way of getting out of doing things.

Then I look at Gérard, who is staring at the floor, and I wonder. Could he be behind all this? Maybe he's taking me for a fool, and maybe I'm falling for it. Maybe it's Gérard, and all three of the women.

Oh, for Christ's sake! Enough of this. Do something.

"All right," I say. "Let's try it. I'll call them on their Trumps." I feel a sudden elation, just from having acted. I must do this more often.

I pull Fiona's card first. Concentrating, I feel the click in my brain as picture turns to reality, and suddenly I hear my sister's voice.

"Who?" she asks, irritated. Obviously I've interrupted her.

"I'd like to talk to you in person. You, Gérard, Llewella, and Flora, if I can get them. Can you come now?" I'm trying to sound authoritative. There's a knack to it that I haven't quite mastered.

"Sure," Fiona replies, actually sounding interested. "Give me ten minutes, and then I'll Trump in." She breaks contact from her end.

A little flippant, I think to myself. I am the king, after all.

Llewella next. She agrees to come immediately. She reaches through the Trump to my hand, and instantly she is standing before me. She kisses me. "Nice to see you, brother," she says. "I was hoping we'd get involved in this." Seeing the smile on her face, I wonder if I've bitten off more than I can chew.

Flora refuses, albeit very politely. She is on her way to Shadow, and wants to spend some time away. I try my best to sound as if I'm granting her permission to go, and I think Gérard, at least, buys it. She assures me she will search diligently for the missing princes our brothers—wherever she goes. She's lying, and we both know it, but it sounds very official.

That's it. The die, as they say, is cast. At least I've done something.

Turn to section 2.

* 2 *

"I meant to keep it secret, and I tried to for a long time," I begin. "But after a while you began to figure it out for yourselves. Our brothers are missing. All of them. And we don't know where they are."

I sit on the throne, because it seems to be the right place to sit. In a semicircle in front of me, on green plush chairs, with golden trim, sit the others. Llewella is to my right, and she stares at the wall behind me. Fiona is to my left, absently picking at her fingers and running her hands through her hair. In the center is Gérard, who fiddles with his sword. The women made a great joke of putting him between them, but I think it was wise. It keeps them from snapping at one another.

"Has any of you tried to reach one of them via the Trumps?" I ask. A stupid question, I realize, since the answer is obvious. But at least it will get them talking.

"Yes," says Fiona. "I've tried to get Julian. And Bleys." Of course, I think. She would say that. "They didn't answer."

"What about you?" I ask Gérard. He's already told me, but maybe he hasn't told the girls.

"At some point," he replies, "I've tried to reach all of them. Even Brand." At Brand's name Llewella starts. I ignore it.

"Any luck?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"No," he says. "But something interesting happened yesterday." Now it's my turn to start. He hasn't mentioned this to me. "What's that?" I ask calmly.

"Well, I told you I tried to reach Julian," he says. "But I didn't have a chance to mention what happened. I didn't get him, but I got some strange what?—vibrations?"

Fiona laughs. "Vibrations? You sound like Llewella." The latter glares.

"I don't know how else to describe it," Gérard continues. His ability to ignore taunts is stunning. Is he that unaware, or that mature? "I felt something. Something like water. And I thought I heard water."

I think for a moment. "Well," I admit, again risking honesty, "that's more than I've managed. Llewella, what about you?"

"Nothing," she says. "Nothing at all."

"Have you tried," I say.

"Yes," she replies. "I've tried to reach Bleys, and Caine, and Corwin. In fact, I've tried for Corwin just about every day for the past couple months. There's something I want to talk to him about."

"We'd all like to talk to Corwin," I say. "Any luck?"

"None," she replies, still staring ahead. At last, she shrugs. "No luck. It's as if they've disappeared, Random, and I'm getting very worried."

Then she looks at me, her eyes filling with tears. "Why has it taken you so long to do something about it?" she asks. At that moment, my heart goes out to her.

"I don't know," I say. "For one thing, they've disappeared before, although not all at once. We've got a secretive family, you all know that. When we want to be left alone, we arrange to have it done. Look how long Corwin stayed lost. And Brand."

"Yes," says Fiona. "But they were special cases. And if all six of them are now special cases, then we're in serious trouble. Why are they all away from Amber at once anyway?" Her tone accuses me, but I manage to ignore it.

"No idea," I say. "They didn't ask permission to leave, and they didn't tell me why they wanted to. I don't run that kind of ship. I'd like everyone to let me know where they are, and what they're doing, but they're not going to do that. Besides, that's why we have Trumps. To keep tabs on each other at all times. For the defense of Amber."

Each of us knows that the Trumps have been used for our own defense as much as for Amber's, but the cards really were meant for the defense of the city. We've always needed a way to contact one another instantly, in case of collective danger. Dworkin designed the Trumps to allow just that.

"I think it's more important," says Gérard, "that we figure out what to do now, not what we should have done before." All of us look at him, surprised. Again he has displayed more astuteness than we would ever have credited him with.

"Yes." I reply. "That's why we're here. And I'd like to suggest an idea."

"Why suggest it?" asks Fiona, seemingly sincere. "Why not just order it?"

"I've already told you, I don't run that kind of ship. Besides, this is something we've always vowed never to do." I pause.

They all look up at me, waiting for me to speak. Sometimes, power can be fun.

"I want to search their rooms."

Gérard gasps, Llewella shakes her head, and Fiona laughs.

"You can't!" says my brother. "No, you can't," agrees Llewella.

Again Fiona laughs. "You mean to tell me, Random, that you have honestly held to that bit of

stupidity? That you've never yet searched their rooms?"

I wait for her to stop laughing. "That's what I mean to tell you," I say. "Not even yours."

"Eric," she informs me, "did it all the time. It taught him a great deal."

"Eric," I reply, "is dead. That, too, taught him a great deal. Now please don't stir up the past." One thing about power is that you can get away with being self-righteous. Ethics can be a great weapon, Machiavelli used to tell me.

Fiona glowers at me. I'd best placate her. "I'm sorry, sister. But you must know where I stand on these things. Now please, let's not have this get in our way. I need your help." At least half of this is sincere. I really do need her. She seems genuinely shocked at my words.

"You're right," she says. Then she smiles. "You do need me." I smile back.

I continue. "All right. Now about those rooms."

Gérard breaks in. "You can't do it, Random. It's been the one thing always considered untouchable. Except by Dad, of course. We've always agreed not to invade each other's rooms. That's been the one privacy we have in Amber. If it goes, no one will ever return."

"But, dear brother," Fiona says, with a touch of her most annoying tone, "I've already told you that Eric visited each of our rooms. I caught him in mine. That's how I know."

"Did he take you into the others?" asks Llewella, "after you found him out?" She looks at her sister disapprovingly.

Fiona smiles. "Of course. That's why you never knew. And I found some interesting things, too."

"I'm sure you did," I say. Like all meetings of the Amber royal family, this one is becoming charged with distrust and dislike. I'd best change the course of the conversation. "I've already asked that we don't stir up the past. Change your room if you want, Llewella. No one will get in it again. But I repeat my request. May I enter your brothers' rooms? My vote counts, and I vote ves."

Nobody replies quickly. Gérard clasps his hands together and looks down between them to the floor. Llewella resumes her stare at the wall behind me. Fiona picks her nails, as once in a while a smile-a smirk, perhaps-crosses her lips.

"No," says Llewella at last. "It's not right." "I don't agree," says Fiona. "If it's that important, the king should be allowed to do it. At least he's let us know about it."

That leaves Gérard. If he votes no, I don't know what I'll do. I can just use my authority to enter the rooms anyway, and I could do so secretly, but I really meant it when I told Fiona I don't run that kind of ship. But it might be necessary. This time. Is this how monarchs nurture hatred?

At last Gérard speaks, slowly and with obvious forethought. "I don't like it, Random," he begins. "I don't like it at all." A pause. "But in one way I agree with Fiona. At least you've asked, which is more than Eric did, and more than Dad did. Somehow that means a lot."

He pauses again, then says, "All right. I vote yes. Don't disappoint me."

He has no right to say this last to his king, of course, but every right to say it to his brother. I acknowledge this, and Gérard merely nods. I glance at the women, and they are looking down. As if they haven't noticed.

"Thank you," I say. "But I won't force any of you to do something you don't want to. Llewella, I'd like your help, but I understand your position. Fiona, I assume you'll help, since you voted yes immediately. Gérard, you'll have to make up your mind. I give you the night to do so. Meet me back here—all three of you—first thing in the morning. I want to start immediately."

After they leave, I sit back, contented. I did something. Not only that, but I thought of it myself. It's a good feeling.

But it's been tiring, all that diplomacy. Weighing each person's wants, and making sure you express your understanding, takes more concentration than Trumping to a distant Shadow. I don't enjoy conversations like that, especially with people who know me as well as my brothers and sisters do. Promotions from within always create the problem of gaining respect. Becoming king over your peers is no different.

And then I wonder. How Machiavellian have I been? I greatly enjoyed the talks I had with Machiavelli, but I often wondered if his advice was useful. Perhaps for Renaissance politics, I thought, but not for modern governments, and certainly not for the court of Amber. But maybe he wasn't so far off, I now think. Maybe that's how Dad kept us in line all these years. And isn't that what I've just done? Haven't I just taken great pains to acknowledge the wishes of Fiona, Llewella, and Gérard, not for their sakes but for mine? Or was my respect genuine? I do not know. Maybe I never will. But thinking

I do not know. Maybe I never will. But thinking about all this, which I seem to do more and more often, gives me a headache. I take two aspirins and wait for the morning. When it comes, my headache is even stronger. There's nothing worse than starting a day with a throbbing head, but I've managed to do it. Not a good thing, but I'll have to live with it. I just hope it doesn't destroy what I've set up so far. I tend to get ornery when my head hurts.

Llewella and Gérard are waiting for me when I reach the dining room. Fiona, as always, is late. We begin breakfast without her, and when she appears she looks shocked that we would have done so. I invite her to sit down. She does, and devours whatever we haven't already eaten. Business, among Amberites, is never discussed at mealtime, so we talk about very little. My headache seems under control, but is still far from gone.

We move to the throne room, where we sit in the same positions as the night before. Nobody speaks. Everyone is waiting for me, and I am reluctant to say anything. Invading the others' privacy suddenly seems not such a brilliant idea. Maybe it's the headache.

It is Gérard who breaks the silence. "May I say something?" he asks. Relieved, I assent.

"I've been thinking about last night, and I want to say that I'm more firmly convinced we're doing the right thing." He pauses, perhaps expecting my thanks, but I simply nod. He continues. "But what are we hoping to find in the rooms?"

I shrug. "Who knows? Most of us, though, keep things in our rooms we wouldn't show to anyone else. I know I do. Those are the things we're looking for. Anything that might give us a clue to their whereabouts."

Then I look at Llewella. "Have you decided yet? Are you in this with us?"

She sits awhile without speaking. How she can be so

quiet, so motionless, with people watching her has always perplexed me. I tend to get flustered under that sort of pressure. Llewella is a rock.

"I've decided," she says at last, "that I cannot go with you into our brothers' rooms." A pause, then she continues. "But I do want to help you. So I'm asking you, Random, to let me do something else. Give me some task, and I'll fulfill it."

I can't help thinking her speech is a little forced, but with Llewella you can never tell. She often gets on a high horse, and I don't believe it's intentional. It's just the way she is.

"Good," I say. "That will help."

I wait for several seconds. Then, "So three of us will go into the rooms. Fine. Let's get started." "Wait," Llewella says. "What do you want me to

do?"

"I don't know yet," I reply. "If we find something, I'll let you know. I'm sure there'll be something."

"But what do I do in the meantime?" she asks. Her voice is beginning to whine, and my head reacts with a new level of throbbing. But this is no time to turn negative.

I think for a moment, then suggest, "How about keeping tabs on us with your Trumps? If we leave, it'll be up to you to make sure nothing happens to us on the way. As a matter of fact, it would be best for only one of us to go, leaving the Trump open. The rest of us will pool our concentration to keep contact with the traveler. That way, there's less chance of losing another of us. Agreed?"

"Agreed," says Llewella. "Good idea," says Gérard. "It is a good idea, Random," chimes in Fiona. "You're improving, brother." She says this last with a smile. I return it as best I can.

"Then let's go," I say. "Llewella, head for your own room and get your Trumps ready. Gérard, you already have yours. Fiona?"

"I'll get them," she replies. "Where do you want me to meet you?" Then she smirks and says, "Your room, Random?"

I'm about to wave her off, but then I think of the consequences of what she's said.

"Yes," I reply. "My room. We may as well start there." As I turn to leave, I see Fiona's eyebrows raise in disbelief. I've never shown anyone my own room, and they all know it. Nice move, I think to myself. Nice move. Fiona is right. I *am* getting better. I hope it continues.

When the others arrive, I wonder at the wisdom of having them here. Like all Amber royals, I am very protective of my room. It is, as Gérard said last night, the only private spot we have in all of Amber, and we guard that privacy jealously. But I'm aware also of what must be done. Being king isn't always fun. "Inspect it as you will," I say, trying to sound as

"Inspect it as you will," I say, trying to sound as cheerful about it as possible. The others don't move. "Really," I assure them. "Go ahead. It's okay." Still they don't move.

"Well, what's wrong?" I ask.

"Random," says Gérard. "You're the king. We're not about to snoop around your room. Unless you give us a direct order. Besides, we know you're only going into the others' rooms because it's necessary. We don't need proof."

Again I am struck by Gérard's sheer horse-sense. I look at Fiona, and she nods in agreement.

"Okay, then," I say. "Whose room first?"

"We could split up," says Fiona. "Might be faster that way."

"True. But I'm not sure it would work. Part of the strategy is to make sure we're together, in case the traveler gets lost. Or worse." "That's right," says Gérard. "Not only that, but

Llewella is going to have enough to do keeping contact open. Let's not complicate it."

"You're probably right," Fiona assents. "Just seemed like a good idea, that's all."

Silence for a while. Then I say, "All right. Once again, then. Whose room first?"

Fiona shrugs. "It doesn't matter to me," she says. "Nor me," says Gérard. "Maybe we should choose someone who might be easiest to find."

"My idea exactly," I say, and it's true. "Corwin, we all know, is almost impossible to find, even when things are going well. Brand we don't know about. Bleys sometimes goes on his incommunicado binges, as does Benedict. That leaves Caine and Julian. I suggest Julian. He's never hidden before."

"I'm fine with Julian," says Fiona. "But Caine might be more help if we do find him." She has a point.

"True," I say. Caine is good at almost anything. We stand for a moment, facing each other, making up our minds. My headache is now a dull throb.

Turn to section 3.

"Okay," I say, "how about finding Caine second? Julian will be a practice run."

Both agree. My headache is almost gone.

Julian's room is neat, as we expected. We search it, putting everything back in place as carefully as possible. He has many interesting things, including a gorgeous set of chessmen I would once have killed to own. Which is probably why he never showed them to me. But there isn't much that would suggest where he's gone.

Julian's walls, like all of ours, are covered with art. My tastes run more toward Renaissance nudes, but Julian has more modern stuff. Monet. Even a Dali. "Why would anybody want a Dali?" I say out loud, and Fiona laughs.

"I was wondering that myself," she says. "But then, I'm a Romantic." Of course, I think to myself.

"Look at this." Gérard's voice. We look, and he is pointing at a small drawing near the bottom of the wall. "I've never seen anything like this."

The picture is a drawing. A building, with people walking on it. It's a bit strange, perhaps, especially since all the people look alike, hooded and marching, but I've seen buildings like it before and find it unremarkable.

"What about it?" I ask, hoping not to sound too stupid.

"I see it now," says Fiona. "Look at the people."

"They look identical. And very mechanical." I'm beginning to feel really dumb, so I shut up.

"No," Fiona continues. "Look at the way they're walking."

I look. Some are walking up the stairs, others are coming down. Nothing strange about—no, wait. The stairs are continuous! The people are clearly going up and down, but there is only one level to the stairs. Totally upsets the idea of space. "Yes," I say. "I see it now. Whose is it?"

"Julian's, obviously," says Fiona.

"No, I mean who drew it?"

Gérard squints at the bottom right corner. "M. C. Escher," he says. "Who's he?"

"Dutch artist," says a voice. "Twentieth century." The voice belongs to Llewella. She has our Trumps open.

"I thought you didn't want to watch," Gérard says.

"I'm not," Llewella replies. "I'm listening. I thought it best to keep the contact at all times. Just in case."

Fiona is smiling. She winks at me. I'm not sure, though; Llewella may be telling the truth, whatever Fiona might think.

"Know anything else about this Escher?" I ask. I could name hundreds of Renaissance artists, and dozens from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but I suddenly realize how little I know about the twentieth century. On Shadow Earth, at least.

Llewella's voice comes through clearly. "A master of visual tricks, illusions, paradoxes, that sort of thing. His goal seemed to be to upset the notion of space. A little like hellriding, only Escher wanted you to *think* you knew what you were looking at. Some of his stuff you've got to study before you see what's unusual about it."

"Anything else worth looking at?" I ask Gérard,

who has been searching while Llewella and I have been talking. Fiona is sprawled on the bed, obviously tired and growing disinterested.

"Nothing," he replies. "Not that I can see. But that drawing still interests me." He looks at it again, while I begin to walk around the room.

Then his voice calls my name. I spin around and look at where he has been standing. Fiona has leaped up from the bed. She walks to where he was.

"He's gone," she says. "Into the picture." Her voice trembles.

I stare at the picture, but it doesn't seem to have changed. The people are still marching up the stairs, and I can't tell if there is one more person or not. I wish I'd studied it more when I first saw it.

"Fiona," I say. "Do you notice any change in the picture?"

She looks at it for a good thirty seconds. "No," she replies at last. "At least, I can't tell."

"Nor can I," I admit.

And then I feel it. The drawing is doing just that. Drawing. Drawing *me*. Because I'm staring at it. The drawing draws, I think to myself. Interesting word play, that. And just as quickly I condemn myself for thinking of games at a time like this.

With an effort, I turn my head away. "Fiona, look at the drawing. Stare at it for a while. Tell me what happens to you as you do so. But be careful."

"Why?" she asks.

"Please. Just do it. It's important."

She stares. Her eyes grow wide as the drawing begins its work. "It's pulling me, Random!" she yells. "I don't think I can pull out!"

I grab her arm and shake her till she snaps out of it. She turns to look at the drawing again, but I stop her

before she can. I begin to wonder how I managed to tear myself away. It didn't seem quite that difficult for me.

"Thanks," she says. "I thought I was gone." "Weird, isn't it?" I reply. "It really does draw you in. I don't think I've ever felt anything quite like it." "Of course you have," Fiona insists. "The

Trumps."

It strikes me then. "Yes," I say. "The Trumps. It's almost as if the drawing was a Trump. A strange Trump, but a Trump nevertheless. But how could that be?"

"I don't know. Unless Dworkin drew the picture. He's the one who designed and painted the Trumps in the first place."

That brings Corwin to mind. Corwin, who escaped from Eric's imprisonment through a picture drawn by Dworkin on the wall of his cell. And Merlin, Corwin's son, also the son of Chaos. He too discovered pictures that worked like Trumps, only those were not created by Dworkin. So who created these? Dworkin? Or the people Merlin knew? Or maybe it's possible for anyone to do it.

I'll never forget how I felt when Corwin told me he could redraw the Pattern, and thereby re-create Amber. I had a lot of trouble understanding it then, and I haven't done much better since. Amber, we discovered, was *not* the prime Shadow. That was shock enough. But when I understood what Corwin was doing, redesigning the Pattern of Amber, the pattern that holds everything together, I was stunned. It's a little like someone telling you the floor you're walking on isn't real. If you stop believing, what happens? Do you fall through? That's what I kept wondering about the Pattern. If it wasn't real, then what was I? Physicists can tell us over and over that reality is something we create, that there is no such thing as a world external to our experience, but we never truly believe it. If we did, we'd truly be insane. But Corwin was asking us to believe something very similar.

Funny, isn't it. We're brought up with reality drilled into us, through school and parents and society, only to find out the whole thing is one big crock. I used to cause a big ruckus in the Renaissance of Shadow Earth by telling church officials that the Bible needed a book after Revelations. This would be called Revelations II, in which we discovered that God was just kidding. If I go back now, I'll suggest a new opening to Genesis: In the beginning, God created Adam and Eve; they did the rest.

But enough of this. Gérard is gone, and Fiona is still in partial shock. I've got to start thinking about the matter at hand.

I draw out my Trumps. Shuffling them, I find Gérard's likeness and concentrate on it as hard as I can. A click, and I begin to sense him. Not very strong, but he's there. I concentrate harder, closing my eyes. It doesn't help. He's still fuzzy, vague, indistinct.

Then I remember Fiona.

"Come here," I almost shout. No time now for requests and civilities. Fiona obeys immediately.

"Help me," I say. "We must get through. Help me bring him in clearer before I lose him."

She hesitates. "Come on!" I yell. "I think I'm losing him!"

"I don't care," says Fiona. "I don't want to go in there. Didn't you see what that place can do to your mind?"

"No," I reply honestly. "I didn't get far enough in." "Well, I did, damn it. And I'm not going back."

I feel Gérard's image about to slip away. I must do something, but I don't know what.

"Fiona! Please! I'm losing him!" My voice sounds desperate, even to me. Gérard seems to be striving to grasp onto me, but I need help. I need someone else— Llewella. Of course.

"Llewella! Can you hear me?" My voice seems weak. I wait for a moment, then try again. "Llewella!" Nothing. "Llewella!" Still nothing. And then Fiona's voice. "Random, where are you? I think I can help you now. Where have you gone?" "I haven't gone anywhere," I shout. "I'm still with you." But then I open my eyes and look around. Fiona

"I haven't gone anywhere," I shout. "I'm still with you." But then I open my eyes and look around. Fiona is nowhere in sight. Nor is Gérard's room. All I see is a flight of stone-grey steps in front of me, leading downward, with a grey metal railing on either side. For a minute I am too stunned, and a little too scared, to look around, but at last I do so, and I immediately wish I hadn't. Vertigo overtakes me, and I sit down hard on the top step.

To my left is a grey stone wall, two stories tall. The bottom floor has two windows and a door, while the top floor is an open court, which is joined by a walkway to where I sit. To my right is nothing, but to my right rear is another wall, this time with a set of steps leading down into a forbidding-looking opening. Behind me is an opening through a large archway, actually one of three large archways on the second level court. There's something very strange—and very familiar—about it all.

Then I understand why it's strange. It's in black and white. I've never lived in a black and white world before, although I suppose I could have if I'd wanted to. I remember going to a movie matinee in Corwin's Shadow Earth. It was one of those old attempts at 3-D, something about an underwater monster, and you had to wear these cheap tinted glasses to get the 3-D effect. The movie was no prize, but I remember going outside still wearing the glasses, and suddenly seeing the city in black and white. It was unsettling, a little like Corwin's announcement that he was going to redo the Pattern, a little like quantum physics, a little like the picture on Julian's . . .

The picture. Of course. I am inside the drawing. That means if I go up to the top, I will see the impossible staircase. Maybe Gérard is there.

I look at my Trumps, still in my hand, and find the one I want. Then I concentrate on it, and it comes into focus. Gérard! Walking with the monks, high atop the building. I call to him, but he cannot hear me. I try his Trump, but I can't make a connection.

I try some other Trumps. Corwin. Nothing. Bleys. Nothing. Caine. Nothing. What about my sisters? I know where they are. Fiona. Nothing. Llewella. Black. Black? That's strange. But then again, what hasn't been today?

I have to decide which way to go. It may be that Gérard was concentrating on the upper staircase, and therefore went there. I don't know. But now I must figure out whether to go right up there and try to bring him back, or to go down and start from the bottom. Maybe in the lower levels I'll find something to lead me properly to the top. Maybe not. Maybe I should just march straight up the closest stairs I can find, reach the top, and grab Gérard as he walks by. That way seems easiest, but I never have trusted the easiest way.

If Random descends the stairs, turn to section 8.

If he goes up, turn to section 12.

* 4 *

Toward the fading light I race, leaping over the bodies that writhe in their agony. Faster I run, and closer I come, but the distance I've run completely belies the distance my eyes tell me I should have to run. I can't get a grip on distance here. My sight doesn't seem to work.

Finally I reach the doorway, and through it I see it is night outside. I stop, take one look back into the room, then step toward the door.

A barrier. Something in my way. Something I can't see.

I push against it, but it does not yield. Then I kick it, and hit it with my fists, and ram it with my shoulder. Nothing. Whatever this is, I can't budge it.

Then fear sets in.

I don't know when we make the crossover from frustration to fear, but I think it happens at the point where we finally lose hope. Being frustrated is simply being denied a satisfactory conclusion. To be fearful —truly fearful—is to be without hope. Even if the hopelessness lasts only a few seconds, which is usually the case, while it lasts it is the worst feeling imaginable. You can temper frustration by getting angry, but there's nothing you can do to ease fear. The circumstances have to change.

Does being king make you philosophize all the time? I wonder if Dad left any memoirs. I must find out.

What I fear is the sheer senselessness of what is happening. And "senselessness" is exactly what I mean. Sight, my primary sense, is being denied me. I can bloody well see the doorway, its arches are perfectly clear, and the night outside is gorgeous with its cloudless, star-filled sky. Furthermore, my eyes tell me there is no reason I can't get out into it. But something is keeping me back. I don't like it, and it scares me.

I can't understand this place. No matter what I do.

So I do the only reasonable thing: I sit down and cry. When I finish, I test the doorway again, and it has not changed. But I have. I am no longer afraid. Perplexed, frustrated, and useless, but not afraid.

One last time I resolve to force my way through. I step back a short distance, lower my shoulder, and charge. When I hit, something gives. My shoulder throbs, but the barrier still stands.

Roll one six-sided die and read the result. Subtract that number of hit points from Random's character record.

Turn to section 10.

* 5 *

To Amber then, Julian.

First, I blot out any images of the endless staircase. It would be easier if the monks walked a little quieter, but I'm doing fairly well. Now, to imagine a scene in Amber. Julian's room. With Fiona in it. That's where I left her, so it shouldn't be hard to piece together. There she is, sitting on the bed, staring at the wall. Think. Concentrate. Harder.

I open my eyes and peek. We're still on the stairs. How about trying for Julian's room without Fiona?

I try that, but nothing happens. Okay, Fiona again.

Once more I bring her into focus, and once more she sits on the bed and stares at the wall. Put her somewhere else. I try that. She won't go. It's almost as if she really *is* in Julian's room, really sitting on the bed and really staring at the wall. Of course. She must be. Otherwise this wouldn't be working at all.

I try to imagine what she is staring at. That wall holds the smaller pieces of my brother's art collection. The Monet. A Picasso sketch. The Escher.

Yes. She's looking at the Escher. But how can she do that without being drawn into it, as I was? I concentrate on the drawing. There it is. The stairs, the opening, the endless stairway. The opening, again the opening. I feel myself being pulled. I grasp Julian's hand.

"Here we go," I say to him. "Back home."

But then I force my eyes open and let go of his hand. Is this going to work, I ask myself? What if we get back to Julian's room, and then find out that it was the drawing that got us back? If that's the case, then we'd no sooner arrive than we'd be pulled back inside the drawing. Worse still, we might then end up right back here, precisely at the point where we entered the drawing. If this happens, we'd be in an endless loop, drawn out of Julian's room into the drawing, and out of the drawing into Julian's room, forever.

It's not a nice thought.

I try to imagine the throne room and the dining room. I do so, but they do not draw us. Then I think about my own room, but it too is powerless. I try other locations, even some Shadows, but nothing works. That's all I can do. I can't imagine the others' rooms, even though I think they might help, because I've never been in them. Suddenly I wish I hadn't been so honorable.

This hasn't worked. I'll either have to step on the

endless stairway and work my way toward Gérard, or try to use the Trumps to get us home. I don't know which is best.

If Random uses the Trumps, turn to section 6.

If he steps on the endless stairway, turn to section 11.

* 6 *

I take out the Trumps and look through them until I find Llewella's. Maybe from here I can reach her. I would dearly love to get Julian home, where she can administer to him and keep him out of my way. I have no idea what rescuing Gérard will entail, but I would rather not have a blind, half-dead companion to carry around.

I concentrate on the Trump, paying close attention to its details. I can't help thinking the Trumps should be at home here. Like this place, they defy space and, to a degree, time. Many of us have noted the time distortions that occur when traveling among Shadow, and as I look at Julian I realize a similar time distortion happens here. In fact, it may be the temporal aberration, rather than the spatial, that caused the dungeon to seem much bigger than my eyes told me it was. Perhaps my eyes were seeing properly, but every step I took used up far more time than it seemed. None of this helps, but as I stare at the Trump it all comes to mind.

I think harder. My head hurts again. But at last something happens. Llewella's face, a bit fuzzy but nonetheless real, appears on the Trump.

"Hurry, Random," she says. "I've finally got you.

Give me your hand, and I'll pull you through." "Wait," I say. "I've got Julian with me. Can you pull us both?"

"I can't hear you. Just give me your hand. And hurry. You're starting to fade." She sounds desperate.

Uncharacteristically, I must make a quick decision. Clearly, only one of us can make it to her. Normally that wouldn't be the case, but the Trumps don't work right in this grey, ugly place. Were I to go home. I might be able to return for both my brothers. But in the meantime Julian could die, and who knows what could happen to Gérard. Still, if I send Julian, I may not get another chance to return myself. And if I let the contact fade, unused? Well, perhaps the staircase will provide a solid alternative.

If Random sends Julian in his place, turn to section 17.

If he goes himself, turn to section 22.

* 7 *

"Idiot," I say out loud to myself. "I should have figured this out sooner." But then again, that's always the case when you finally know the answer.

All I have to do, I realize now, is close my eyes and forget about trying to see. Since sight doesn't work here, and in fact distorts things, don't trust it. Suddenly it all seems so easy.

It isn't, though. I mean, knowing you shouldn't depend on sight is one thing, but actively putting it out of your consciousness is guite another. Especially if you've used it ever since you were born. We train ourselves to see, and we even link truth with sight. So how do I forget about it?

First, I close my eyes. A good start. I can't see anything, of course, and I'm immediately tempted to open them again, but I don't, remembering that being able to see—in this place at least—only makes things worse.

Fine. My eyes are closed. But what do I think about? My throne? My beautiful wife? Nice thought, that, but it's not going to help me. How about writing a book? I've always wanted to write one. My memoirs, perhaps. Another nice thought, but again it's useless. Funny. I've always wanted time to do nothing but think, but now that I'm forced to, I don't want to.

Again the answer comes like a flash. Think about getting through the door, idiot. Think about the door not being there, and you walking through the open space.

Now try it.

I do so, and damn near break my nose as it hits solid wood. I believe I've made an error: What else can I try?

What's been wrong about this place? Mainly, distances don't mean anything. All right, so ignore them. Don't even think in terms of distances. But how do I do that? Only one way. Ignore space. Obliterate it. Unthink it!

I imagine the room behind the door, even though I have no idea what it looks like. No, wait. I do have an idea. That's where Julian is. Somehow, Julian was able to engage my mind, drawing me toward that door. That's why the door seemed so attractive in the first place.

Okay, one more time. The room. The wooden chair in the corner. The small table to the side. The

bookshelves along two walls. The throw rug in the center. It has designs on it, something about two men praying, monks perhaps. Concentrate on that rug.

Nothing.

What else does the room have? What haven't I included?

Of course. Julian. Julian is in the room.

I imagine him then, lying on the floor, his hand covering his empty eye sockets. I imagine the welts on his neck and his body, and I imagine the ribs that dominate the chest. I concentrate on his face, its long beard and tortured grimace. And then the eyes. The eyes that no longer work.

Yes. That's it. The eyes. If they don't work, then they're perfect for where he is. And as a focus point, the eyes work perfectly. I throw every ounce of concentration into the eyes.

And I open my own and see him at my side. He is still alive, but not by much. He needs help.

Okay, try it again. Imagine another scene. This time with good, healing food, and bandages, and hot water to clean him, and cold, clear water to drink. I open my eyes. Nothing.

No, it doesn't work that way. This isn't like shaping a Shadow, even though it seems like it. I can't just invent something. I have to imagine something that already exists. And that's hard, because I know nothing here.

"Julian," I say, "where can we find help?"

He raises his hand. I clasp it in mine. "Think," he whispers in a croak, "old monk. Blind. Basin. Milk. Bowl. Bread." And then in a gasp, "Think with me."

I obey. Together we draw the scene.

Suddenly we are there. The monk is ancient, and he holds a bowl filled with milk. A basin of water sits at

his feet, and a loaf of bread on the floor beside him. He is, of course, blind.

"Please," I beg. "Help my brother."

"Of course," he says. "It is my duty." He hands me the water, the milk, the bread. I help Julian drink and eat, very slowly and very little, and then caress him to sleep.

"Thank you," I say. "We are in your debt."

"No," he says. "It is my duty. You must go now. He will heal. In time."

"But we don't have much time. I've lost another brother here as well. On the endless stairs."

"Then go there. Find him. Then take him home." He speaks slowly, but with no hesitation.

"How do I do that?" I ask. "He looked trapped there."

"No one is trapped here," the old monk says. "Not if they do not wish to be."

I'm getting frustrated. "What the hell does that mean?" I almost shout. "Are you saying Gérard wanted to come here? That's bullshit. The picture pulled him here, against his will. I saw it. Or almost did."

"You must ask him that yourself," replies the old man. "Now please take your leave. And take your brother with you. He will heal. In time."

"Who are you?" I ask. "Why are you here?"

Smiling, the old monk responds. "It is a long story, and one that you do not want to hear. Suffice it to say"—and here he pauses—"that I am the only one to survive the endless walk."

"Endless walk?" I break in.

"If you reach the top of the stairs," he intones, "you will then understand. Now go. You have little time."

I look at Julian, and already he seems healthier.

Maybe the monk is right. Or maybe I'm just imagining it. At any rate, I obey the old man. I pick up Julian and walk to the door.

Naturally, it won't open. The old monk smiles.

Well, where do I want to go? To find Gérard, of course. All right, then, up to the endless stairs. It's all so easy, I guess.

I close my eyes and paint the picture. Then I burn my brain thinking about it, until my head weighs a thousand pounds. But it works. When I open my eyes, the endless stairway lies before me. It exists, exactly as I saw it in Julian's room, and exactly as it appeared when I used Gérard's Trump. If I want to find Gérard, I am going to have to make use of that stairway. All I need do is step on.

But, before I get on the stairway, why not take care of Julian first? He could use some nursing, and Fiona is pretty good at that sort of thing.

Maybe I can *think* us back to Amber, or rather, I'll *unthink* us away from here. Whichever.

And, of course, it is always possible that the Trumps will work here. I can't quite believe that they are useless, when I have depended on the cards more often than I have on the people they picture. Well, those are my options: The choice is waiting.

If Random steps on the endless stairway, turn to section 11.

If he tries thinking himself back to Amber, turn to section 5.

If he tries to use the Trumps, turn to section 6.

* 8 *

Cautiously I descend the stairs, and then I turn to my left and walk toward the door. I knock, but there is no answer. I step over to the windows and look through. An empty room. Then I hear a noise above me. I look up and see a cowled figure—a monk, it appears—on the walkway. I shrink against the wall, but he does not look in my direction.

I return to the staircase and walk past. There it is: the forbidding opening. If possible, it looks even more forbidding now that I'm standing in front of it. Slowly I start down the steps. I feel cold air on my face.

Then I hear the noises! The sounds of groans, not of pain but of despair. Feeble sounds. I look up, and high above me I see a hand grasp the railing of the impossible stairway. Whatever the forbidding opening holds, I think, the impossible stairway is worse. At least the downward way conforms to my sense of reality.

Bracing myself against both cold and fear, I enter. It is dark, and my eyes don't work. I wish my nose didn't. A smell assaults me, a mixture of human excrement and burnt flesh. Or something like that. Good God! What have I let myself in for?

Breathing through my mouth, I stand still and wait for my eyes to adjust. When they finally do, I take one look and wish for darkness again. I don't know why this place is so dark, since the opening I came through has no door, but for the two people I see here it will never be anything but. They are chained to the wall, with old, piss-laden straw and hunks of spoiled meat

thrown haphazardly around them. They are groaning, and they have every right to do so. It may be the smell, which must have made them constantly sick. Or it may be the pain of tortured flesh. Or it may be the fact that they have no eyes.

I feel vomit rise in my throat as I look at them, but I manage to keep control. However much I hate this scene, I have even less desire to go back outside. I wonder why.

I take a few steps, and darkness falls again. I pause, wait for my eyes to adjust, then go forward once more. This is weird. The victims are still in front of me, practically the same distance away. I don't seem to have covered any ground at all. I shake my head, then take several steps toward them, not bothering to wait until my eyes adjust. Then I wait. Finally I can see, but the men have disappeared. No. I still hear the noises.

Behind me!

I whirl around, and there they are. I've managed to walk right through them. And now the light from the doorway is fading. Soon it will be gone, and I will not be able to see. My eyes will not be able to adjust at all.

If Random rushes to the doorway, turn to section 4.

If he waits until the light fails, turn to section 10.

* 9 *

Frustrated again, I batter at the door until my hands, legs, and feet throb. Then I throw myself at it once more, hoping the damn thing shatters into fragments around me.

It doesn't. But my other shoulder feels as if it does.

Roll 1 D6 and subtract the result from Random's hit points. Then continue reading.

At last I give up and sit down where I left Julian. My head throbs, and I'm extremely thirsty. I close my eyes and dream about my bedroom in Amber, with its plush carpet, its warm, soft comforter, and its built-in wine cellar. I would kill for one of these things. For all, I'd give up the throne.

I'll forget about Julian, I think to myself, and head back. Along the way I'll check along the walls for other exits. There must be some way out of here. Something I haven't thought of yet.

Of course. The Trumps. I keep forgetting about them. Perhaps they work, now that I'm out of the dungeon.

I shuffle them and try a few. Llewella? No. Fiona? No. Gérard, no change. Brand, black. Corwin? Hopeless.

Wait a minute. What about Julian? I must be getting senile.

I bring out his Trump and try it. Immediately I see him. He's pointing toward his eye sockets. Is he hurt? I mean more than the obvious? No, he's trying to tell

me something. He brings his hand down over his eyes, as if he's covering them from something. Or closing them.

Like a bolt of lightning, the realization strikes. Of course. Now I understand.

Turn to section 7.

* 10 *

As the light continues to dim, I grow even more afraid. I don't know why. I've been in far scarier situations before, with far grislier scenes, and I not only lived through them but found them quite interesting. But there's something about this place. It spooks me.

I feel disoriented. I can hardly see, and what I can see makes no sense. The men I understand; they're torture victims. But distance has lost all meaning, and so, I think, has time. Still, even that shouldn't bother me: I've hell-ridden through more disorienting places. I've even created worse than this.

Maybe that's it, though. This is just so unexpected. And it's something I've no control over. Even a hellride is something you do because you choose to. It's strange, but you're expecting it to be strange. The scene I'm in now has been forced on me, and I keep thinking I should be able to do something about it. But I can't. I've been trying.

Okay, King Random. Think. Concentrate. As hard as you can.

I stare at the floor and focus my concentration.
Then I stare at the victims. Finally I concentrate on the fading light. Nothing. Not even a whimper of activity in my brain. But my head keeps saying, over and over, *concentrate*. Okay, head, I'll concentrate. But on what?

The Trumps! Of course. When all else fails, take a Trump and concentrate. That's how we all get out of bad situations. We let the others pull us away. Literally.

There is just enough light to see which Trump is which. I don't have enough time to work on all of them, so I'm going to have to choose. Gérard is out; I know where he is, but he can't help me. Who else? Somebody who might be ready to receive.

Llewella. She said she'd be trying to keep contact.

I find her Trump, and once again throw myself into concentration mode. It works.

"Llewella, help me."

"I can't," she says.

I wasn't expecting this. "Why not?" I ask.

"Because I can't reach through to you. I can talk to you, even though you're not very clear, but I can't touch you. I've been trying."

"How the hell have you been trying?" I say, getting frustrated once more. "You can't try unless I let you. That's the way Trumps work."

"Not necessarily," she replies, "but there's no time to discuss it with you now. Besides, I'm having trouble hearing you, so forget about an elaborate conversation."

"I can hear you fine," I argue.

"It must be a one-way problem, Random. Maybe that's why we couldn't reach any of the others. Maybe they're even farther away than you are. But that doesn't matter. I want you to try to reach Julian."

Julian? Of course. Julian. I'm in his drawing. Or at least the one that was hanging in his room. Why didn't I think of that?

"Fine," I answer. "I will."

"I can't hear you, Random," comes her voice. "I've got to sign off. My head is splitting." She waves her hand across the card to break contact. I wonder if she saw me at all, or if she could only hear me. I'll find out later.

Even in this dim light, Julian's Trump stands out. I grasp it tightly and stare into it. Slowly something comes into view, but the scene is dark and I can't make anything out. Then I see a figure lying crumpled on a floor. I concentrate harder, and the figure becomes a little clearer. The floor is stone, with wisps of straw or grass here and there, and the light is very dim. I focus on the figure, which squirms in seeming pain. I focus my strength and concentrate harder.

The figure is thin, as if starved, and bears welts, apparently from whips. My eyes travel up its body, where huge burns show on its chest. Then I see chains cutting into its wrists, and more welts on its neck. And then I see the face. It has no eyes.

"Julian!" I scream, and the scream reverberates around me. I rush to the figures that lie on the floor, and I lean close to their faces. One is about to die, but the other struggles on. At the latter I now stare, and in the last of the fading light I see Julian's face. I reach down and embrace him, and I tell him my name, and he sobs. The light fails.

The chains, it turns out, aren't hard to get rid of. They're held by primitive padlocks, which I pick using some debris—bone, I think—I find on the floor. But Julian can't walk. He's been lying on the floor for longer than he can even estimate, or so he says, and his muscles refuse to function. Even this is weird. He



hasn't been gone from Amber that long. Perhaps I was right. Perhaps the place distorts time as well as space.

So I carry him. Not toward the doorway, but away from it. For hours we walk, in total darkness, but Julian is too weak, and I am too tired, to carry on a conversation. Before I can question him, he needs food and rest. I just need a good sleep. And a couple aspirin. God, my head hurts.

Finally we come to the end of the corridor. I set him on the floor and feel around me. Stone walls, wet to the touch, rise on either side, and in front of me is a wooden door. I try the latch, and it does not open. "Julian," I whisper, "do you know where we are?"

But when I turn to look at him, Julian is gone.

Gone! Just like that. The son of a bitch couldn't even move, and now he's disappeared. He didn't have his cards, so he couldn't have Trumped out. Maybe one of the others drew him out. Maybe they found him through his Trump.

Great. I'm on my own again. I knock on the door. No response. I pound. Still nothing. I ram it with my shoulder. Useless. All I get is a sorer shoulder.

What the hell is going on here?

Roll 2 D6 and compare the total to Random's Intelligence value.

If the total of the dice is less than or equal to Random's Intelligence, turn to section 7.

If it is greater, turn to section 9.

* 11 *

Getting on the stairway is easy. Getting off, I now realize, will be anything but. For one thing, like Gérard, I am in the procession going up. In fact, I am right behind him. I wanted to merge with the downward stream, because walking downhill is easier, but I couldn't because it is on the inside of the circle. I asked the monk behind me how one gets from the upstream to the down, but he didn't answer. Then I noticed that those on the downstream are much older than those on the up. Obviously seniority plays a part. Some things never change.

For another thing, carrying Julian is slowing me down. The stairway may be endless, but my strength and energy aren't. These people must have extremely muscular legs to keep walking, and I find mine getting tired very quickly. Gérard is directly ahead of me, but I'm going to have to speed up to reach him, and Julian hinders every effort. I wasn't able to speed up when I was fresh; I see no hope of doing so now.

Another problem. The outside world is starting to disappear. The longer I walk the stairs, the more the stairs becomes the dominant feature of my life. Or maybe, like everything else in this place, it demands total concentration. Concentration on one thing, if sustained long enough, eliminates everything else, and that's what's happening here. The stairwell I emerged from, and the small peak on the far side of the stairs, are growing less distinct with each step I take. Soon, there will be nothing else, only the stair-

case. Once that happens, I begin to understand, the stairway becomes a way of life. What that means is that everyone on the stairs has

been here a long, long time. Or at least ever since they entered it. But some of these monks are young, and the old ones couldn't have been here forever.

I must get rid of Julian. He's already cost me time and strength. I try thinking him off the stairs, but the stairs itself takes so much concentration that my mind can't form the images it needs. The Trumps, I realize, are my only hope.

I take out the Trumps and find Llewella's. I concentrate on it, paying close attention to its details. I can't help thinking the Trumps should be at home here. Like this place, they defy space and, to a degree, time. Many of us have noted the time distortions that occur when traveling among Shadow, and as I look at Julian I realize a similar time distortion happens here. In fact, it may be the temporal aberration, rather than the spatial, that caused the dungeon to seem much bigger than my eyes told me it was. Perhaps my eyes were seeing properly, but every step I took used up far more time than it seemed. None of this helps, but as I stare at the Trump it all comes to mind.

I concentrate harder. My head hurts again. But at last something happens. Llewella's face, a bit fuzzy

ast something happens. Liewena's face, a oft fuzzy but nonetheless real, appears on the Trump.
"Hurry, Random," she says. "I've finally got you.
Give me your hand, and I'll pull you through."
"Wait," I say. "I've got Julian with me. Take him."
"I can't hear you. Just give me your hand. And hurry. You're starting to fade." She sounds desperate.

Obviously, only one of us can make it to her. If I go back to Amber, I might get a chance to return for my two brothers, but there's no guarantee. And if I do go home. Julian could die right here, and who knows



what could happen to Gérard. If I send Julian home, though, I may be stuck here forever. Llewella's contact is very, very weak. She may not be able to restore it.

If Random sends Julian, write "Julian" in the Special Events box of the character record, then turn to section 100.

If he goes himself, turn to section 22.

* 12 *

This is a weird building. Once I get up the stairs, which are pretty normal in themselves, and into the courtyard, also normal—if antique—everything goes strange. All the entranceways are arches, but sometimes, from a distance, the arches look to be going the wrong way. Once I reach them, they are regular, run-of-the-mill arches, but they don't seem that way from farther back. Doors are arched, too, but few of them have latches. Those that do, I discover after several tries, are invariably locked. Windows are opaque. I assume they're one-way windows, otherwise there'd be no point in having them. And the tunnels are very, very long.

So long, in fact, that I feel I've been walking for hours. Maybe I have. I look down each corridor as I enter it, and I count the doors. Eight, sometimes ten, once fourteen. Usually they're all on one side. The doors seem ten or twelve feet apart, pretty standard as far as old mansions go. But it takes me forever to get

from one door to the next. After a while, I start counting paces. To get from door one to door two, along one corridor, takes me one hundred strides, and I'd have bet the throne they weren't more than twelve feet apart. I don't bet the throne on very much.

And staircases. The place is loaded with staircases. Some are circular, some are ballroom style, some are carpeted, and some are more like ladders than stairs. Once again, seeing them gives no indication of their length. At one point, I picked a short one to climb, but by the time I reached the top—no more than twenty steps, I was sure—I was exhausted. Maybe the gravity is different, I thought, so I did some stride jumps. No difference. The place is just weird.

I am now ascending a staircase from the second level to the third, if there really are levels here. I remember from Julian's picture that the endless staircase is on the top level. Endless staircase. I wonder what that means, in a place where distances themselves are meaningless.

That is, I've concluded, what makes the place so strange. The drawing in Julian's room attempted, it seemed, to disrupt what we think of as normal space. The staircase at the top, I recall, looked normal, but only before I studied it. Then I noticed that the monks, some going up and some down, were not really changing levels at all. Eventually, I got a headache. Or at least a worse one, since I already had one. It's hard for the brain to comprehend that kind of meaningless space.

If you think that's hard, you should try walking in it. The corridors frightened me at first, but now they only befuddle me. If I spend much more time here, I'm going to get used to this, and that scares me. Anybody who *is* used to it must surely be insane.

I wonder if Gérard has accepted it. With that thought, I begin to hurry.

But the steps seem endless, and I feel myself tiring. I can see the top of the stairs—I could, even from the bottom—but it seems no closer than when I started. Upward and upward I trudge, on and on, and finally the end begins to appear. By the time I reach it, I am exhausted, and I estimate that I have been climbing for three hours. Impossible.

I step out of the stairwell into the sunlight. There, ahead of me, lies the endless stairs. I scan the monks, but they all look alike. All except for one. At the far side, coming this way, his cowl (unlike the others) only partly covering his head, walks Gérard. I shout to him, but nothing happens. After a long while he approaches, and I reach for him, but another monk pushes me away and Gérard walks on.

He's grown used to it, I think. I'm too late.

But I know I have to try. Cautiously, and with a sudden vertigo, I step onto the endless stairway.

Turn to section 20.

* 13 *

If I want to reach Gérard, I must divert my concentration from the steps to my legs. Something about the stairs draws my mind, sapping my energy and my strength, but I have to force myself away. Come on, Random. Do something.

Think about Gérard. Nothing. All I see is a faceless monk. Then think about Julian. I can't. He's not here. Then think about anything else. Beethoven's Ninth. The craters of Mars. The Trojan horse. Buckingham Palace. The yellow horde. Amber.

Yes. Amber. Why not think about Amber?

I strain, but nothing happens. I try again, but still nothing. Then I stop where I stand, and look up above me, and scream, "AMBER!" to the sky.

Corny, but it works. The clouds form the shape of the palace, and one even takes on the form of the Unicorn. I draw them down to me, a little like manipulating Shadows. It looks so inviting, so comfortable, so colorful.

Color! That's what's so different about it. For the first time in hours, maybe days, I see colors. The blue of the sky and the gold of my home and the sea-white of the Unicorn. My God, they're beautiful. And they explode in my mind, and for an instant, just a short, sudden instant, all thoughts of the endless stairway fall from me.

In that instant, I run. On and on, with images of Amber burnt into my brain, I press toward Gérard. Just a little longer, mind, just a couple more seconds. I'm almost there.

And then I touch him, grabbing his arm. He screams, and the monk in front of him turns and reaches and clutches my throat. I'm surprised, but far from defenseless. With my right hand I hold Gérard's arm as he struggles to free himself, and with the other I ram my elbow into the monk's face. The grip loosens, and I break free. Picking up Gérard, I leap for the center of the staircase. Over the railing I fly, and as the cold air from the lower levels shakes me alert, I close my eyes and brace for the impact.

Once again my senses have failed me. What seemed only a two-story drop, one which I hoped to survive—

even if I broke a few bones-is actually a long, long fall. I force my eyes open and look beneath me. The stone floor of the courtyard, which looks only fifty feet away, is approaching slowly. But I am falling fast,

What the hell is going on here?

But then an idea hits me. Why not use this time-or timelessness, or whatever-to try to escape. Don't wait for the fall. Try to Trump out.

From my jacket I pull the Trumps. I find Llewella's and try to contact her. When that fails, I try Fiona.

"Random?" her voice says. Then I see her face. She's been worried. Somehow that comforts me.

"Hi," I say. "It's me. Care to pull me in? I'm about

to die. Oh, by the way. I've got Gérard with me." A short silence. "Uh—I'd appreciate it if you'd hurry," I say. "A stone floor is rising to meet me." "I know," Fiona says. "I can see it. Send Gérard

now."

This is ridiculous. The Trumps don't work this way. Moving through the Trumps requires concentration, often over the space of several seconds. Both traveler and receiver are supposed to be actively involved in the process.

But the Trumps are distorted here, just like every-thing else. There is precious little reality, of the kind I'm used to, in this whole place. Because of that, I'm able to spend more time than I should by rights have concentrating on the task at hand. With a sudden flash of color, Gérard disappears, and the Trump remains open for me.

I fall for what seems several minutes more. Below me, the floor rises, then drops again, then rises with excruciating slowness. Suddenly, though, it is nearly upon me, or, rather, I am nearly upon it. If I don't get through now, I realize, I'm not going to make it at all.

Roll two dice. If the result is less than or equal to Random's Wisdom/Luck value, write "Gérard" in the Special Effect box of the character record and turn to section 14.

If the result is greater than Random's Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 28.

* 14 *

I wake in a bed, perhaps the softest, most luxurious bed I've ever known. My muscles ache, but my head does not, and I feel whole for the first time in what seems like days. Even my mind is alert, and I find I can concentrate on whatever I want.

So I concentrate on not concentrating.

A voice interrupts my lack of concentration. "Good morning, Random. It's about time you woke up. But I didn't want to wake you."

Fiona.

"Thank you." I feel magnificent. I ache, but nothing more than that. "Any chance of breakfast?" I ask.

"It's already been looked after," she replies. "Should be here any minute. Gérard won't be joining us."

"Oh, yeah," I say as it all comes back to me. "Gérard. For a moment there I felt so good I forgot all about him. Sorry."

"Don't worry. Llewella's looking after him. He's still out of it, but we don't see any physical damage. She's giving him the 'natural' treatment."

"You mean the granola and raisins, that stuff?"

"That, and more chicken soup than he could possibly want. But I didn't object, because he seemed to be responding to it last I saw. Maybe she knows something." Fiona shrugs her shoulders. She has never liked or trusted Llewella, but she grudgingly acknowledges her nursing skills. I am about to ask more questions, but breakfast arrives, and for the next half hour I concentrate only on it.

After the meal, during which I devour enough for Fiona to suspect I'm really Corwin, I fill a pipe, light it, and settle back in a cozy chair. Maybe my success has gone to my head, but I feel too good to worry about anyone else. Fiona, though, sees to it that I don't forget.

"What now, Random?"

After a long pause, and a couple of long puffs, I reply, "I guess I start looking again." I pause again. "But I'd like a break."

"No go," she says. "There's too much at stake, and I'm beginning to worry—seriously, I mean—about what danger the others may be in. You can't sit still, Random."

I almost shout, "I can do whatever the hell I want," but I hold it back, since Fiona is only expressing her concern. Still, I wish that sometimes these people would think of me more as their king, and less as their brother. I get annoyed.

"I know," I finally say. "You're right, of course. Besides, I'm hoping to find someone who isn't injured. I could use some help."

"How about me?" Fiona asks. "Not good enough for you?"

"You're fulfilling a more important role here. If you hadn't been sitting here, minding the Trumps, I would never have made it back."

She sighs and turns her head to the right. To the

wall she says, "I suppose you're right. But I feel bloody useless sitting here while you go play hero."

"Come off it," I say. "I'm not playing hero and you know it. Maybe I should stay here, and let you do the rescuing."

"That's not what I meant, Random, and you know it. Stop being so goddamned uppity. Even if you are the king. I just don't like sitting around." She stops, then says, "Okay, forget it. But what do we do now?"

"Come with me," I say. "Let's visit another room and see what we find."

"Sure," she replies.

"Let's try Caine's now," I say. I feel very ambiva-lent about Caine, but he has always been good at solving puzzles, at working behind the scenes. I could use that kind of expertise.

"All right," says Fiona, looking almost happy. "You stay here," I say. "And keep the contact open."

Turn to section 26.

* 15 *

Roll 1 D6. If the result is 1-3, Random takes one hit point damage from the cold. If the result is 4-6, he takes two.

Then make another Strength roll.

If it succeeds, turn to section 18.

If it fails, repeat the Damage roll and make another Strength roll. Continue until Random either succeeds at a Strength roll or dies. If he dies, turn to section 28.

* 16 *

Things must change on the stairway, even if they take a long time to do so. The young monks get old, and take over the downstream. The old monks must die, or get shoved into desk duty, or something. I scan the stairs for middle-aged ones, and I see a couple. They must be making the transition.

Something is happening in the downstream. There seems to be some confusion. I look around, and all the monks have stopped walking and are now taking in the spectacle. I join them.

An old, bent, wizened monk on the downstream is leaning over the railing in the center, where the roof drops away into, presumably, the courtyard. No one is helping him. He seems to have almost no strength, but he is using all he has to climb the railing. I don't know what he intends, but all the monks are watching, their eyes drinking this in as if it were a public hanging.

At last the old monk stands atop the railing. He totters. Then he pleads for help, in a harsh, whining voice. Still no one helps. Finally, with what sounds like a curse, he leaps. All we hear is a long, endless scream as he falls.

One of the middle-aged monks calmly turns in his place and walks to where the old monk had been. He nods, and everyone begins walking. I look behind me, and a new monk has joined the upstream. The system, it seems, looks after itself.

I must have chanced on the staircase at a moment of transition. That's why no one bothered me. Or maybe a change occurs every few hours. Who knows?

But I've discovered something important. There is a way off this thing. The trick now is to find an exit without waiting until Gérard and I are old enough to die.

Everything outside the staircase, except for the open space in the center, has now completely disappeared. I have managed only five complete laps of the thing, constantly walking upward and always, seemingly impossibly, reaching my starting point. The stairs is consuming my concentration; I am beginning to think only of how to take my next step. Already I am fighting to keep my objective—rescuing Gérard in my mind. Simply climbing the stairs is taking on every importance.

I must get through to Gérard. Once I do so, I don't know what to do, but reaching him is first. As I watch him, it is clear that he has already succumbed to the staircase; he has become, for all purposes, one of the monks. I call him, but he does not answer. I must reach him. Now.

I concentrate, not on the stairs but on my legs. I will

them to move faster, to fight exhaustion. But it's not easy. The stairs themselves keep trying to tear me away. But I won't give in. I can't. Not if I want to save Gérard. And not, it suddenly dawns on me, if I ever want to return to Amber. This place really *is* endless.

To simulate Random's chase, do the following: 1. Make a Strength roll. If it succeeds, go to step 3. If it fails, go to step 2.

Step 2. Roll 1 D6. Subtract the result from Random's Constitution value. Go to step 3.

Step 3. Make a Constitution roll. If it succeeds, go to step 5. If it fails, go to step 4.

Step 4. Roll 1 D 6. Subtract the result from Random's Strength value and from his hit point total. Then go back to step 1.

Step 5. Make a Luck roll. If it fails, return to step 1. If it succeeds, turn to section 13.

If, at any point, Random's Strength or Constitution value or his hit points reach zero, turn to section 19.

* 17 *

I touch Julian's hand to Llewella's, and she draws him home. She'll make sure he's all right.

Me, I'm not sure about. That may have been my last chance to get out of here, and had I gone I might have been able to come back and save both Julian and

Gérard. Oh, well. Decisions are like that. Once you make one, the hardest part is convincing yourself it was the best thing to do. You can never play out the other paths, to examine the consequences of a different decision.

What life needs is a Game Save feature. That way you could try out one path, and go back and start over if you screwed up. Maybe I'll redraw the Pattern and put one in.

It's time to worry about Gérard. Getting rid of Julian should help me. I hope it does.

I lift my left foot and place it on the first step of the endless staircase. This thing gives me the willies.

Write "Julian" in the Special Events box of the character record. Then turn to section 20.

* 18 *

At last, gasping for air, shivering, and numb, I lie face down on the river's bank. Too exhausted to move, I close my eyes and rest. For a brief minute I sleep, and when I open my eyes I can breathe.

But I'm still very cold. The weather is the cold of early spring, but the sun is of late fall. I have no idea which it is, since the clouds above look snow-laden but the plants around me seem to be coming into bud. Strange plants, these. Little scruffy things, but occasionally what might, on another world, be a brilliantly colored flower. Here, though, there are no colors at all. Only grey.

Terrific. I, who love color more than most other beings, continue to get stuck in black and white

drawings. If I get out of this, I vow I will seek out the artist and flay him. But only after I show him a box of crayons.

I stand up and look around. As it looked in the drawing, the land is bleak and cold. I am standing, I figure out, on the far side of the river from the hillside town—the right side, if I were looking at the drawing. To my right I see the drawing's far town, while up and to my left I see the town on the hill. The third town, in the valley at the bottom of the hill, is obscured from my view.

I am deep in a valley. Steep hills, cliffs almost, rise tall on the opposite side of the river, while the hills on my side climb more gradually. To my right, behind the town, the mountain range continues. The tallest mountain, though, is the one that holds the hillside town. I see now that the town is only halfway up that mountain, that the mountain rises at least five thousand feet beyond.

Well, I have three places to go, but only two seem realistic at this point. The town far to my right, no matter how interesting it may look from here, is simply too far to bother with right now. I might find what I want with far less travel. Still, neither the hillside town nor the obscured town in the valley has any meaning for me, and the decision could take some time. Looking over the alternatives, I find that the location of the hillside town attracts me, and the valley town's very isolation is extremely interesting in itself.

If Random chooses the hillside town, turn to section 24.

If he goes to the obscured valley town, turn to section 21.

* 19 *

I'm drained. The steps are endless. Gérard is no closer.

I have failed. And I don't think I can do anything about it. I can't even walk any farther. Every step I take, I fall down. I'm pulling myself up each time, but only with greater and greater effort, and the cuts on my knees, from where I've fallen, are getting worse. How much longer can I do this?

One more step. Just one. But I can't. My leg won't lift. I throw my concentration into it, trying to will it, but it doesn't obey. One last time. One last effort. I strain. My head throbs, then washes over with fatigue.

I collapse onto the step.

The monks are inexorable. They stop for nothing, not even a fallen comrade. A first steps on my chest, not even pausing, and a second grinds his heel into my arm. My pain is great. I see a heel come down on my jaw, and I feel the jaw snap under the pressure. Then another monk walks on me, and I scream. The step under me begins to turn black.

But then a warmth invades me, and I feel myself floating. Maybe I'm dying, but I just don't care. If this is death, it feels good. Closing my eyes, I drift into a silent sleep.

Make a Wisdom/Luck roll. If it succeeds, turn to section 106.

If it fails or if Random's hit points are at zero, turn to section 28.

* 20 *

Getting on the stairway is easy. Getting off, I now realize, will be anything but. For one thing, I am, like Gérard, in the procession going up. In fact, I am right behind him. I wanted to merge with the downward stream, because walking downhill is easier, but it is on the inside of the circle, so I couldn't. I asked the monk behind me how one gets from the upstream to the down, but he didn't answer. Then I noticed that those on the downstream are much older than those on the up. Obviously seniority plays a part. Some things never change.

Another problem. The outside world is starting to disappear. The longer I walk the stairs, the more it becomes the dominant feature of my life. Or maybe, like everything else in this place, it demands total concentration. Concentration on one thing, if sustained long enough, eliminates everything else, and that's what's happening here. The stairwell I emerged from, and the small peak on the far side of the stairs, are growing less distinct with each step I take. Soon, there will be nothing else, only the staircase. Once that happens, I begin to understand, the stairway becomes a way of life.

What that means is that everyone on the stairs has been here a long, long time. Or at least ever since they entered it.

Turn to section 16.

* 21 *

Three days it has taken me to get here, even though there's no way it should have. Part of it was my fault: my delays at the river, my explorations of caves along the bank, my obsessive attempts at finding warmth. But other things intervened as well.

First was a storm, with a hard, biting rain that turned to sleet and almost killed me with cold, then turned to ice and pummeled my face. I sought shelter in the caves, and they were dry but very, very cold. Then a wolf—at least, I think it was a wolf—stalked me for a morning, causing me to zigzag off course to avoid it. And, perhaps strangest of all, I saw a house, which for some reason I didn't want to go near. I don't know why; I just sensed I should stay away. So I steered wide of it, going north and then east before heading south again (if in fact those are the directions), and that maneuver cost me hours.

But even then it shouldn't have taken that long. I have a feeling, and I really wish I didn't, that this drawing has something in common with the other. It lies about time and space.

The town is small, but certainly not tiny. I approach it from the northeast, having crossed the river at a narrow bridge two miles downstream. I see no reason not to stick to the road. As far as I know, nobody lives here.

But someone must: I see smoke rising from the chimneys. So cold am I, so incredibly cold, that I realize I would gladly sell my soul, and any other part of my body or my estate, for just one hour with one of

those fires. Hell, I might even give up my crown. But let's not get carried away.

The building I am approaching looks like a cross between a factory and a church. Its block shape is very large, it has two stories, and rising from the second story is what looks like a smokestack but is, I see on closer inspection, a steeple. Behind it is, I suppose, the castle, because it is extremely ornate. I make a mental note of its features, so I can use the best features on my own palace and then claim originality.

Toward the church, I think, I now walk. The morning is sunny, which means the grey has lightened a fair bit. The air is slightly warmer, but still not enough to thaw my toes and fingers. If this is a church, and if this world operates like many of the other worlds I've been to, it should willingly shelter me. If not, well, how bad can it be?

One thing about this town is very strange. I see no people. None. Up and down the streets I look, and back into the fields, but there is nobody around. A prison camp, maybe? Or perhaps I've just come at a bad time. Maybe they're all inside eating supper. Or maybe they're at church.

Maybe they're dead.

I walk to the church door and knock. The door is ornate, but it does not feel very strong. I was expecting thick oak, perhaps even steel, but not this soft, pliable wood. I don't know what it is, but it smells funny.

There is, predictably, no answer. Why should there be? The other drawing had nobody behind its doors, so why would this one? I begin to wish this Escher guy had populated his drawings with someone other than crazed monks. A few more people like me, for instance. I'm relatively nice.

"All right, door. Fine. If you want me to break you

down, just do as you're doing. Don't open, don't respond to my knock, and don't practically break at my touch. I can't think of three better reasons to smash you off your hinges."

This, I believe, is a first. I have never before spoken to a door. Not out loud, at least.

If Random smashes the door, turn to section 27.

If he leaves the church, turn to section 32.

I wake in the softest, most luxurious bed I've ever known. My muscles ache, but my head does not, and for the first time in what seems like days, I feel whole. Even my mind is alert, and I find I can concentrate on whatever I want.

* 22 *

So I concentrate on not concentrating.

A voice interrupts my lack of concentration. "Good morning, brother. Or good evening, to be a little more precise. Did you sleep well?"

Llewella.

"Yes. I feel—well—magnificent. I ache, but nothing more than that. And you, sister?"

"Stop sounding so cheerful." I open my eyes and look at her. She seems worried. "Where's Gérard?"

"Oh, yeah," I say as it all comes back to me. "Feeling this good is inappropriate, I guess." I pause, then confess, "I don't know where Gérard is. I didn't get him."

"I know. That's pretty obvious. Well, have some breakfast. Then we'll figure out what to do next."

After the meal, during which I devour enough for Llewella to suspect I'm really Corwin, I fill a pipe, light it, and settle back in a cozy chair. Maybe my failure still hasn't dawned on me, but I feel too good to worry about anyone else. Llewella, though, sees to it that I don't forget.

"What now, Random?"

After a long pause, and a couple of long puffs, I reply, "I guess I start looking again." I pause again. "But not for Gérard."

Llewella, startled, asks, "Why not? What are you going to do? Leave him to die? That's where he's headed, you know."

"I know. And of course I don't mean that. But I want to seek out one of the others first. I could use some help to rescue Gérard."

"So why not let me help?" Llewella is plainly disgusted.

"Because you're fulfilling a more important role here. If you hadn't been sitting here, minding the Trumps, I would never have made it back. Seems pretty vital to me."

She sighs and turns her head to the right. To the wall she says, "I suppose you're right. But I feel bloody useless sitting here while you go play hero."

"Come off it," I say. "I'm not playing hero and you know it. Maybe I should stay here, and let you do the rescuing."

"That's not what I meant, Random. I'm just getting very concerned, that's all. I don't like any of this, especially after watching what happened to Gérard." Then she asks, with a fearful voice, "Do you think the others are in similar situations?"

"I don't know," I reply truthfully. "But we'd better find out." She smiles. I think it was the "we." If I ever get out of this, and find my way back to Renaissance

Earth, I'm going to make a killing as a diplomatic advisor. Royal wine, royal women, royal song. The works. Cool it, Random. You've got work to do.

"It's time to visit another room," I say.

"Sure," she replies.

"Let's try Caine's now," I say. I feel very ambivalent about Caine, but he has always been good at solving puzzles, at working behind the scenes. I could use that kind of expertise.

"All right," says Llewella. "Caine's it is."

"You stay here," I say, and she nods. "And keep the contact open."

Go to section 26.

* 23 *

Why not fight? They rush me, the women bearing candle holders, the men, except for the leader, carrying only their fists. I know I can take them, but I hate fighting people who are so clearly unskilled. Give me a good fencing session any day.

But then the leader pulls from his robe a dagger almost an entire foot in length. "Hit him, knock him down," I hear him yell, and I'm pretty sure I know why. If they get me on my back, with all of them pinning me, he'll have an easy time of it running me through. This isn't going to be as simple as I thought.

The first blow comes quickly: a candle holder thrown at my head. I wasn't expecting this, and it grazes my ear as I duck. A second one hits me squarely in the chest, and it stings. Worse, because I've let them get so close, I've been knocked off my

guard. Had these been real fighters, I'd have eliminated three before they reached me, but my hesitation has done me considerable harm. Oh, well, it's never over till it's over, as some idiot once put it.

I exaggerate my stagger, grasping my chest with my sword hand, hoping they will think me more hurt than I am. They do. Just as they're about to leap, I thrust my sword in front of me. None of them expects this, and one of the men dodges to avoid impaling himself on it. The sword passes cleanly through his arm.

As he drops, I step behind him, using him as a kind of shield. "Art thou alive?" I hear one of them say, and he replies, "Yes, fight on." At the sound of his voice they seem heartened. My strategy changes.

"One more step," I say to them as they hesitate, "and your friend's a dead man." Ever since I heard that line in an old movie on Shadow Earth, I've always wanted to use it. Problem is, it always works in the movies. It doesn't now. The group leaps toward me.

One of the women reaches her fingers toward my throat. I push her away just in time to feel a fist thud into my ribs. Okay, I think to myself, time to get serious. One well-placed kick drops the first man, and a slash of my sword opens a cut on the woman's leg. Another man sprints toward me, so I hold my sword out and watch it sink into his chest. He drops, the second woman rushes to him howling, and the leader puts away his dagger. It's over. Why do I feel so lousy about it?

"You have mastered us," says the leader. "Please, will you kill us?" My mouth must be hanging open in disbelief, for he adds, "We do not wish to die. But better this than to suffer at the hand of our God." He hangs his head. The rest start crying. "Hold it," I say. "What will your God do to you?"

The leader hesitates a long while, then says, "He will imprison us in a dungeon, and he will put out our eyes."

What *is* this? A bloody motif? First Corwin, imprisoned and blinded by Eric. Then Julian, imprisoned and blinded by God-knows-who. And now Brand.

What the hell is going on here?

The only difference is that Corwin's eyes regenerated. So will Julian's. These eyes won't.

"Does your God know you found me in the church?" I ask.

"No," says the leader. Another pause. "He is not here right now. I am in charge of the town." At the intense pride in this last statement I almost burst into laughter.

I continue. "Then why will he imprison you?"

Now it's their turn to look foolish, their mouths hanging open. "Will you not tell him?" asks one of the women.

"Why should I?"

"Because he is God. All must be told to him."

"He's not my God," I chance. "Matter of fact, I think he's an asshole." A nice touch, that. Stupendous astonishment.

Finally, one of the women says, "He will kill you if he hears of this."

"Perhaps," I say. "But you're not going to tell him. Because he'll kill *you* if he hears of this, too." At this they can only nod.

"Now," I continue, "tell me something of him. How long has he been with you? Where did he come from? What does he want from you?"

After I reassure them I won't rat on them, the leader explains. "He has been with us for a year. He came demanding homage, and that we have given him. We

are glad to do so, for he has made our valley fertile and has given our lives new meaning. And he is strong, and brave as well. Alone of all our rulers, he has tamed the hordes from the city on the mountain. In one short year, they have ceased being our enemies and we have begun trading with them. We have reason enough to name him God."

"I see," is my reply. "But why 'God'? Why not 'King'? Or 'Fuehrer'? Or even 'Great One'?"

"Because he wishes to be God. We are happy to oblige."

And then the sheer enormity of what Brand has done strikes me. It's not enough for the stupid bastard to come in and disrupt the lives of the people around him. No, he's got to set himself up as their chief god. Even Benedict only let himself be king, back in the Avalon where Corwin met Ganelon. Not Brand, though. No sir. He's got to be God. And not just one god, but the whole shootin' match. *The* God.

I've done more than my share of life-changing, flitting from Shadow to Shadow with no more in mind than an interesting and challenging time. But I've always known, intuitively I guess, that there are certain things you do and certain things you don't do. Live the good life, rule the people, screw the women, start a war. But don't screw about with their religion. When all is said and done, it's the one thing they hold completely dear.

I was right, Brand. You are an asshole.

"You said he wasn't here right now," I say. "Will you tell me where he is? And what he's doing?" "No," replies the leader. "We can't." *Can't.* A

"No," replies the leader. "We can't." *Can't.* A contraction. What do you know? I guess the archaic language was another of my brother's demands. Language and religion, eh, Brand? That's right. Hit 'em right in their souls.

"Why not?"

"We are under oath . . ."

"I'm not," I interrupt. "And before you forget, I'm the one who won this fight. I ask you again, will you tell me?"

They look at one another, then the leader nods. "I will tell you," he says. "Either way, we die."

"Not necessarily," I say. "Brand has no control over me." I'm angry now, at Brand's stupidity and these people's subservience, and I stop caring about what I say.

"He is in the town on the hillside," they say. "In the town of Caine." Again I must look astonished, and the leader adds hastily, "They are discussing further trade." He clearly expects this to placate me.

"Caine?" I ask. "Did you say 'Caine'?"

"Yes," he answers.

"Is that the city's name?"

"No." The leader shakes his head. "Like this town, that one has no name. But its ruler is named Caine."

"Ruler?" I press. "Or god?" To what depths, I wonder, has my other brother sunk?

"Not a god," he replies. "That town has no gods. Their Caine is but a ruler, and it is rumored that he is brilliant."

"I'm sure he is," I say, not in the least ironically. So that answers another question. Two towns, two brothers. I wonder if I will find another in the third.

Mark a "C" in the Special Events box of the character record.

If Random goes to the hillside town, turn to section 24.

If he waits in the valley town for Brand to return, turn to section 40.

* 24 *

Embedded, almost buried into the side of the mountain, the town rises high above the mountain path. The quickest way to reach it, it is obvious, is by climbing, and I begin to do so. Everything I brought with me, except of course my sword and Trumps, I left at the mountain's foot, choosing to climb the rough but passable terrain rather than follow the winding, uneven road for mile after mile. Besides, I'd rather not invite an entire committee to watch my entry into town.

The climb takes most of the afternoon, and it is tiring, but at last I reach the outermost buildings. Large structures, these: a palace, a huge inn, another church, perhaps an academy, all with windows looking out over the mountain. A stunningly beautiful place, I conclude, with its ancient balustrades and tall, regal towers, its walls that both keep the town in and the enemy out, its picturesque view of the valley far below. Too bad it's all in grey.

The place has not been under attack for some time. I know this because into the wall have been carved several small doors, perhaps servants' doors, and they are unlocked. Through one of these I now go, taking special care to close it behind me. I shake the dirt from my clothes and the fatigue from my head and turn to face the town.

It's not there.

None of it.

I'm standing on a dull-grey flat plain, with absolutely no features. A void. Nothingness. Chaos. This isn't a place at all.

What the hell is going on here?

Then I turn around and look where I was standing. Sure enough, I see the door and the wall, but there are no towers, no buildings, no palace, only the grey sky with the thick clouds high overhead. Again I wheel, and again there is nothing. I turn once more, and the wall, with its solitary door, stares at me dumbly. I can only return the stare.

Shaking my head, I return to the door. It opens, and I take a deep breath and walk through, closing my eyes as I do so. This time I leave the door open, and slowly I turn around. I open my eyes, and the town rises high above the wall, just as I saw it before. Through the door, I now see, is the flat-grey expanse, the nothing I just stood on. Quickly I review my life, searching for my biggest mistakes. The greatest of all, I conclude, was getting out of bed this morning. Perhaps if I lie down, and fall asleep, all this will go away.

But then a shout snaps my attention. "There he is!" a man's voice says. And toward me, walking quickly, come six men, armed and armored, their swords drawn and their shields in place. I take a look at them, each about six feet tall, and at their weapons glistening swords whose points seem to sparkle even under the grey clouds—and I decide that fighting is out of the question. Besides, I console myself, only half believing it, maybe they aren't after my blood.

As they approach, I raise my right hand, palm facing toward them. In my best voice I exclaim, "Greetings. I come in peace." I've always wanted to say that, but life has never before afforded me the opportunity. I almost add, "Take me to your leader," but I figure one cliché per incident is quite enough. Besides, these guys look serious.

Their captain, or sergeant, or leader, or whoever,

identifiable by a white stripe around his left sleeve at the elbow, approaches me. He, too, raises his right arm, and for a moment I want to laugh. Apparently he sees the smile begin to crease my face, for he smiles in

return. I don't believe it. I think he's friendly. "Hail, stranger," he says. "We saw you climbing the mountain, and we figured you needed help. What may we do for you?"

"Thank you," I say, still a little astonished. "I'm, well, I'm trying to find a way into your town. I thought going through the door would help, but . . ."

The men laugh. "There is nothing through that door," says the captain. "But I assure you if you try another door, you will meet with better success." "Good," I reply. "But about that other door..."

"Not now, sir," says one of the others, a dark-haired man with generally darker features (they might be brown, but who can tell in this black and white world). "You must come with us now, to join us for a meal. After that, we will talk."

Maybe I'm growing overly neurotic, a paranoid king in a shadowy world, but I get nervous whenever I meet truly nice people. I have spent so much of my life watching over my shoulder for the doings of my brothers, or the enemies of some great court on a Shadow Earth, that I have trouble believing that everyone I meet isn't after something, however small. That's what strikes me now as the greeting party turns away from me. Not only have they invited me in, they willingly present their flank to me, without even asking for my sword. Things like this make my head reel. I think I would have preferred an outright attack.

They lead me to a second door, exactly like the first. Opening it, they stroll into an enormous courtyard, with the church to our left and the palace to the right. As magnificent as these buildings are, though, what I

notice immediately is the town's depth. I am looking away from the wall, and the town goes back for what seems like miles. Just a few yards away, through the door I tried first, there was no town at all.

Finally, after sending the other men ahead, the captain drops back to talk with me. An extremely handsome man, he walks with an elegance I'm sure most military leaders wish they could instill in all their men. He seems strong, with large shoulders and a thick neck, and yet nothing about him suggests a consciousness of that strength. He seems, in other words, perfect, the kind of man most lesser men either envy or hate.

And on top of all that, his pleasantness is infectious. I feel myself ready to open up to him, answer whatever questions he asks me, before my trained guardedness reinstates itself and holds me back. I know one thing: if this guy's real, I'm going to try to get him back to Amber. He'd be an inspiration to the court.

"You look fatigued," he says. "Most who climb the mountain do. It is a long way."

"Do many climb it?" I ask.

"No, but every few months or so we gaze out onto the mountain and see another trying. When we do, we give whatever aid we can."

"Why do they do it? Where are they coming from?" His story is beginning to interest me.

"I might ask that of you, stranger," he says, and a smile crosses his face. I can't help but return it.

"True," I reply. "My name, by the way, is Random." That can't hurt, I think.

He shows no hint of recognition. "A strange name, Random, but not an unpleasant one. Mine is Carey. I am Calitan here."

"Calitan?" I ask. "I've never heard that word."

"Of course not. You aren't from here. Calitan. One

who leads. One who commands. One to whom obedience is shown. It can be used on a much higher level than the military, of course, but for the most part we use it as I have used it. But it is a powerful word."

I nod. Obviously it's powerful. Calitan. Is that what Brand meant by "God"? More than that, if this man is Calitan, how powerful is he? Is he just a captain, as I supposed him to be? Or have they in fact taken me to their leader?

"Where are we going?" I ask, but I vow to return to this discussion.

"To dinner," he replies. "Just as we promised. In the palace. You will be seated with me, as my guest at the lead table. That spot is always reserved for the Calitan."

"I'm honored," I say, and I mean it. I can't remember ever being made to feel this welcome, not even when I was Austrian ambassador to Frederick the Great. This guy is beyond belief.

He leads me through the palace doors and into a long hall, where tapestry after tapestry hangs from the wall. I look at them, and see that they are truly beautiful, even though they are black and white. The subtle shades of grey, and the supreme mastery of shadings of light, come through very clearly, and I begin to wonder who the artists were. But then I think, too, that these details shouldn't be here, because they weren't in the original drawing. If they're here, why not the world on the other side of the first door? This is weird.

The hall itself is elaborately carved, a visual delight to someone interested in sculpture. But I'm not, so I pass by with more respect than awe. It's hard to be awe-filled when you don't know anything about what you're looking at. But it's not hard to respect it.
Inside the banquet hall, twelve tables sit at various angles, all set with china, silver, and bowls of fruit. The lead table, as the Calitan calls it, is draped with a cloth of rich dark-grey silk, and as I sit down I am astonished again at how beautiful grey can be. On Corwin's Shadow Earth I heard it said that the art of photography died with the invention of color film; until now, I never understood what that meant. Only black and white, it seems, gives the artist the full range of texture needed to complete the picture. Stunning.

"This is really something," I say to the Calitan. "The ornamentation, I mean. I never thought grey could be so wonderful."

He looks at me quizzically. "Grey?" he asks. "What grey?"

"This." I show him the tablecloth.

"Ah, that," he says. "Truly you are from another place, friend Random. Here, we call this blue. Royal blue."

"Then what color is that?" I ask, pointing to a huge painting on the south wall. The painting describes, in intricate detail, a clearing in a forest. Its shades of grey are multiple.

The Calitan looks at it for a while, then replies, "Many colors, my friend. I see gold, and white, and green, and various browns, and red, purple, and others. It is an autumn scene, and the artist did well to depict it."

"Carey," I say, "I see only grey. All shades of grey, but only grey."

"Then I pity you," he says, "for you have missed the best part of our land. After we eat, I will take you to the high wall and we will look over it. Then you will tell me what colors you see, and I will tell you which

are truly there. But now, Random, comes our Escalitan, and the food will soon follow."

From a doorway at the far end of the hall walks a tall man, dressed in plain grey clothes and a grey hood covering his head and forehead, and carrying two huge pitchers. As he passes each table, he pours from those pitchers into smaller pitchers on the table, whispers something to those seated there, and walks on to the next table. Finally he reaches the front, and as he turns to pour into our pitcher I see his face for the first time.

Caine.

He has not seen me yet, and I lower my head. He is just about to pass by, when the Calitan leans close to him and says, "We have a guest this evening, sir. Another who climbed the mountain."

"He is welcome," says Caine without looking up. "Please see that he is well cared for." And then he raises his eyes to look at his guest, and for a few seconds he stares at me. I feel the force of his stare even though my eyes are lowered, and slowly I lift my head. First he furrows his brow, but then a smile comes to his face. Throwing back his hood, he holds his arms out and shouts, "Random!"

his arms out and shouts, "Random!" When I don't move, he says, "Stand up, you clod!" and I do so and he hugs me. This isn't feigned, I suddenly realize, he really is this happy to see me, and I return the embrace. Then he looks me in the eyes and says, "I don't know what you're doing here, brother, but I triple my welcome. I can't tell you how wonderful it is to see you." With that he embraces me again. I'm beginning to get embarrassed.

Then he turns me to face the entire hall. When all are silent, he gestures toward me and announces, "I bid you welcome my brother Random. In my land, he is my Escalitan. There are none more precious to me." He pauses, then says, "Now let the food come. And bring in the best wine. Tonight we celebrate. Welcome, brother."

"Isn't the 'precious' thing a bit much?" I whisper to him.

"Sure," he replies. "But their language is more formal than ours, and I've sort of fallen into the role. They like that kind of thing. Besides, how do you know it isn't true?"

I smile. "I don't," I answer, "but it's quite a turnaround if it is."

"I've been here for a couple years, Random, and I miss all of you. What with the Corwin thing a few years back, and now this, I've come to see the family in a different light. If I ever get back, I want to put aside all the petty squabbles. A bit like starting over. Understand?"

I nod. "But, Caine," I say. "You haven't been here a couple of years. You only left Amber a few weeks ago."

He thinks for a time, then leads me to his chair and arranges for me to sit beside him. "Is that true?" he asks. "About the time I've been gone?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, everybody's been gone a few weeks, except for me, Gérard, and the girls. I started looking for some of you, then realized I couldn't reach you with the Trumps. I got a little worried, then more worried, so I decided to look for you."

"Have you found any of us?" he asks.

I hesitate, then reply, "No." He doesn't need to know. Not yet, at least. "But why do you say you've been here a few years?"

"Because I have," Caine says. "Ask anybody here. Ask the Calitan, if you don't believe me."

"No, that won't be necessary. But it's hard to believe. I know for a fact that you've been gone much less than that. Amber time, I mean."

"Sure," says Caine, "but that's Amber time. We both know that time in the Shadows is different from our own time. That's why we never age in some of those places."

"True," I reply. "Still, I'm not sure we're on a Shadow. This is a drawing, Caine, nothing more, nothing less."

Without hesitating he responds, "Far more than a mere drawing, I assure you. It drew me here, brother. I didn't have much choice." He pauses, then looks at me and says, "Have you found Brand yet?"

Again I answer obliquely. "Brand? Why? Is he here?" An information-gathering question, pure and simple. But he falls for it.

"If you don't know, then you haven't found him. Look, Random, after the feast let's go back to my chambers. I've got to talk to you about him."

I nod, just as the meal is served. I look around me, and all the people here are watching Caine. Obviously nobody starts until he does. Then, too, they're probably wondering who I am and where I came from. Probably never knew that Caine even had a brother.

Caine rises from his seat, his silver cup in his hand. In it he has poured a clear grey wine, the same wine he poured into every cup in the hall. At his signal we all drink, then Caine declares the meal started and we all dig in.

I eat quickly, and I eat a great deal. The food steams with heat, and the smells of roasted meat and fresh bread make me think, for the first time in a long while, how hungry I've become. Fresh cheese, and fruit of all kinds, and thick rice with thicker gravy—and all of it followed with fruit custards and pies, enough for all to have seconds, thirds, fourths. In my case, in fact, there is enough for fifths. Unashamedly I finish my last plateful as the entire hall watches. When I'm done, they applaud.

"A masterful performance," Caine says, leaning toward me. "For a minute there, I thought you were Corwin. You've given these people something to talk about for weeks, maybe longer."

"That's something I've been wanting to ask you," I say. "Who exactly are these people? And why are you in charge?"

"You'll have to wait a bit for that, Random," Caine replies. "These are good people, excellent people in fact, but there's no reason for them to know everything. If we talk about it now, surely someone will hear us. Besides, the entertainment is about to begin. Watch. You'll enjoy it."

The enormity of my meal is suggesting otherwise. My stomach feels roughly eight sizes larger than it was, and it's making serious efforts to bring itself within control. I think I want to sleep, and I know I want to vomit. The only thing I'm not sure of is the order. I always eat too much at official occasions.

Then, suddenly, all my thoughts leave my stomach. Into the room dances a trio of women, and they are, each one of them, among the most beautiful women I've ever seen. Their hair is black, and their faces a pale grey, and they are naked, and they are lovely beyond belief. Their smiles enchant, their bodies entice, and their hair shines, but they have one other feature that impresses itself even more on my mind. They look—and I have no other word for it absolutely pure.

I don't mean innocent, for innocence can be feigned. No, I mean pure. As the driven snow, if you will, or whatever other cliché you can think up. Pure.

Utterly unsullied, in any way whatsoever. Their faces gleam and look carved yet fragile, while their bodies are perfect, intensely exact in every possible detail. I stare at that perfection, and I wonder how it can be. I have seen, at various times in my life and in various places, women that men consider perfect, and I have always wondered what they meant. But these are truly, indisputably perfect.

And then I look around me, and I notice for the first time that the men are perfect too. Each in his own way, but perfect nevertheless. That, I now realize, is what captivated me about Calitan Carey: he was, in all ways, perfect. Not a flaw, nothing you could complain about. No wonder he was Calitan. But then, any of them could be Calitan.

What are these people? Human beings? Or works of art?

The drawing. Of course. I am inside a work of art. Why wouldn't the inhabitants, too, be works of art? Especially here, in the highest town in the picture, the town with no background, with nothing to rise above it. Maybe that's why they're grey. Nature has colors; art has no need for them. Art represents nothing but itself.

"They're beautiful," I say at last to Caine. "Perfect. Absolutely perfect."

"Yes," he agrees. "Perfect. But they're fragile, Random, like great marble statues. They will break in time. I am here only to try to preserve them. Brand wants to smash them." He, too, is in awe, even though he must have seen them many times before.

"Why would he want to do that?" I ask, as much to myself as to my brother. "Why destroy something like that?"

"For the same reason he wanted to destroy the

Pattern," Caine replies. "And then make a new one. He can't stand perfection unless he creates it himself. He has seen this perfection, and he hates it. Much more than he has ever hated you, or me, or Corwin, or even Dad. Why do you think I stay?"

"I thought maybe you had no choice," I say. "Could you leave now, even if you wanted to?"

"I don't know. I haven't tried. I couldn't. This is too important." He pauses. "But come. This is no place to talk. Let's go." And he rises and leads me away, and with one last look at the dancing women, I shake my head and reluctantly follow.

When Caine called his rooms "chambers," I thought he was using the dialect of the people, formal and archaic. But now I see that he was being quite accurate. He lives in a large apartment, with three bedrooms, each decorated to the hilt in various greys, blacks, whites, and off-greys, two sitting rooms, a library, and a few other little rooms here and there. They are lush with antique ornaments and works of art, depictions of ancient scenes and religious motifs.

"Nice place," I say to him, intentionally understating.

"Somewhat better than just nice," he says. "But thanks. I'd like to say, 'It's not much, but it's home,' but that would be ridiculous." We both laugh.

After a long pause, I ask, "Caine, how did you get here? And what are you to these people. Carey used the word 'Escalitan.' What does that mean?"

He looks at me, then around the room. Slowly he begins to explain. "When Dworkin gave me the drawing, the one that's hanging on my wall, I didn't like it at first..."

I interrupt. "Dworkin gave it to you?"

"Yeah. He said it had been inspired by some Escher

guy. He didn't copy it, he just borrowed the general idea."

"You mean it's not a real Escher."

"Of course not. Dworkin just started looking at the guy's work, and decided he wanted to make what he calls 'an interactive drawing.' Like the Trumps. The problem with this one, he said, was that it interacts only one way. You can get there, but you can't get back. At the time, I didn't understand."

"But you *can* get back," I say. "I got back from Julian's drawing. With the help of the Trumps."

Caine is startled. "You mean the Trumps actually worked? As if you were on a Shadow World?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand," he muses. "Dworkin told me that if I left, it was for good. And when I saw the sheer perfection of the drawing, its sheer brilliance, well, I was hooked. What he didn't say, though, was that others could follow. I guess he just took it for granted I would know."

"Who followed?"

"You," he replies. "And Brand."

"Brand?" I ask. I want him to tell me about him.

"Yeah. Brand followed me, only a short time after I left. I have no idea if anyone else did."

"Why did Brand follow?" I ask.

Caine stands up and walks to the far side of the sitting room. He stares into the fireplace for a time, then says, "I suppose he was drawn into it, just like me. Ever since his dream of building a new Pattern died, he's been obsessed with works of art, with finding the perfect art form. He meant to redraw the Pattern without any flaws, and I think he might have done it. Except, as Corwin said, trying to make it perfect was itself an imperfection."

"You know, Caine," I chime in, "I didn't even know where Brand was all this time. Why didn't you tell me you were in contact with him?"

"He asked me not to. Very plausible about it, saying he wanted to return to Amber and make up for everything, but wanting to give you a chance to get on your feet as king before he did. He was very convincing."

"Is he no longer convincing?"

"Hardly. You should see what he's done here."

If you have marked a "B" but not a "Brand" in the Special Events box, turn to section 47.

If you have written a "B" and "Brand 1" in the Special Events box, turn to section 49.

If you have written a "B" and "Brand 2" in the Special Events box, turn to section 108.

If none of these, turn to section 43.

* 25 *

Why not fight?

They rush me, the women bearing candle holders, the men, except for the leader, armed only with their fists. I know I can take them, but I hate fighting unskilled people. I'd prefer a good fencing session any day.

But then the leader pulls from his robe a dagger almost an entire foot in length. "Hit him, knock him down," I hear him yell, and I'm pretty sure I know

why. If they get me on my back, with all of them pinning me, he'll have an easy time of it running me through. This isn't going to be as simple as I thought.

The first blow is a candle holder thrown at my head. I wasn't expecting it, and it grazes my ear as I duck. A second one hits me squarely in the chest, and it stings. To make matters worse, I've let them get close and they've knocked me off my guard. If these had been real fighters, I'd have eliminated three before they reached me, but my hesitation has done me considerable harm.

But then a man comes rushing through with a metal plate in his hand. I jerk my head aside to avoid it, but as I do so someone dives at my feet and tackles me. My head crashes against the floor, and five people instantly jump on me. In the next instant the leader reaches me, holding his shining dagger to my throat.

I surrender, and they lock me in a room.

Turn to section 40.

* 26 *

Caine's room is unlocked. Surprised, because my siblings never leave their rooms open, I enter and look around. As I expected, the room is messier than Julian's, with books littering the floor and completely covering a huge desk in the corner. The bed is unmade, suggesting either an unplanned departure or a chronically messy person. I opt for the former, even given the books and papers that sprawl here and there.

Caine is not an art collector. He has fewer pictures than I do. Instead of artworks, he has covered his wall in writings. Handwritten manuscripts that look positively ancient, typescripts from what must be the earliest typewriters, and unreadable scrawls that may be the work of anyone. Funny. He never talks about books, or writing, or even reading, at least not to me. Most of the others willingly spend hours discussing their loves and their hobbies. Caine does not.

If I live through this, I must remember not to ask him about it. This is supposed to be private, after all.

On the wall opposite the door, however, is one framed drawing. A somber black and white, with forbidding grey clouds and mountainous, rugged terrain, the drawing shows three settlements, one atop the hill, one in the valley immediately below, and one farther away, along what seems to be a river. Roads and checkerboard fields line the countryside between the lower towns. There is no apparent route from the upper town to the lower ones, but only a small part of the upper town is shown.

The artist's name is in the top right corner. I'm not surprised to discover it's another Escher. Why have I never heard of this guy until now? To everyone else, he seems to be a fact of life. This is unnerving.

Even more unnerving is the drawing itself. There's nothing weird about it. I mean, it's a stark setting, perhaps an unusual one, but I don't see any paradoxes, any illusions, anything self-referential about the thing. The river seems a bit odd, almost as if it comes out of nowhere, but that could just be the perspective. At least in Julian's drawing I was ready for something strange.

I'd better be on guard anyway. I don't need another endless staircase.

The other thing about this drawing is that it doesn't draw me. It's very nice and all that, but nothing stands out the way the endless staircase did. Unless

it's the river. There's something about it, something almost unnatural. It seems to be in the wrong place. Or the far town does.

I press my face close to the drawing to see where the river goes. I stare at the waves, and how they jump off the hills that contain them. I concentrate harder, trying to discover if the river is flooding, and if the far town is about to be deluged. And then I study where the river runs over the hill, and I wonder where it goes from there. Yes, the hill. Does the river turn left toward the town, or right into the valley, or . . .

And then I find myself clinging to a tree branch at the river's side, while the grey water roars around me and on over the hill. The water is cold, barely above freezing, and I feel my body going numb. I am still too surprised to move.

Then panic strikes. I can't draw myself out of the river; I just don't seem to have the strength. I struggle again and again, but the current holds me in place. Pulling with all the strength I have, I feel my hands slipping off the branch.

Make a Strength roll.

If it fails, turn to section 15.

If it succeeds, turn to section 18.

* 27 *

With little effort, I force open the door. Splinters fly all around, and the noise is deafening in the silence of the town. For a moment I crouch against the wall, not yet daring to go in, and wait for someone to react to the sound. Nobody comes. I shake my head in disbelief.

Slowly and cautiously I step inside.

Light streaks through the windows high in the steeple, filtering down through a series of skylights in the main body of the church. The light is grey, of course, and even the stained-glass windows are merely differing shades of grey. Still, the church is surprisingly bright, even against the dark-grey clouds accumulating in the sky.

Inside, the church is plain, austere, and enormous. Wooden pews sit in row on endless row, and far to the front is a large, unadorned altar. The pews are made of the same wood as the door, and when I sit on one it cracks. Quickly I stand up.

I walk to the altar, pausing as I go to look around me. There is nothing at all fancy about the place, but it fills me with—well, something. Not reverence, but perhaps a sense of awe. Big churches do that to me. That's why I got married once in Westminster Abbey. (Actually, it was one of my shadows, not me. But I enjoyed it anyway. So did the princess.)

The altar, too, is almost plain, but it bears a small carving of a face. I take no notice, since paintings and carvings of faces grace the ceremonial accoutrements of many religions, but something about the face has startled me. Probably I am astonished at evidence

that any faces actually live in this town. I've seen

nothing, and that's what I've come to expect. But then my eyes travel up the walls to the ceiling, and there I find something truly astonishing. High above me, covering nearly the entire ceiling Sistine-Chapel style, is an enormous work of art. Carved into the wood, the work depicts all kinds of strange things, among the weirdest being a long sailing ship fighting the waves of a copulating river. What the river is copulating with is not shown, but I'm sure there must be something. My eyes sweep the scene, finally alighting on the most interesting feature of all. In the middle of the ceiling, centered in a round

frame, is the face I saw carved into the altar. I am hardly startled to realize that I know this face. Playing a hunch. I return to the altar and examine the carving. As I suspected, it is fairly recent. The face on the ceiling, too, looks as if it was added only recently, and at once I begin to grasp what has happened here. The face is the face of the town's new god.

And the face is the face of Brand.

I laugh. Long, loud, and hard. I try for a while to stifle it, because the church seems solemn and I feel I should respect that, but finally I give up completely. I laugh so hard that my legs fail me and I fall to the ground. I clutch my side and roll down the aisle, and I laugh until my eyes are filled with tears. Never have I laughed this loud or this long, but I simply can't help it. This is too funny, too stupid, too completely believable. Brand has set himself up as a god.

Mark a "B" in the Special Events box of the character record. Then continue reading.

Finally I regain control, and again I wait for some reaction. Surely someone must have heard me. If not,

either no one is around, or else they are lying in ambush. After a good, solid laugh like that, though, I can't honestly say I care. Let them do what they want. I'll be ready.

Suddenly, from behind me, I hear a noise. I whirl around and put my hand on the hilt of my sword. Covering the front wall is a thick, grey curtain, which now parts to reveal a man, nearly six feet tall and dressed in a simple grey robe. With him are four other men and two women. All of them are pretty ugly.

The tall man's voice booms through the church. "Who dares laugh in the sight of God?!" he commands. "Show thy face, heretic, and answer to the Lord!"

Oh, no, I think to myself, not one of these. I'm already in a black and white drawing. Do I have to be in a black and white movie as well?

"My face," I reply with as little irony as possible, "is already shown." I can't help adding, "Do you like it?"

"Jest not, heretic!" he says, "lest thou lose all favor in our eyes. The questions shall be ours, and ours alone. Who art thou, and what is thy business? Whence come you, and where go? How hast thou entered, since the door was fixed and bolted? What mean you by this blasphemous intrusion?"

"I deeply apologize, sir," I say, as humbly as I can through the giggles I keep suppressing. "Had I known of your authority, I would surely have tried a different route. In my own defense, though, I must say that I did knock."

A direct hit. That one's got him stumped. He leans toward the small man beside him and whispers for about half a minute.

"We heard thee not," he replies, a little sheepishly I think. "Truly didst thou knock?"

"I did, sir," I reply. "For I remembered the words of the great man who said, 'Knock, and it shall be opened unto you." At least, I think that's what it was.

"What great man be this?" the tall man asked. "I know of no such words." Whoops. I decide to say nothing, but the elder woman presses the point.

"Yes, stranger," she says, "of what great man do you speak?"

Might as well go all the way. "Your Lord, madam. Brand."

That's it. The shit has now hit the fan. The seven come rushing at me, screaming curses and growling. I back up as far as I can, but the altar is right behind me and it sticks into my back. I raise my sword and shout at them to halt, but even if they could hear me I doubt they would obey. I have, it would seem, made a little error.

If Random fights, turn to section 35.

If he surrenders without a fight, turn to section 40.

If he turns and runs, turn to section 30.

* 28 *

I have never been afraid of death, and I am not now. It's a strange experience, but no stranger, perhaps, than living inside a grey drawing for what seems several years. Like all people, I have thought long and hard about what death means, and like most people I have thought wrong.

What it is, I now know, is blackness.

Somehow, I never counted on this. I expected something else, maybe even something terrifying. Certainly an otherwordly experience, even if nothing to do with the traditional notions of good places and bad places to go once dead. But I never, in all my thinking about death, imagined this impenetrable blackness. Whatever sight I once possessed, I realize at last, is gone forever.

I'm dead. What else can I say?

I wonder who will take over from me in Amber. I hope whoever does so keeps it well. I don't know how long I have to worry about that kind of thing, but I suspect eternity isn't a bad guess.

Eternity. Now there's something to think about.

Turn to section 94.

* 29 *

The shadows of evening descend upon Amber as I gaze through the window at my people below. I am their king, but I might not be their king for long. Too much has happened since I became their monarch, too much that I simply have not managed carefully. My achievements are small; my failures, many.

Still, I know I must go on, if only for a short while. The Unicorn chose me for a reason, even if it seems now that I have betrayed her. She saw in me something I do not see in myself. I know I cannot be satisfied until I find out what that is.

But I am tired. My energy is nearly gone. I need a sleep of several days, to heal the wounds that hurt my mind, my body, and my heart. But that sleep is far

from coming, because until I finish what I started I know I can never stop.

I will sleep when I have all my brothers beside me. Until that happens, I will not even rest.

I search for the Pattern, but my mind reels in exhaustion. I stare at my Trumps, but a fog seems to pass before my eyes. I call to the skies, but my voice is feeble and hoarse.

I am Random, King of Amber.

I close my eyes.

I sleep.

Turn to section 94.

* 30 *

Outside, snow falls gently, and I see my breath in the cold air when I finally stop to breathe. The church people have given up the chase, and I am on the outskirts of the town. Brand is there, I know that, and I can return for him when I wish. For now, I head toward the hillside town.

Turn to section 24.

* 31 *

I'm choking. To death. Unless I do something fast. Brand's hold is strong. His fingers tighten. My breath . . .

There's no time to worry about my breath. I must act now. I try a chop to the ribs. It misses. His hands are at my throat. I grasp them and pull. They are loosening, ever so slightly, just enough to breathe . . .

I will myself to kick, and when my head clears I see Brand clutching his groin, pain etched on his face. Then his sword is in his hand, and I quickly scan the room for mine. It is behind him, lying atop a small table.

We circle as I try to maneuver toward the table. But he senses this, and keeps me back. So I edge forward, little by little, but suddenly his sword flashes and I feel a trickle of blood on my stomach.

I fake the pain, clutching my stomach, hoping he will see it as an opportunity to charge. It works. He leaps toward me, and I drop to the floor and roll toward the table. Standing up, I grab the sword and drop once more, just avoiding a vicious slash. Brand is out to kill.

His attacks are strong and continuous. A cut to the face. A feint to the body followed by a thrust toward my legs. I parry both, then try a cut myself. He parries easily.

Our swords meet, and for a second the battle contests the strength in our arms. But then he breaks free and swings hard. I block with my sword, and the

force seems to numb his hand. He switches to his left, even though it is weaker.

I thrust to his throat and draw a drop of blood. He jumps aside, then plants his feet and thrusts at my legs. I parry and leap back, but he presses the attack, slashing at my stomach. As I bend out of the way, he quickly steps forward, reverses his swing, and slices toward my right shoulder. I duck, sustaining only a minor wound, and I come up thrusting toward his stomach. I slash him open, and his sword falls to the ground as his hands grasp the wound.

If Random kills Brand, turn to section 39.

If he captures him, turn to section 38.

* 32 *

There's nothing in this town. No people walking the streets, no police, no anything. Yet I sense it isn't dead. As I look around me, at the buildings large and small, I get the feeling that someone—maybe a host of someones—is watching me. I do not feel wanted.

I walk the entire town, gazing in windows and inspecting whatever I can. No, the town is not dead. Everything is much too fresh, too well kept. But there is nothing here for me now. I will leave now, but I will return.

I head toward the hillside town.

Turn to section 24.

* 33 *

Use the combat rules to determine the winner of the fight.

The fight is in two parts. In the first, Random must break free of Brand and find his sword. In the second, the two men fence. Brand will try to kill Random, but will try to flee as soon as his (i.e. Brand's) hit points total sinks to 3 or less. If he flees, Random will have to succeed at a Dexterity roll to catch him. If Random catches him, he can either keep fighting him or he can attempt to subdue him. The latter requires a successful Strength roll.

Part 1: The Struggle

BRAND

To hit Random: 14 To be hit: 14 Hit points: 42 Damage with body: 1 D6

When the struggle starts, Brand is holding Random by the throat. To begin, Random's rounds consist solely of breaking the hold. To do so, he must score a successful 'To be hit' on Brand, then obtain a Damage result higher than 2. As soon as he does this, the hold is broken. Until he does so, Brand gets one hit per round, as is normal.

After breaking the hold, Random fights normally. As soon as he scores a Damage result on Brand of 4 or

higher, Brand will draw his sword. At this point, Random tries a Dexterity roll each round. As soon as he succeeds, he retrieves his own sword. Once this happens, the fencing battle begins.

Part 2: The Fencing Battle

BRAND

To hit Random: 6 To be hit: 6 Hit points: 42 Damage with sword: 2 D6+2

If Random wins, turn to section 31.

If not, turn to section 36.

* 34 *

Surrendering was a mistake. I sit now on the wet, stinking floor of a black, lightless dungeon. From time to time something climbs over my legs and scurries past me, and at other times something slithers over my chest, but I have no desire to know what somethings they are. I am fed daily, but with my arms bound behind my back, I gag on the thick, foul broth that is poured down my throat. I wish I could vomit, but my body needs food and it keeps it down.

I have no idea how long I have been here, for the days mean nothing without the structure of light and dark. I await some event: a punishment, a blinding, a death—I am not sure which, but when it comes I know it will be severe. Here Brand is power, the thing that Brand has always wanted to be.

Finally, after endless days with no light and little

food, when my body is sick with fever and my brain in a continual fog, Brand comes. He questions me, over and over again, and I tell him everything I know about our brothers and sisters and Amber and the Shadows. I am able to keep nothing from him, and he knows it. But when all is over he orders not that I die, but rather that I be released. "He knows nothing," I hear him say as he leaves, and a huge guard carries me out into the sunlight, throws me across the back of a horse, and leads me out into the wilds. There he feeds me, and he gives me a sack filled with food, and he has me drink from the river that flows nearby. Then he is gone.

I wake in the night, a cold breeze touching my face. I brush a thin film of snow from my face and get to my feet.

After some food and some water, I feel refreshed, almost healthy. I have no idea how long I've been here, but surely no more than a couple of nights. Strangely, I don't feel as if I've just been through days of torture; my body is full of vigor, and my mind is thinking clearly. I know I can regenerate, but . . .

Of course. Things are a bit clearer now. Regeneration is something we Amberites can do anywhere, but in some places, some Shadows, regeneration is extremely fast. That's why in some Shadows we are known as the walking dead, because shortly after we're killed off—actually, only *almost* killed off—we come back and wreak vengeance on the people who did us in. This world—the world inside Caine's drawing—must be one of those places. I am almost fully recovered, despite having just undergone severe bodily harm.

Now I see how Brand could become God. Aside from his considerable personal power and ability, he

is practically immortal here. Maybe, on his arrival, the townspeople tried to get rid of him, but even if he didn't survive the fight—and he would have impressed everyone there—he would have healed practically overnight. And maybe we are immortal here; maybe I would have regenerated even had Brand killed me.

After all, this is only a drawing. It's not even as real as a Shadow.

For a day I rest, and when I awake the next morning I am as good as new. Grabbing the food and a canteen of water, I head for the hillside town.

Subtract 1 D6 hit points from Random's total.

Turn to section 24.

* 35 *

Use the combat rules to determine the outcome of the fight. Each character attempts one hit per round. If one of the church people gets killed, decrease the To-hit-Random number of all the rest by one (they're getting demoralized). If a second dies, the rest will surrender. Note: Once Random's hit points are reduced to 3 or lower, he will surrender. The church people will not kill him.

THE LEADER

To hit Random: 8 To be hit: 9 Hit points: 14 Damage with dagger: 1 D6+1

THE OTHER CHURCH PEOPLE To hit Random: 6 To be hit: 12 Hit points: 10 Damage with fists and random objects: 1 D6-1

If Random wins, turn to section 23.

If he loses, turn to section 25.

* 36 *

I'm choking. To death. Unless I do something fast. Brand's hold is strong. His fingers tighten. My breath . . .

... No time to worry about my breath. Must act. Now. A chop to the ribs. Misses. His hands at my throat. I grasp them. And pull. Loosening. Ever so slightly. Just enough to breathe ...

And then I will myself to kick, and when my head clears I see Brand clutching his groin, pain etched on his face. Then his sword is in his hand, and I quickly scan the room for mine. It is behind him, lying atop a small table.

We circle as I try to maneuver toward the table. But he senses this and keeps me back. So I edge forward, little by little, but suddenly his sword flashes and I feel a trickle of blood on my stomach.

I fake the pain, clutching my stomach, hoping he will see it as an opportunity to charge. It works. He leaps toward me, and I drop to the floor and roll toward the table. Standing up, I grab the sword and drop once more, just avoiding a vicious slash. Brand is out to kill.

His attacks are strong and continuous. A cut to the face. A feint to the body followed by a thrust toward my legs. I parry both, then try a cut myself. He parries easily.

Our swords meet, and for a second the battle

contests the strength in our arms. But then he breaks free and swings hard. I block with my sword, but the force of the swing numbs my hand. I switch hands, even though my left is weaker.

I thrust to his throat and draw a drop of blood. He jumps aside, then plants his feet and thrusts at my legs. I parry and leap back, but he presses the attack, slashing at my stomach. As I bend out of the way, he quickly steps forward, reverses his swing, and slices through my right shoulder to the bone. I score with a thrust to the guts, but it isn't deep enough to knock him down.

I grow weak. My hand opens, and my sword drops to the floor. I raise my left hand in surrender. Brand does not heed it. He raises his sword and thrusts it toward my chest.

Turn to section 28.

* 37 *

My gamble has failed, and I sit now on the wet, stinking floor of a black, lightless dungeon. From time to time something scurries past me, climbing over my legs, and at other times something slithers over my chest, but I do not wish to know what somethings they are. I am fed daily, but at those times my arms are bound behind my back and a thick, foul broth is poured down my throat. I gag, and I wish I could vomit, but my body needs food and it keeps it down.

I don't know how long I have been here, for the days mean nothing without the structure of light and dark. I await some event: a punishment, a blinding, a

death—I am not sure which, but when it comes I know it will be severe. Here Brand is power, the thing that Brand has always wanted to be.

Finally, after endless days with no light and little food, when my body is sick with fever and my brain in a continual fog, Brand comes. He questions me, over and over again, and I tell him everything I know about our brothers and sisters and Amber and the Shadows. I am able to keep nothing from him, and he knows it. At last I tell him that I know where Caine is, and for some reason this infuriates him more than anything else. In the meager torchlight I see the fury on his face, and then I see his sword come down between my eyes. The light disappears.

Turn to section 28.

* 38 *

"Stand up, Brand," I order, holding his sword in my left hand and my own in my right. "You may deserve to die, but I'm not the one to do it. If anyone has the right to kill you, it's Corwin. I'll leave the pleasure for him one day." I'm angry, and it shows.

Brand rises, and I motion for him to call someone to dress his wounds. Apart from keeping him alive, having one of his worshippers see him like this should take him down a peg, and it won't hurt my reputation either. Sometimes humiliation is wonderful.

A servant arrives and works quickly and effectively. Brand is about to order the servant to keep quiet about it, but I stop my brother before he can speak. Brand's head droops slightly as the servant leaves.

"Why did you do that, Random?" he asks, much of the irony gone from his voice.

"I didn't do anything," I respond.

"You practically willed that servant to spread word of my defeat. Do you know what that will do to this town?"

"No," is my answer. "But I hope it affects the way they feel about you."

Brand shakes his head. "Why do you want that? Don't you realize what I am to them?"

"Yes, I realize it. And I abhor it. You're not God, Brand, even though you've spent the last several years believing you were. When I discovered in the church what you've done to these people, I was honestly shocked, and there isn't a whole lot that can shock me. I mean, where the hell do you get off setting yourself up as God? Isn't that a little insane, even for you?"

"Knock it off, brother," Random interrupts. "Do you mean to tell me you've wandered around Shadow after Shadow and never had any temptation to use your strength to lord it over the inhabitants?"

"Of course I've done that," I say. "But I've always done it politically, not religiously. I don't screw about with gods."

"What the hell's the difference?" Random almost shouts. "Religion is politics, isn't it? And in some places, politics is religion. So don't give me that uppity-uppity shit about why you're right and I'm wrong."

"If you can't figure out my answer to that bit of stupidity, Brand, we might as well can this conversation. You're not about to accept what I say, let alone understand it." I realize this is the classic cop-out, and I've always hated the *if-you-don't-understand-itnow-you-never-will* line (especially when women have used it on me), but there really *is* no point to all this.

If someone can honestly believe that religion is merely politics, and vice versa, I'm afraid I'll never get through to him.

"Fine," says Brand. "Then we won't discuss it any further." He pauses. "Well, Your Majesty"—as the irony returns to his voice—"now that you have me, what do you want to do with me?"

"I want you to return to Amber, and wait for me there." I have no idea how he's going to do this, since my Trumps haven't worked since I set foot in this drawing, but I'm hoping my tone of voice will force him to reveal how he might accomplish it.

"And what if I don't?"

"Then I'll take you out into the wilderness, tie you to a rock inside a cave, and come back to get you later."

"That's what you'd better do," he says, "because I don't know how to get back. I only know how I came."

If I play it right, I can keep this going. "How was that?" I ask.

"Through Caine's drawing, of course. The same way you got here. Since this place isn't real, it's the only way."

"You mean it's only a drawing?"

"Exactly. That's why we're gods here, Random. We can't be killed. Except maybe by each other. But even then, I don't know if we'd stay dead."

"But that doesn't make us gods, damn it! It simply makes us immortal."

Brand laughs. "Once again, brother, what's the difference? Isn't that all a god is? An immortal being. Besides, these aren't real people. They're just things inside a drawing."

That triggers something. "No," I reply. "You're wrong. The people weren't inside the drawing. At

least, not inside the one I saw. The entire landscape was empty. There were no people."

"So how did they get here?" Brand asks, a crooked smile glued to his face.

"How do I know? Maybe you created them."

Brand laughs again. "If a tree falls in Siberia . . ."

"Screw off," I say. Then, after a pause, "I mean, it makes sense, doesn't it? You wanted worshippers, so you made some. Isn't that the view of religion some people have?"

"You're not much at this sort of thing, are you, Random?"

"What sort of thing?"

"Logic. Argument. That sort of thing."

"Look, Brand, we've spent most of our lives creating Shadows, or at least altering them to suit our needs. Is it that great a step to creating people inside a work of art, once you've entered inside? Maybe this is just another Shadow. A Shadow of a Shadow of a Shadow. Maybe all this is just a creation of our minds. Maybe our minds have grown so warped over the years that we couldn't understand reality if it hit us between the ears."

Brand nods, suddenly serious. "Fascinating," he says, regaining his sarcasm. "But that doesn't help me get back to Amber."

I take out my Trumps and shuffle through to find Llewella. I concentrate, but the image is fuzzy. "Help me, Brand," I order, and to my surprise my brother joins me at my side. Several minutes later, Llewella comes into view.

"Pull me through!" Brand shouts, and before I can speak he disappears.

"Keep him locked up!" I shout, but the image is gone before I have spoken. I don't know if Llewella heard it.

I'm finished in this town. It's time to move on.

Write "Brand 1" in the Special Events box of the character record. Then turn to one of the following:

If "Caine" is written in the Special Events box of the character record, turn to section 109.

If not, turn to section 24.

* 39 *

Brand is dead. Whether or not I did the right thing I'm sure I'll never know, but I did what I thought I had to do. I'll leave him here for now, because I have a great deal else to do before I leave.

But I vow, brother, that I'll return for you. I'll take you back and bury you in Amber. A state funeral, a long procession, the whole bit. You've done your share of rotten things, and I don't remember ever liking you, but you are, after all, one of us. Until you died, you were a prince of the blood.

But now I must go on. Wherever I go, I go with little bounce in my heart. A brother lies dead behind me.

Write "Brand 2" in the Special Events box of the character record. Then turn to one of the following:

If "Caine" is written in the Special Events box of the character record, turn to section 110.

If not, turn to section 24.

* 40 *

"About time," I say as Brand strolls into the room. "I've been here quite some time." I'm trying to sound as nonchalant as I can, even though I am on Brand's turf. He's always been a tough customer, never more than when he's had backing. But I keep reminding myself that I'm the king. I think it helps.

"Random," he replies, a little surprised to see me, I believe. "How wonderful to see you again." Obviously, the formality—and the geniality—is for the benefit of his guards. Unable to stand being this nice, he gestures them away. With the door closed, he becomes once more the scheming, conniving, brilliant son of a bitch I've always known.

"Well, O King," he begins. "What brings you from your lofty throne? Need help containing the peasantry?"

I can't let his jabs turn me. Others before me have made the mistake of getting mad at him. It's extremely easy to do.

"No. The peasantry is fine. I've come looking for you." This should throw him. Actually, I've come looking for Caine, since the drawing was in Caine's room. He does seem a little startled.

"Looking for me?" he says, his eyes opened wide in mock wonder. "Why ever would you want me?" What a prick.

"Look, Brand," I begin. "All I wanted, originally at least, was to find out where you were. And why I can't reach you via the Trumps. As a matter of fact"—and here I risk the full truth—"I haven't, for the last month, been able to get hold of any of you. It's almost as if you've disappeared."

Brand ponders this awhile. "Well, then, brother," he replies, "your search is over. You may go home now." With that he draws out his pack of cards. "Do you want some help?"

"Not yet," I answer. "I've got a whole bunch of questions."

"And I don't feel like answering them. Go home, Random. It's where you belong."

"How?" I ask.

"The same way you got here. Through Caine's drawing. It's the only way."

"About that drawing. Where did it come from? Why were you in Caine's room? And where's Corwin?"

One of my talents is for saying whatever gets the greatest reaction. I am fully aware that Brand's hatred for Corwin is utterly without limit, and that any question about him should elicit a dramatic response. Once again, it works. Brand walks toward me and reaches for my throat. I stand still and let him grab me.

"If you ever," he says, "mention that bastard's name once more in my presence, I swear before your precious throne that I will lock you up forever and burn out your eyes every time you start to see. And no one in this town will show you any sympathy, because to them the name of Corwin is cursed. To them, he is Satan."

The fury in his eyes is frightening, and I begin to understand why his people call him God. But I refuse to show him my fear. With an artificial but convincing display of disinterest, I shrug, smirk, and say, "You're not real fond of him, are you? Of course, we never do like the people we lose to."

He is angry now, and his grip tightens. I've done as I thought necessary, but he is strong and I do not know how long I can last. If I fight him, I could lose. If I surrender, he may let me go.

If Random surrenders, and if there is a "C" or "Caine" in the Special Events box of the character record, turn to section 37.

If he surrenders and there is no "C" and no "Caine" in the box, turn to section 34.

If Random fights, turn to section 33.

* 41 *

But then I remember that I want Caine, not Amber, and I begin to wonder why I have seen the place of my birth. I am in the middle of a hellride, with nothing proceeding as it should. I should be altering the Shadows to suit myself, changing my surroundings to scene after scene of my own choosing, attempting to crack through the very idea of Shadow to get where I want to go. That's the whole idea of the hellride, after all, the very reason we all finally learned it. It is risky, because at any point the mind could snap and we could be trapped inside a Shadow only partly of our own making, but to traverse many Shadows very quickly it is utterly indispensable.

This one, though, hasn't worked at all. If anything, it seems to have lengthened the distance from one place to another. The far town was easily visible from

the mountaintop near the hillside town. At the most, it should have taken two days to go from one to the other, and that by conventional riding. The hellride, I figure, should have reduced it to less than a day, but I've been riding for hours and the Shadows seem no closer to my destination. I should be sensing the change by now, the alteration of one reality into the Shadow I want, but nothing has happened. I seem farther away, not closer.

But then I remember. I am inside a drawing. I don't even know if this is a reality, let alone whether or not I can alter it. Is this a Shadow? Or a series of Shadows? Or the Shadow of a Shadow? Or is art somehow above all this Shadow stuff? If Amber is Art, as I have so often claimed in my pompous after-dinner speeches, then maybe any art is beyond hellriding. Maybe I can't alter anything here. Maybe Art really is unchanging.

For some reason, Plato comes to mind. That guy didn't like artists, but he sure understood art. Think I'll have a talk with him sometime. I've got a lot to learn.

All right, damn it! Stop. Stop the hellride. Let me off. I can't seem to get anywhere.

I rein in. I've never done this before, stopping in the middle. I wonder if the world will drop away beneath me, because I haven't created it yet. I wonder if anything exists at all.

It does. But it's weird. All the colors are wrong. So are the distances. I look around, and I can't tell where I am. Nothing seems right.

The hellride hasn't worked. I'm lost. Never in my life have I been lost in a hellride. It's a scary thought. I don't even know how to find my way back. It's simply never happened.

Red trees, I decide, aren't attractive. If in fact these are trees. Neither is yellow water. And the birds fly upside down. Suddenly I realize, as I stare at each of these strange and frightening things, that I'd better keep moving. My head is starting to burst.

The hellride resumes. Concentrate, I tell myself, concentrate and make up your mind. It's the only way to find where you are. The only way to find Caine. And the others. And Amber. The only way not to go insane.

Better. The hills recede, begin to level out. The grass begins to grey before me, and I use the grey spots to guide me through a maze of brilliant colors. Trees sway, bend, break, fall: lightning flashes and thunder bursts, as colors drop like petals from the sky. Thorns underfoot, and my horse neighs in pain. He bleeds, but his blood is grey. A branch from an enormous tree strikes me from out of nowhere, and I scream with the impact. I put my hand to my forehead, and I feel the blood. I taste it, and it is real. I look at it, and it is grey.

And then I look behind me and see what I knew all along must be inevitable. Around the sky I see a straight, grey boundary. A frame, a border, an ending. The drawing has a frame, and I have gone through it. My head throbs and nearly erupts as I stop my horse and fall to the ground. Foam drips from its mouth, and I drop the reins and let him go. The smell of water is strong. Toward it he gallops, kicking and neighing all the way. I fall into a long sleep filled with nightmares of colors, and when I awake I silently praise the grey sunrise that greets my eyes.

I rise and walk to the river. Its current is strong, its banks continually washed by the water's force. But it looks clean and inviting. Stripping off my clothes, I test the water, shiver, and slowly immerse myself. My
heart protests, pounding with the cold, but my filthy body urges me on.

I don't stay in long, because it is very cold indeed, but the bath I have is refreshing. Once on shore, I take my clothes to the water and wash them as well, then lay them on some rocks to dry. After a quick meal, I lie in the sun and relax, wondering what has become of Caine. Then I take my dried clothes, put them on, and climb onto the horse. Together we walk along the bank, following the current, picking our way among the rocks and holes. Then the sun goes behind the clouds, and the day turns cold once more.

Near dusk I climb a gradual hill, hoping when I reach the top to figure out where I am. Once there, I see that the hill descends much faster than it rose, and the way is rockier, more treacherous. But I see something else as well. Before me, perhaps a morning's ride away, are the lights of the far town. In front of the town, with torches and flares lighting the dusk, is what looks to be an entire army. Men with spears, and swords, and shields, waiting for something, guarding the entrance to the town.

I wasn't expecting this.

I look for ways around the army, perhaps a flanking entrance, but the hills beside the town are practically cliffs, difficult to scale and almost impossible to hide in. Still, without the horse the idea might work. If only I could see a little better.

Where is Caine? Far more a military leader than I am, he might be able to figure out what to do, at least whether or not the army is vulnerable. I can't. I don't know enough. Then, too, I wonder what the army is doing there. What are they guarding against? Me? Caine? It hardly seems possible, but neither does anything else here.

My choices, it seems, are limited. If I'm going to try

to sneak past the army, by scaling the hills on the town's flanks, I'll have to start immediately. My only other choice is to find Caine.

If Random tries it on his own, turn to section 46.

If he tries to find Caine, turn to section 55.

* 42 *

For several minutes I stand where I am, with half of me wanting to leave and half wanting to stay. My brother's wife is in danger in the town, and I want to help her if I can. But my brother is in perhaps greater danger here, and I know I can help him if I stay.

In the end, I decide to stay.

Taking up my position again, still in the weakened right flank, I wait for another assault. It comes quickly, and it comes severely. Through our ranks the enemy cavalry tears, scattering us in all directions until we fight in small pockets. I kill several men, and several horses, but they outnumber us by far.

But suddenly I hear a chorus of shouts, and I look behind me to a host of our own cavalry riding to our aid. Over the battlefield they race, swords waving high and arrows already unleashed. With renewed fervor our battered men fight, and I join them in the thrill of newfound victory. As our comrades hit the line, I realize the conclusion is inevitable.

Minutes later, the enemy scatters before the wind.

"Well done, brother," Caine's voice says from behind me. "I appreciate your support." He is smiling, but he is also bleeding. "I could hardly leave," I begin to explain, but he silences me.

"There is still the town, Random. Leave without me. I'll catch up when I can."

Nodding, I spur my horse and it leaps toward the south. Caine shouts orders to his men as I leave the battlefield behind.

Turn to section 64.

* 43 *

"Where is Brand?" I ask.

"In the town in the valley, at the foot of this mountain. Do you feel up to fighting him?"

"Not really. Should I?"

"Yes," Caine replies. "It's necessary."

"Why?" I ask. "What's he done this time?"

"What hasn't he done, Random? We're talking here of a man who wanted to redraw the Pattern, to re-create the world in his own image. He keeps convincing people—I'm just the latest—that he's reformed, but then he comes back with another zinger. When I think back, I still can't believe Corwin beat him. I know I couldn't have.

"But what's he done this time? Simply managed to change nature, that's all. Our slimy son-of-a-bitch brother has used his power in this world—and it is considerable—to divert the course of the river. Little by little. Within a couple of days, the far town in the drawing will be completely swept away by the river's enormous force."

"Why did he do it?" I ask. "And how?"

"The people wouldn't surrender to him. They have a leader there, a woman, who distrusted Brand's intentions right from the start. He approached her with the idea that he would lead them out of poverty and into prosperity, and all he wanted in return was trade and shared prosperity with his own town. An emblem in his honor, he suggested, would also be nice. The people loved him—everyone loves him at first—and the woman almost succumbed to his charm. But she didn't. She held back, and asked him to leave. Finally she had to throw him out. He vowed to return, in true villain style.

"No one knows where she is now, but before she disappeared she convinced the people not to listen to Brand. They held true, but it wasn't easy. Finally Brand gave up, and he decided to wipe them out. That's the kind of person he is."

"What do you want us to do?" I asked at last.

Caine replies, "We have to use our own power to undivert the river. We've got to restore things to what they were. And then we have to find the woman. No matter what."

"No matter what?"

"Yes," he says. "This is no ordinary woman, Random."

"Who is she?"

"She's the leader of the town, the people's spiritual guide. She's also my wife."

He pauses for a long while, and I let this sink in. This world is getting too real.

"Can't you help me?" I ask. "Take care of Brand, I mean."

"No," Caine replies. "I know it sounds like a cop-out, but I have to stay here. If he comes when I'm not around, this place will surrender to him. He's that strong. He really is."

I suspect there's more to Caine's desire to stay, but I say nothing. For one thing, my mission is still to find my brothers, and whether I like it or not, Brand is one of them. So I have no choice. I must head for the valley town.

Write "Caine" in the Special Events box of the character record then turn to section 21

* 44 *

I'm being chased, by several of them. And together they've raised an alarm they should hear back in Amber. There's nothing I can do, no way I can reach my horse. Nothing at all.

Except maybe the Trumps.

I dig into my pocket and draw them out. Concentrating as I run, trusting to blind luck that I don't step in a hole or trip over a rock, I practically will Fiona to appear. At last she does, vaguely, indistinctly, but Fiona nonetheless. I wait for the last possible second, when her image is as strong as I know it will become, and then I shout, "Pull me through!"

I wish I could see the faces of my pursuers as I disappear through the Trump. I can't, though, because once I've returned to Amber the vision of that grey world is completely lost. I look at Fiona, and she at me, and I see a sadness behind her slightly mocking smile.

"Nothing, brother?" she asks.

"Lots. But I've got to go back there."

"Not now," she says. "I have to," I say. "I've got to go back for Caine."

She nods. "I know," she says, "but there's no way for you to get there. Caine's destroyed the drawing."

"What!" I shout. "How did he do that?"

"He came back," she says, "when you were still there. Said something about a hellride gone wrong. Then he went to his room and brought out the drawing. He threw it on the fire."

She pauses and adds, "He left this for you."

Handing me a note, she leaves. I open it and read it, and its contents do not surprise me. I have gone, Random. My wife is dead. Don't look for me. If I return, it will be on my own terms. If you see Dworkin, curse him for me. Curse him until he dies. Caine.

I don't understand, but it's got something to do with the time distortion. I've failed, and so has Caine. It's over.

Turn to section 29.

* 45 *

We are ready to leave, Caine and I by ourselves, in the middle of a night that threatens storm. The Calitan alone knows we are going, and he now helps us get away without detection. It hasn't been easy, readying two excellent horses and preparing enough food to last for a few days, all under the noses of the entire town, but somehow the Calitan has managed it. He is a worthy man, this Carey, and I vow to myself again that I will somehow get him to Amber.

Out of town we lead our horses, stopping after two hours to let them graze and us rest. All around us are hills, which tire us but hide us, and to our right is the almost sheer drop of the mountain. I point to our left and ask, "What's over there, on the other side of these hills?"

"Nothing," Caine replies. "Nothing at all."

"You mean nothing worth talking about?"

"No. I mean nothing at all. Void. Empty. Call it whatever you want. It's out of the picture."

I tell him about the first door I went through and he says, "Yeah. That sort of nothing. If it doesn't exist in the picture, it doesn't exist here. That's the problem with wandering around in a drawing."

I shake my head. "That's impossible," I say. "I've seen many things that aren't in the picture. Hell, you're one of them. And so is Brand. And the people. And these hills."

"We don't count," he explains, "because we're Amberites, and so is Dworkin. But the rest of it, the geography and the people, and even this storm we're about to go through, are implied. They're there because the picture would make no sense without them. At least, that's the closest I've come to figuring it out. It's like looking at a painting of a cave opening. What's inside the cave is not in the picture. But the picture implies that something is in there. At that point, it's mostly a matter of guesswork, but it's there. These hills, the feast hall, my chambers, Brand's church, they're all implied. So they're there, even though you can't see them from the outside."

"But why wasn't the space through the first door implied?" I ask.

"The first door isn't in the picture. I made it myself. So from outside the drawing you aren't drawn through it."

"I see," I said, only partially lying. "And that's why we have horses, and no electricity, and no gunpowder? Because the drawing's tone implies that kind of civilization?"

"Exactly," Caine replies. "Incidentally, Random, I

want to clear something up. Outside the town, you're in charge again. I give you fealty and all that stuff, so if something happens, I leave the orders up to you. Pretty obvious, maybe, but . . ."

"Not obvious at all," I say, "and I'm not sure I even want the charge here. But it's a good thing to clear up, one way or another. In case we get in a scrape."

We ride on, and the sky darkens. We climb a long hill, stopping at the top, and we look out over the side of the mountain onto the valley below and far beyond. The moon is behind the clouds, so the only lights we have are from the candles and torches in the houses below, and from the occasional campfires dotting the ground. It is beautiful, but the wind is cold.

Suddenly, far past Brand's town and along the valley, a flare lights the blackened sky. It dies out, but a second takes its place, and then a third before all goes dark. I look at Caine, and I see he is deeply concerned. I wait for him to tell me why.

"The far town," he almost whispers. "Something drastically wrong. That is the ancient signal for the gods to come to their aid. My wife told me all about it. She also told me it hasn't been used for hundreds of years."

"Oh, come off it, Caine," I say. "You can't be serious. That sort of thing doesn't happen in real worlds. It just doesn't."

"It just did," he replies. "We've got to ride, Random, faster than these horses can possibly carry us. Are you coming with me?"

"I thought you said I give the orders."

"You do," he admits, his head lowered.

"Then hellride!" I command. "Hellride with me!" "You can't hellride here," he shouts. "The place isn't just a Shadow." "I can bloody well try, brother, and I suggest you do the same. We're never going to get there otherwise. Now go ahead. Start. We can't do it together. You know that."

He goes over the hill, and I lose sight of him. I dismount and walk to my horse's head. I pat him, soothe him, feed him, and try to explain what we're about to do. He can't possibly understand, of course, but I've always known horses to act better if they're relaxed, and the best way to relax them is with the voice. They listen to the tones, the pitch.

Then I mount once more, and I prepare to ride. The first drops of rain fall on me, the horse rears high in the air, and before he comes down the hellride begins.

Turn to section 50.

* 46 *

Thank God for the clouds. If not for them, I'd have been spotted long ago. Still, I'm far from out of the woods. Or off the cliff, in this case.

This is much more of a cliff than I thought at first, much steeper than it looked from back on top of the hill. At times it's been so steep I've nearly lost my balance and slid down. Almost worse is the terrain itself. A combination of soft ground and loose rocks, it would hinder walking even if it were level. As it is, I think I've thrown both legs out of joint just trying to stay on my feet.

The torches of the army (which is bigger than I thought) are directly below me now to my left. I'm so close to them that I can scarcely believe they can't see

me. But they're obviously preoccupied, preparing their defenses. Strange, this. I wonder who could possibly be attacking. Brand's town? I simply can't believe that. Caine's? Well, possibly, but they hardly seem the conquering type. Someone else? Who? There's nobody else alive in this drawing. Not that I've seen, anyway.

I've reached an impasse. A huge rock in front of me, and a steep, muddy slope beside me. I don't know if I can climb the rock, but even if I do I have no guarantee the thing won't come loose. If I try the mud, I could easily slide down into the troops' arms. I don't even know if I could make it back to the hillside to start searching for Caine.

If Random turns back and looks for Caine, turn to section 52.

If he tries the boulder, turn to section 58.

If he tries the mud, turn to section 69.

* 47 *

"I know what Brand's done," I say. "I know how he's set himself up as a god. When I first saw his face emblazoned on the ceiling of the church, I laughed. But the more I think about it, the madder I get. He's got no bloody right..."

"Spare it, Random. At least he keeps them in food and clothing, even if he is an asshole about it. But he's done far more than that. He's tried to convince me to hand over this place to him. Many times. He wants it. Covets it for its perfection. That's why I asked the people here to set me up as Escalitan, which means the person who watches over the Calitan, to make sure he doesn't screw up. I convinced them of the need to defend themselves against Brand, who is, to them at least, an alien being. So am I, but I try hard not to seem alien. I adopt their practices, and I respect everything they do. Not that it's hard work."

"But has Brand actually done anything?"

"What hasn't he done, Random? We're talking here of a man who wanted to redraw the Pattern, to re-create the world in his own image. He keeps convincing people—I'm just the latest—that he's reformed, but then he comes back with another zinger. When I think back, I still can't believe Corwin beat him. I know I couldn't have.

"But this time he's simply managed to change nature, that's all. Our slimy son-of-a-bitch brother has used his power in this world—and it is considerable —to divert the course of the river. Little by little. Within a couple of days, the river's enormous force will completely sweep away the far town in the drawing."

"Why did he do it?" I ask. "And how?"

"The people wouldn't surrender to him. A woman is their leader and she distrusted Brand's intentions right from the start. He approached her with the idea that he would lead them out of poverty and into prosperity, and all he wanted in return was trade and shared prosperity with his own town. He also suggested an emblem in his honor. The people loved him—everyone loves him at first—and the woman almost succumbed to his charm. But she didn't. She held back, and asked him to leave. Finally she had to throw him out. He vowed to return, true villain style.

"No one knows where she is now, but before she

disappeared she convinced the people not to listen to Brand. They held true, but it wasn't easy. Finally Brand gave up, and he decided to wipe them out. That's the kind of person he is."

"What do you want us to do?" I asked at last.

Caine replies, "We have to use our own power to undivert the river. We've got to restore things to what they were. And then we have to find the woman. No matter what."

"No matter what?"

"Yes," he says. "This is no ordinary woman, Random."

"Who is she?"

"She's the leader of the town, the people's spiritual guide. She's also my wife."

He pauses for a long while, and I let this sink in. This world is getting too real.

"But before we worry about all that," he continues, "you have to take care of Brand. As long as he's around, I can't move out of this place. He's simply too powerful for these people to resist."

"Even if you order them to?" I ask. "I don't give orders, Random," he says. "I thought vou understood that. I'm a check on the Calitan, but not an authority over him. I could press it, but it would destroy the relationship I've built with them, and I won't do that."

"Fine," I reply. "But I don't relish the thought of taking on Brand by myself. He's strong, and he's got the force of the people behind him. What the hell am I going to do? Walk in and say, 'Hi, mind sending Brand out? I'd like to knock him off??"

"No, but finding him won't be tough. Look, Random, we don't have much choice. With Brand gone, we have a chance of stopping that river. With him fighting against us, we don't. It's that easy.

"Now, will you do it?"

"Yes," I answer, though I'm far from sure it's the right thing to do.

So back I go to the town in the valley, riding part of the way, walking the last couple of miles, until the church is once again in sight. I march through the barren streets, knocking on doors and getting no answer, and then in frustration I do the only thing I think will work.

I walk to the steps of the church, throw open the door, and shout at the top of my lungs, "Brand is an asshole. Brand is an asshole. Your precious god is a piece of shit." Not very mature, maybe, but it brings instant results.

From out of the church and the surrounding building streams an entire host of enraged villagers, knives and forks and two-by-fours in hand, ready to beat me into submission. Pretending terror, I fall on my knees and beg for mercy. The leader of the church people, recognizing me from before, raises a hand and calls a halt to the would-be massacre. They lead me away and lock me in a room.

Write "Caine" in the Special Events box of the character record, then turn to section 40.

* 48 *

I draw my sword and lunge at him before he has time to recover. He is hit, and recoils in pain. But this grey man in the grey mail is well trained, and he moves quickly to the left and draws his own sword. I have to strike quickly, before he thinks to sound the alarm.

I jump to his left, then brace my legs and throw myself back to the right. Got him! He wasn't expecting this. With his sword he slashes to where I was, opening his right side to my full attack. One slash to the ribs, and the man cries out as he falls.

Grabbing his throat, I warn him against making any noise. His eyes are filled with terror, the fear that can only come with a true threat of death. Soon he is silent and motionless, and I tear a piece from his tunic and gag him. I walk him ahead of me back to the hill, where I tie him up and leave him in a cave by the riverbank. I will return for him later.

Turn to section 55.

* 49 *

"I know about him," I say. "I know what he's done to his town, how he's terrified his people. And I've sent him back to Amber."

"What?" says my startled brother.

"At least, I think he made it back to Amber. Together, we managed to contact Llewella through her Trump. She drew him back during the brief second the contact was relatively clear. I lost her after that."

"Then he's gone?"

"Yes."

"In that case, brother, we have a job to do."

"No need," I say. "Brand's people are already setting to rights his dirty work. They needed a lot of convincing, but I don't think they'll need any help."

"That's good," Caine replies, "but it's not what I meant. There is something left of Brand's dirty work

that you can't possibly know about. Something that I could do nothing about because I had to stay here to guard this town against him. He was constantly coming here, talking trade and diplomacy, but I always knew he wanted the town itself. He admires its perfection. That's why I asked the people here to set me up as Escalitan, which means the person who watches over the Calitan, to make sure he doesn't screw up. I convinced them of the need to defend against Brand, who is, to them at least, an alien being. So am I, but I try hard not to seem alien. I adopt their practices, and I respect everything they do. Not that it's hard work."

"But what about Brand's 'dirty work'? What has he done?"

"What *hasn't* he done, Random? We're talking here of a man who wanted to redraw the Pattern, to re-create the world in his own image. He keeps convincing people—I'm just the latest—that he's reformed, but then he comes back with another whopper. When I think about it, I still can't believe Corwin beat him. I know I couldn't have.

"But this time he's beaten all odds. He's simply managed to change nature, that's all. Our slimy sonof-a-bitch brother has used his power in this world and it is considerable—to divert the course of the river. Little by little. Within a couple of days, the far town in the drawing will be completely swept away by the river's enormous force."

"Why did he do it?" I ask. "And how?"

"The people wouldn't surrender to him. A woman there, their leader, distrusted Brand's intentions right from the start. He claimed he would lead them out of poverty and into prosperity, and all he wanted in return was trade and shared prosperity with his own town. He suggested an emblem in his honor would be

nice to show their gratitude. The people loved him everyone loves him at first—and the woman almost succumbed to his charm. But she didn't. She held back and asked him to leave. Finally she had to throw him out. He vowed to return in true villain style.

"No one knows where she is now, but before she disappeared she convinced the people not to listen to Brand. They held true, but it wasn't easy. Finally Brand gave up, and he decided to wipe them out. That's the kind of person he is."

"What do you want us to do?" I asked at last.

"First," Caine replies, "we have to use our own power to undivert the river. We've got to restore things to what they were. And then we have to find the woman. No matter what."

"No matter what?"

"Yes," he says. "This is no ordinary woman, Random."

"Who is she?"

"She's the leader of the town, the people's spiritual guide. She's also my wife."

Write "Caine" in the Special Events box of the character record, then turn to section 45.

* 50 *

Grey, and grey, and grey. Grey of every imaginable shade. A gleam of almost silver, then a somber deep grey, then a deathly pale white-grey, then the greyblack of the storm cloud. The storm cloud fills the sky, threatening, terrorizing, waiting for the right moment to . . .

... strike! Flash after flash after flash after flash. White. Blinding white. Pure, unendurable white. Everything gone, consumed, subsumed under this blanket of killing white. The town, I think. Concentrate on the changes. The far town. The river. The open terrain. But nothing happens. I am alone, and it is white.

And then I see green. Green grass in green fields under green trees beside a green river. Then I will the river blue, and the colors assault me. I have been so long in grey, I hardly know these colors now.

Expanses of endless green. Blinding. Forests of trees, all green. They hurt my eyes. And the blue river, chopping its way to the sea, sunlight glinting off it, the color splashing with the water along the shore. I dream of Amber.

Amber. Its perfect beauty. Its perfect designs. Its perfect flaws. Amber. Art. For me, they are one. For me, they are inseparable.

I am its king. If I deserve to be king, it is because I love the kingdom. Nothing more, but nothing less, either. If all kings had loved their kingdoms, kingship on Shadow Earth would never have died.

But I am not alone in that love. Corwin loves. Benedict loves. Julian loves. All my brothers love her. Even Brand in his own way.

Why not them? Why has the Unicorn accepted my love, and not theirs. I am not a skillful ruler, even though I am a skilled diplomat. There is no reason to prefer me over the others. Unless maybe, just maybe, I love Amber more.

Why haven't I reached the far town yet? How the hell far is it? Am I still inside the drawing?

This is a hellride, but it is unlike any I have ever taken. It scares me, and I am lost.

Corwin has rejected her. His love is strong enough

to let him turn her down. Benedict, much the same. Brand has loved her too much, and she has rejected him. Julian may one day have a chance. Caine, perhaps not. Gérard's love is that of a servant only. Bleys, who knows?

I am king, perhaps by default. The thought does little to inspire me, but even less to upset me. Knowing this makes my love no less real.

How did the Unicorn know?

The Shadows shift, but I am not willing them. A patch of blue in the sky, first pale, then deepening to a rich, royal purple. Then the red of dawn, and the pink of sunset, and the yellow of the dreaded tornado. The fields are green with summer, then the browns of spring, now—just for a second—the golds of the autumn harvest, and finally the blue-white of the frozen winter. The sky shows the day and the weather, the fields the seasons.

And the forests, first in the velvety green of primal splendor, then the deep green of ancient age, then the browns and blacks of death, finally the light green of rebirth. Another cycle, another dream.

Cycles of days, of seasons, of life. Cycles of the universe. All imaginable cycles. Whirling in my brain, upsetting my vision, destroying my perspective.

This is kingship then, to see and acknowledge all the great cycles. To know one's place within them. Sacred kingship. Niall, the King of Ireland. Zeus, king of the gods. Random, King of Amber.

Not necessarily in that order.

Suddenly I am deep in the forest of Arden. The flowers are fresh with early summer, the leaves full and green, the undergrowth thick, luxurious, full of life. I smell the smells I love, and I see the sights I have longed for. I close my eyes and smile.

Then it comes to me. Arden. The great forest of Amber. Julian's stomping grounds.

What the hell am I doing here?

I rein in. Have I created this? Have I turned the drawing into a Shadow of Amber? I dismount and look about me. The forest is as I remember it. Every last detail. I mount and ride on. If I see the palace, I'll know I am home.

As I leave the forest, I know the truth. I have come home. The court of Amber stands before me. I smile at its beauty.

If Random enters the palace, turn to section 57.

If he attempts to return to Caine, turn to section 41.

* 51 *

Use the combat rules to determine the winner. The sentry will fight until his hit points are reduced to 5, at which point he will try to run. To prevent his getting away, make a Dexterity roll. If it succeeds, Random has captured the sentry and will tie him up out of the way (he has no useful information). If the Dexterity roll fails, the sentry gets away and raises the alarm.

THE SENTRY To hit Random: 8 To be hit: 14 Hit points: 14 Damage with sword: 1 D6+3

If Random wins the fight and the Dexterity roll, turn to section 48.

If he loses the sword fight, turn to section 54.

If he wins the fight but loses the Dexterity roll, turn to section 59.

* 52 *

Toward Caine, then. I hope this works.

I'm almost past the army, and just in time. The moon is getting low. Dawn isn't too far away. Once off these slopes, I'll have to make a run for it. It's a long way back to the hill—running, at least—but it's a damn sight better than facing this army.

All right. Around this wall, then another. Now for the last one. Once past this, I can start running. I take a deep breath, listening for any sounds. Nothing. It's clear. I spring . . .

... right into the path of a bloody sentry. Oh, Jesus!

He's startled, even more than I am. I must take advantage of that. No time for a set-piece fight here. Take him out fast, or run like hell.

If Random runs, turn to section 44.

If he fights, turn to section 51.

* 53 *

At Caine's command, I stop. He's right, I think to myself. I'll never make it through alone. I start back toward his side.

Prancing with pride, my horse waits beside Caine's for the order to ride. Somewhat less excited, I survey the army in front of us and wonder how many of us will survive. I have few doubts we will win, but I sense the victory will be pyrrhic. Many of us are going to die.

Caine barks a command. The army advances.

Within minutes, the front lines hit. Behind them, listening to the extreme authority in my brother's voice, I feel useless, an unnecessary piece of dead weight that the army can ill afford to carry. Riding forward to catch Caine's attention, I motion that I will ride over to the right flank. Caine nods his agreement.

Once there, I take my position, sword at the ready. A few seconds later, a wave of infantry races into us, slicing through many with their long swords and screaming in a voice that seems to frighten our horses. I manage to slash the soldier on my right, while my horse's hooves crush the head of the one on my left. We stop the attack, but it has been painful.

Suddenly, though, just as the infantry falls, a line of cavalry charges toward us. Spears thrust out in front of them, and some firing arrows into our ranks, they bear down on us at a full gallop. Neighing wildly, our horses begin to break ranks, and my own rears and tries to throw me.

In a few seconds I calm him, but by then our flank has nearly evaporated. To my rear, the flank commander shouts retreat orders, which I obey because I want to stay alive. As I reach him, I see Caine approaching.

"Re-form the line here," he shouts to the commander. "The left flank has fared better, and reinforcements are on the way. But there won't be many."

"Random," he says, looking at me. "I want to talk to you."

When we pull out of the others' hearing, he continues. "This is almost dead-even," he begins. "Our left flank has dented theirs badly, but they've done ours in almost completely. The center is a stalemate." He pauses, then says sadly, "I don't know if we can win this thing."

Looking into my eyes, he says, "I think you were right. You should go on by yourself. Ride south a ways, then cut around the army. You should make it with little difficulty. But start quickly." With that, he wheels his horse and heads back into the battle.

If Random decides to head toward the town, turn to section 64.

If he chooses to stay and fight the battle, turn to section 42.

* 54 *

I draw my sword and lunge at him before he has time to recover. He is hit, and he recoils in pain. But he's well trained, this grey man in the grey mail, and he moves quickly to the left and draws his own sword. I have to strike quickly, before he thinks to sound the alarm.

I jump to his left, then brace my legs and throw myself back to the right. Damn! He was expecting it, and now my side is wide open to him. I feel a slash cut through to my ribs, and I feel the warm blood flowing down to my hip.

But I parry his next swing and score with a thrust to his left leg. Stunned, he merely stands there, his mouth open. I lunge, but I'm too slow. Must be the loss of blood. He steps aside, grimacing as he does.

A chance to put him away! I brace myself and take my sword in both hands. Ready to swing, I bend my legs and wait. And then my body gives up. My legs collapse beneath me. I pant. Before I can move, he thrusts clean through me.

Turn to section 28.

* 55 *

I've looked for hours, but Caine is nowhere in sight. My horse is tired and so am I. The darkness is complete.

I don't know what's happening, but the flares—and the flames—from the town are getting brighter and more frequent. Whenever I've ridden close enough to look, the army has increased in size. I feel as if I'm in the middle of some enormous plot, but with no idea of what's supposed to happen. The whole thing is still a big mystery. As if that's not enough, I find it impossible to shake the feeling that something even more important is happening all around me.

Dismounting, I rest as the horse grazes. Something is different than before, something about the place itself. I don't know what it is, but I know it's true. It's almost as if this world, with all its shades of grey, is, well, fading. The approaching dusk should explain it, but it doesn't. More than just the sunlight is going away. I touch the grass beside my leg, and even it feels strange. Slightly, only slightly, insubstantial.

Then I feel something cool against my leg. Instinctively I reach down, attempting to brush it away. But then I feel what it is. The Trumps. They are cool again, the way they're supposed to be. When they're cool, they work.

I draw them out and shuffle for Fiona's. I concentrate. The picture is indistinct, but it definitely exists. She is sleeping, and I see no reason to bother her.

Then I take Corwin's. Nothing. Not even static. Just plain nothing at all. Shuffling again, I reach for Bleys's.

A scream! Terrified and terrifying. But no picture. Only sound, the sound of a man in sheer horror. If I could only figure out where he is . . .

... suddenly a bolt shatters my thoughts. My head whips back, my ears throb with the noise. "Random!" screams Caine's voice from out of nowhere. "Come to me. Now!"

I look straight ahead, and I see the shadowy outlines of a hand, its bloodied fingers extended. For a moment I do nothing, then I see Caine's ring on the middle finger. I reach for the hand, and then I black out.

I awaken to see Caine kneeling beside me. His hand is bandaged heavily, his face a canopy of welts and bruises. With his good hand he is pouring water on my face and down my throat. Suddenly aware, I jump to my feet. We are in a tent.

"What happened to you?" I ask. "And what happened to me?"

"I got in a fight," Caine says. "What does it look like? As for you, well—the Trumps are beginning to work here, but they're a little too dramatic. I don't think the ambiance is quite right."

I sense a strain behind my brother's jokes. "But they work," I say, "for the first time. Why?"

"Something's happened, Random," he says, suddenly solemn. "I'm not sure what—or how—but the land's changing, almost by the minute." He pauses. "I think someone's changed the drawing."

"How?"

"I don't know. But you were near the far town, weren't you?" To my nod he says, "Didn't you notice anything strange? Anything different from the drawing?"

I think for a moment. "People," I reply. "An entire army. I didn't see any people before."

"That's one," Caine responds. "But what else?

What dominated the picture but wasn't in the real scene?"

Again I think. What was it? The hills? No, they were there. The boulders? Not significant enough; they might have been in the drawing. Then it hits me.

"The river!" I shout.

He nods. "Wasn't there, was it?" I shake my head. "Gone," he says. "Somewhere."

"Did you see the flames?" I ask.

"Yes. I was trying to get closer to the town when a couple of sentries caught me. That's why the bruises. One of them damned near chopped off my arm. I jumped away just in time."

For a moment all is quiet. Then I ask, "What now?" "A battle," he replies. "We're going to fight the army."

"But we don't even know why the army is there," I say.

He shrugs. "Probably guarding against us," he says. "I wouldn't know why else. Besides . . .

A pause. Then he looks up, and I see tears in his eves. "My wife's in there, Random. I don't give a damn if there's a million men in that army. I have to get through."

I nod and say nothing.

Turn to section 60.

* 56 *

This is one big mother, and I can't find any handholds. All I can do is jump on the thing and grab with all my strength. If it starts rolling, I can always jump off.

Make a Dexterity roll.

If Random succeeds in jumping onto the rock, turn to section 67.

If Random fails and falls onto the mudhill, turn to section 61.

* 57 *

Tired to the point of exhaustion, I cannot resist the call of my home. I will find the others. Someday. Somehow. For now, I need rest. My heart beating wildly with excitement, I enter the palace where I am king.

The shadows of evening descend upon Amber as I gaze through the window at my people below. I am their king, but I might not be their king for long. Too much has happened since I became their monarch, too much that I simply have not managed carefully. My achievements are small; my failures, many.

Still, I know I must go on, if only for a short while.

The Unicorn chose me for a reason, even if it seems now that I have betrayed her. She saw in me something I do not see in myself. I know I cannot be satisfied until I find out what that is.

But I am tired. My energy is nearly gone. I need a sleep of several days, to heal the wounds that hurt my mind, my body, and my heart. But that sleep is far from coming, because until I finish what I started I know I can never stop.

I will sleep when I have all my brothers beside me. Until that happens, I will not even rest.

I search for the Pattern, but my mind reels in exhaustion. I stare at my Trumps, but a fog seems to pass before my eyes. I call to the skies, but my voice is feeble and hoarse.

I am Random, King of Amber.

I close my eyes.

I sleep.

Turn to section 94.

* 58 *

The rock is huge, and I can't find any handholds. All I can do is jump on the thing and grab with all my strength. If it starts rolling, I can always jump off.

Make a Dexterity roll.

If it succeeds and Random has jumped onto the rock, turn to section 65.

If it fails and Random falls onto the mudhill, turn to section 69.

* 59 *

I draw my sword and lunge at him before he has time to recover. He is hit, and he recoils in pain. But this grey man in the grey mail is well trained, and he moves quickly to the left and draws his own sword. I have to strike quickly, before he thinks to sound the alarm.

Slow, slow, far too slow! My reflexes are dull and sluggish, and he manages to scramble away from me. I chase him for a short while, but common sense overtakes me quickly. I can't possibly catch up with him quietly now, and I want to be as far away as possible when he returns with his friends.

Quickly I sheath my sword and move on.

Turn to section 55.

* 60 *

When I leave the tent, I see, all around me, an entire mounted army. Where Caine got all these people, and how he convinced them to ride with him, I have no idea. I'd be willing to swear that his town's entire population was smaller than this, let alone the military portion. But my brother is agitated, and I see no point in asking.

A strangely dressed lot, this. Most carry spears in their hands and wear swords in their belts, but only about half have shields, and they are of many shapes

and sizes, with many designs, coats of arms, none of which seem to match. Of those who wear armor (about a third), the most common dress is a short tunic of mail, but at least two people stand out in almost full plate. Helms and gauntlets seem entirely a matter of choice, while boots range from socks to hard leather, and barefootedness is not uncommon. If an army was ever a haphazard collection, this is it.

army was ever a haphazard collection, this is it. "They come from all over," Caine offers, apparently sensing my questions. "Some from the hillside town, others from Brand's town, quite a few from towns beyond the hills. They may not know what's going on, but there's a general sense that the world is in danger."

"Towns beyond the hills?" I ask. "I thought the world only went as far as the drawing." "It does," Caine replies. "But the drawing extends

"It does," Caine replies. "But the drawing extends beyond what we immediately see. As near as I can figure out, everything exists that the artist had in mind when he drew the picture. Behind the wall you went through he envisioned nothing. In other spots, he pictured entire towns, even cities. There is, for instance, a city on the other side of the valley town, if you care to ride that far. It's pretty impressive."

I shake my head. "I'm lost. Just when I was beginning to get a handle on this reality thing, too. So the drawing itself isn't the artist's complete notion. Oh, boy."

"Yeah. Pretty much kicks hell out of most theories of art, doesn't it? If we make it back to Amber, maybe I'll write all this down and shock the art world. Of course, who'd believe it?"

"Now," he continues, "let's ride."

At dawn we come over the hills down toward the far town. We stop on the slope overlooking the other army, taking note of its deployment and trying to assess its strength. Caine shouts orders, as do his captains, and from directly behind me I hear the voice of the Calitan. "Carey," I shout, and he smiles in return. I ride back to him.

"How did you get here so fast?" I ask him.

He looks puzzled. "Fast? What do you mean?"

"We left you back in Caine's town. And that was only a short while ago. How did you get here?" "I'm not sure what you are talking about," he says.

"The Escalitan rode back for me three days ago. He said he had been riding in strange lands, shadows of lands he called them, though I don't know what he means. He said he had failed, but that he wished to try something new. I did not ask what he meant, I merely consented to be with him. We arrived here yesterday." "Yesterday? But that means . . ." What it means is

that my hellride took about four days. Once again my world is messed up. Hellrides are supposed to speed things up, not slow them down. But the hellride turned a normal two-day ride into a four-day adven-ture. No wonder the Trumps are having trouble here. "I'm glad you're with us," I say to Carey, and then I

ride back to Caine.

Together we survey the army that faces us. It isn't huge, but it's certainly formidable. Making what seems to be excellent use of its defending terrain, it has anchored both its flanks against the hills to its sides, and most of its front stands half-concealed behind a line of ridges and makeshift barriers. Caltrops dot the ground in front of us, nothing that would stop a skillful rider but more than enough to disrupt a charging army. And I see ropes and wires strung between rocks all along our path, stuff to break our horses' legs and, with them, our necks. This isn't going to be easy.

Caine calls to his Calitan. Carey joins us. "Yours is the left flank, Calitan," my brother says. "Go as quickly as you can, but don't have your entire army falling on its face. Send some men ahead to take out the ropes and wires, then get ready to charge. Wait for me, though. Make sure we coordinate this." Carey nods and rides away.

We watch from the hill as the lead riders head out. The first traps they take out with little trouble, but by the time they hit the second line the arrows begin to fly. Three of our men fall, and at Caine's order three take their place. More fall, more replace them, as trap after trap is dismantled. Finally, as our men take out one of the last lines of wires, the far town launches a sortie. As their riders engulf ours, Caine gives the order to charge. As a man, we ride at a gallop.

It's been a long time since I've known the thrill of battle, but it comes back to me quickly. The wind in my face as I charge toward the enemy, my sword drawn and a cry waiting in my throat, the surge of power as I look beside me at my comrades, the sudden, overwhelming knowledge that what I'm doing is entirely right. It doesn't last long, of course, especially if the guy beside you loses his guts, but while it lasts there's nothing like it.

The sortie has seen us coming. Quickly they turn and try to make it back. Seeing this, our lead menwhat's left of them, anyway-turn on them and begin a pursuit, slowing them so we can catch them. As we do so, our spears fly and bring down some, then our swords hack the rest to bits. My own sword dismembers two of the enemy, and I watch as the remainder of the sortie falls. With victory, as always, comes a rush of excitement.

But then the arrows hit. A man immediately in

front of me falls to the ground, and I barely duck from an arrow in time. Two more men die near me, and as an arrow grazes my left arm I swerve to the right and gallop—stupidly perhaps—across the line of fire. Farther to the right, I think, I will do one of two things. Either I will draw fire from the rest of the troops although it will take more than me to do so—or I will find a way past the arrows and into, and maybe through, the enemy's left side. Caine wants to get past these guys, not just defeat them.

"Random!" I hear Caine's voice shout. "Get back here! Stay in your position!" Looking behind, I see his sword raised in the air as he is about to lead a charge. The temptation to go back is strong, but so is the one to proceed on my own.

If Random returns to Caine, turn to section 53.

If he continues by himself, turn to section 64.

* 61 *

Mud is low on my list of favorite walking surfaces. This stuff's very slippery. Occasionally I manage a foothold, but not very often. Every step I take is an effort, since the mud is deep. Like a cat walking through snow, I put one foot down, then shake the other off before putting it down, and so on. It seems to be taking forever.

After about half an hour of this, I notice I am slowly sliding down the hill. I brace my left foot, the lower one, and try to push myself upward. But the hill is

getting steeper, and even though the end of the mud is only about ten yards away, I don't know if I can make it. My strength is draining.

Make a Strength roll.

If it succeeds, turn to section 75.

If not, turn to section 76.



When I hit, my leg lodges between two rocks and twists badly. I wince as I take off my boot and test my left ankle. It isn't broken, but the bruise is going to be enormous. Replacing my boot, I stand up and walk. It hurts, but I can move. I hope it won't slow me down too much.

The rock lands below, but thankfully no one notices. I'm through and the town lies straight ahead.

Subtract 1 D6+2 from Random's hit point total, then turn to section 75.

* 63 *

I land in the mud, but my ankle twists badly. Grimacing, I take off my boot and soak it in the coldest mud I can find. After several minutes, I stand up and test it. I can walk, but any pressure on my left leg causes a sharp pain.

The rock lands below, but no one notices. Caine's army has drawn them all away.

Subtract 1 D6 from Random's hit point total, then turn to section 61.

* 64 *

Caine's shouts die as I gallop out of range. When I look back again I see the enemy swarming from the ridge, covered by arrow fire, in an impressive charge. Our own army is having trouble with it all, but I have no doubt we will beat this back. Casualties will be fairly high, but we'll manage.

I have not drawn fire. Since nobody followed me, it's hardly surprising. To the enemy, if they see me at all, I must be simply a deserter. Matter of fact, that's what I may be to my own troops as well. People usually think that of people who run from battles.

With the battle still raging behind me, I slow down just enough to leap from the horse. I want him to continue running, just so anyone watching will see

him and not me. Hitting the ground, I roll, stop, and wait. I get to my knees and look around. No one is near me.

Crouching, I run toward the enemy's left side. If our own army keeps them distracted, I should have no trouble getting by. Once I do so I have no idea where to go, but I'll think of something. Caine's wife is in that city somewhere, and he may never get a chance to reach her. I've got that chance, and I don't intend to pass it by.

I half crouch, half crawl to the enemy's side. Now they are even with me, now slightly behind. I am making it past. I keep my eyes to the left, watching for signs of anyone noticing me. So far, nothing. A more casual stroll I've seldom enjoyed.

A few steps at a time, then I crouch. On higher ground I lie down. My progress is slow, but I'm getting there. I'm now on the hills to the army's left. Just a few more steps, and then I can start running.

I leap to my feet and run as quickly as I can. At first the ground is flat and solid, and I make good progress. But within a minute the rocks begin. Little ones, big ones, scattered about me, forcing me to shift my eyes from the enemy line to the ground, making me feel watched and uneasy. And in the shadows of the hills the rocks are hard to negotiate.

Make a Dexterity roll. If it succeeds, continue reading. If it fails, subtract 1 D6+1 hit points and then continue reading.

I've reached an impasse. A huge rock in front of me, and a steep, muddy slope behind me. I don't know if I can climb the rock, and even if I do I have no guarantee the thing won't come loose. If I try the
Sections 65, 66

mud, I could easily slide down, and even though the enemy troops are busy, a few of them might spot me.

If Random tries the rock, turn to section 56.

If he tries the mud, turn to section 61.

* 65 *

I'm on. Now to inch my way to the top. Damn it! This is hard. I'd kill for a good fingerhold.

Make a Strength roll.

If it succeeds and Random reaches the top of the boulder, turn to section 74.

If it fails and Random slides off the boulder into the mud, turn to section 69.

* 66 *

Hell! I missed the tree and landed back on the boulder. Now the goddamned thing is rolling. I've got to jump, but which way. Forward or back? If I go back, I know I'll land in mud. At least it will cushion my fall. Forward, the ground looks harder, rockier, though it is closer to where I'm going. If I live, that is. I'm pretty high up.

Sections 67, 68

Here goes. No foothold. Here's one. No, it's rolling away. Another. Take it and jump.

If Random jumps forward, turn to section 62.

If he jumps back, turn to section 63.

* 67 *

I'm on. Now to inch my way to the top. Damn it! This is hard. I'd kill for a good fingerhold.

Make a Strength roll.

If it succeeds and Random reaches the top of the boulder, turn to section 70.

If it fails and Random slides off the boulder into the mud, turn to section 61.

* 68 *

Hell! I missed the tree and this goddamned thing is rolling right underneath my feet. I've got to jump, but which way? Forward or back? If I go back, I know I'll land in mud. At least it won't kill me. Forward, the ground looks harder, rockier, but I'll be closer to where I want to be. If I live, that is. I'm pretty high up.

Here goes. No foothold. Here's one. No, it's rolling away. Another. Take it and jump.

If Random jumps forward, turn to section 71.

If he jumps back, turn to section 72.

* 69 *

Mud is low on the list of my favorite walking surfaces. This stuff's slippery. Occasionally I manage a foothold, but not very often. For every step forward I take, I seem to slide back two or three. And walking is an effort, since the mud is deep. Finally I try walking like a cat through snow; I put one foot down, then shake the other off before putting it down, and so on. It seems to be taking forever.

After about half an hour of this, I notice I am slowly sliding down the hill. I brace my left foot, the lower one, and try to push myself upward. But the hill is getting steeper, and even though the end of the mud is only about ten yards away, I don't know if I can make it. My strength is draining.

Make a Strength roll. If it succeeds, turn to section 75.

If not, turn to section 78.

Sections 70, 71

* 70 *

Good God! I'm going to have to play Tarzan. The rock is beginning to slide away below me, and the only escape is a tree in the cliff wall above. It's quite a jump, but I have to try it. If this son of a bitch starts rolling, I don't want to be around when it hits bottom. Once on the tree, I know I can make it. The rest of the cliff looks much easier.

Make a Dexterity roll.

If it succeeds and Random manages to grab the tree, turn to section 73.

If it fails and he misses and lands back on the boulder, turn to section 66.

* 71 *

When I hit, my leg lodges between two rocks and twists badly. I wince as I take off my boot and test my left ankle. It isn't broken, but the bruise is going to be enormous. Replacing my boot, I stand up and walk. It hurts, but I can move. I hope I'm not slowed down too much.

The rock lands below, but no one notices. I'm through. The town lies straight ahead.

Sections 72, 73

Subtract 1 D6+2 from Random's hit point total, then turn to section 75.

* 72 *

I land in the mud, but my ankle twists badly. Grimacing, I take off my boot and soak it in the coldest mud I can find. After several minutes, I stand up and test it. I can walk, but any pressure on my left leg causes a sharp pain.

The rock lands below, but no one notices. Caine's army has drawn them all out.

Subtract 1 D6 from Random's hit point total, then turn to section 69.

* 73 *

Clutching the branch of the tree, I swing myself up onto it. There I rest for a moment, getting my breath and surveying the land around me. The mud is practically behind me now, while ahead stretches fields and grasslands. Several miles ahead, they look like easily traversed miles at that, and I can see the first buildings of the town.

Working my way slowly to the ground, I find the footholds I need to get myself through the last few yards of mud.

Turn to section 75.



* 74 *

Good God! I'm going to have to play Tarzan. The rock is sliding away below me, and the only escape is a tree in the cliff wall above. It's quite a jump, but I have to try it. This son of a bitch is starting to roll and I don't want to be around when it hits bottom. Once on the tree, I know I can make it. The rest of the cliff looks much easier.

Make a Dexterity roll.

If Random succeeds in leaping and grabbing the tree, turn to section 73.

If Random fails and lands back on the boulder, turn to section 68.

* 75 *

I rest awhile before brushing the mud off my clothes and resuming my journey. The far town—for so I have come to call it—is without a doubt the strangest of all the towns in the drawing. At first indistinguishable, its features now display a kind of asymmetry that is both disorienting and, I would think, unsafe. It almost looks like an entire city built of leaning towers of Pisa.

As I walk the streets, looking first at my feet and

then at the outline of the buildings against the sky, I begin to feel dizzy. I decide it is far better to concentrate on either the ground or the sky, and not try to do both, so I lower my eyes and watch my feet only. The streets are cobbled, wide, and sparklingly clean.

So clean, in fact, that they don't look real at all. But then, by now I'm used to things not looking real. I walk a grey world under a grey sun, among greyskinned people with grey eyes. I have seen time that makes no sense and distance that refuses to pass as I walk it. And I have found that my Trumps—those strange cards I use to judge certainty—are suddenly as uncertain as everything else. If this is reality, I want to go home.

But I can't. Not yet, anyway. Even if I wanted to, I have something far too important to do. Caine's wife is in this town, and even though I don't know her I know I must find her. She is, after all, my sister-inlaw, even if outside this world the "in-law" part fails to apply. How legal can a marriage be when the entire world seems outside normal laws?

Another thing occurs to me. Why did Caine marry this woman? For love? Okay, I can handle that. But since the reason for marriage in a royal house is to create heirs, love must always be pushed into the background, at least to an extent. Does Caine honestly believe he and this grey woman, a woman in a drawing, can reproduce? The people I've seen here *seem* flesh-and-blood, but even the best-looking women I've had no desire for. They just don't seem real.

Maybe I just can't stand colorlessness. Or maybe my concrete personality is showing through again.

Maybe I'm simply right.

But she's here, and I have to find her. I don't know where Caine is right now, but the streets are so quiet

that I can't imagine him being in the town. But then I think of the guards lining the entrance to the town and I wonder why everything is as quiet as it is. Don't these people know their troops are waiting for an attack of some kind?

A group of women walk far in front of me, two of them carrying babies. The women are talking, laughing, even giggling, acting as if all is normal. I get closer to them and look as closely as I can. I see no tension in their faces, no signs I have seen so often of women whose men are at war. Two boys throw a ball on a lawn to my left, while to my right a small girl chases a cat toward a house. Normality is rampant.

And then a scream. The women in front of me scatter, clutching the babies but dropping all else. The boys' ball bounces at my feet, and the little girl falls to the grass and hides her sobbing eyes. I hear people hammering on doors, the doors opening and slamming, and yells from the streets behind and around the houses.

Is it me they're running from? I dash to the fallen girl, to see first if I can comfort her and second if I'm the cause of her fright. She lets me hug her, sniffling into my shoulder, as over and over she sobs in terror, "Keep him away from me. Please keep him away. Please. Please. Please." I hold her to me until I feel her terror begin to melt away.

But then everything stops. The women stop running, the boy drops to the ground. Even the cat seems frozen in the moment. What little breeze there was is now gone. I set the now stiff girl away from me and stand in the middle of the street, unmoving, staring in awe at the grey tableau before me. It looks, for all purposes, like a drawing.

Out of that scene, from the top left corner, marching with the intent borne only by a leader, comes a

black figure. He is tall, graceful, self-consumed, and as he approaches the middle of the drawing he stops and looks to his right and his left. Then he resumes his march, and I see it leads straight toward me.

As he draws closer, I study his features. He is dressed in black: black Renaissance-style hat, blackadorned cape, black boots, black shirt, black pants. Lousy taste, I think as he approaches, all those blacks go poorly together. But there is something commanding about the man, something that makes me stand up as tall as I can just so that he seems less far above me. I am frightened, but I refuse to show that fear to him.

His beard, thick and long, struggles to shake off the grey and become red. Long thick hair drops from beneath the cap, and it too is only a reluctant grey. More and more, as the figure closes on me, I feel I know him. I do not recognize the black, and I do not recognize his height, but his hair, beard, and now his eyes seem to call to me across the impossibility of this great grey scene. A sword, elaborate and almost gold, hangs at his side, and this too I think I know.

And then I see his rings. Enormous rings, two on his right hand and one on his left. Each fights against the grey for color, and together they almost seem to win. I reach into my tunic and draw out my Trumps. Shuffling, I find the one I want. The hair, the beard, the sword, the rings: they're all there. I do not recognize the face, nor are the clothes right, but the rest holds. Suddenly the man smiles, and the crooked face confirms it all.

Bleys.

My hand reaches for the hilt of my sword. He stops. I drop my hand to my side. He comes closer. Again the hilt; again he stops. When I let go of the sword, he approaches once more. I don't understand, and I'm not sure I want to.



The women and children in the frozen tableau stare first at me and then at him. They seem to be watching us, as if from outside, as if we and not they were part of the picture. As if we were subjects, and they were spectators.

Maybe that's the way it is. Finally he stops. "Your Majesty," he calls. "I have come for you. Follow me. I think you'll learn a lot." He smiles his crooked smile once again. His eyes sparkle with irony and deviltry. "First," I call out. "Tell me what you're doing here.

And where is Caine's wife?"

Bleys laughs. For an instant I want to kill him.

"Here I am the first servant of the king, as I never was back in Amber," he says. "Almost his equal, actually. And I'm going to take you to him. As for Caine's wife, she's fine. Perfectly safe."

"Where is she, then?"

"In the king's house. She doesn't get around a lot." He breaks into laughter. I look at him uncertainly.

I hesitate. "Why should I come with you?"

Blevs sighs. "Because, brother Random, you stand to learn a great deal. The king does not need you to complete his tasks, but he could certainly use you. You are the King of Amber, and this whole thing has much to do with Amber. That's reason enough for coming with me."

"Maybe," I reply. "Assuming I give a damn." This sounds hollow, and he knows it. He shakes his head. "No good, Random," he says. "The only reason you're here is to help Amber. The king and I have watched your work here, and both of us are impressed. But we want you to see more. We want you to know just how deep in this thing Amber really is. We want to show you the connection between Amber and all these drawings you've been running across. We can explain it all, Random, but we can't do it here. You

have to come with us, into the king's house and then beyond."

"Beyond? Where?" I am stalling, and Bleys knows it.

"Choose, Random. I don't have all day. Your precious Amber is in danger. It may not be around much longer."

One last question. "At whose bidding?" I ask. "Who is trying to destroy it?"

"I don't know," Bleys replies. "But the king might. Now, are you coming, or aren't you?"

Write "Bleys" in the Special Events box of the character record.

If Random follows Bleys, turn to section 80.

If he turns away, trying to find his own way to Caine's wife, turn to section 82.

* 76 *

I'm sliding. Nothing I can do about it. I fall to my stomach. Grab the stuff with my hands. It doesn't work. I keep sliding, and my fingers ache.

Below me stands a single soldier. He hasn't seen me yet, but I'm sliding right toward him. With all my strength, I try to force myself sideways, closer to the mud's end, out of his reach. I might be able to beat him in a fight, but I'm tired and I'd rather not chance it.

I'm moving, but not fast enough. I'm sliding harder, faster. And my hands and feet are dislodging hunks of mud that fall ahead of me. He can't miss me now.

I drop practically on top of him. Summoning my strength, I draw my sword and prepare to strike. His hand is on his own sword, and he draws it swiftly.

Use the combat rules to determine the winner. The enemy soldier will fight to the death.

SOLDIER

To hit Random: 10 To be hit: 11 Hit points: 14 Damage with sword: 2 D6-2

If Random wins, turn to section 79.

If not, turn to section 77.

* 77 *

Goddamn this mud! I can't get a proper footing, and every time I try to steady myself I fall to my knees.

In the meantime, my opponent swings his sword hard, and it's everything I can do to counter it. He's not the greatest swordsman I've ever faced, but he doesn't have to be. I'm not even able to stand up to fight him.

I feel blood on my left arm, but this is no time to look. Waving his sword high above his head, the soldier steps toward me and prepares to strike. I raise my sword to parry.

But just as he begins his swing, my feet slip out from under me. My arms drop to the ground. As I begin to slide, I feel the steel of his blade slice through the arteries in my neck.

Turn to section 28.

I'm sliding. Nothing I can do about it. I fall to my stomach. Grab the stuff with my hands. It doesn't work. I keep sliding, and my fingers ache.

Below me stand what looks like an entire squad. They haven't seen me yet, but I'm sliding right toward them. With all my strength, I try to force myself sideways, closer to the mud's end, out of their reach. If it works, I might have a chance to run.

I'm moving, but not fast enough. I'm sliding harder, faster. And my hands and feet are dislodging hunks of mud that fall ahead of me. They can't miss me now.

A shout. I look below. The men are surprised, but they are organizing. Waiting to catch me. Their swords drawn. No way to stop myself now.

Clawing the mud with my left hand, I reach for my Trumps with the other. Most I scatter into the mud, until I find the one I want. Fiona. Concentrating hard, putting from my mind the reaching hands of the men now inches away, I call my sister.

Turn to section 29.

* 79 *

The soldier is braced to face me. But after my slide in the mud, I am having trouble getting a foothold. Then, suddenly, I do. Only a yard from his blade, my feet strike something solid, and I use my momentum

to stand and leap over him. Once behind him, I brace myself and prepare to fight.

He isn't very good at this. A quick parry and two quick thrusts on my part, and it's all over. If his remaining alive weren't so dangerous, I wouldn't kill him, but here I really have no choice. Even dead, though, he's dangerous, so I bury his body beneath the mud where it won't be found.

Well, where to now? Toward the town lie treacherous rocks, sharp and wild. The only other way out is to climb back up the hill.

If Random chooses to climb up the hill, turn to section 96.

If he tries to get by the rocks on the way to the town, turn to section 95.

* 80 *

For several minutes we stare at one another, our eyes boring into each other's searching out an answer. Finally I speak. "I'll come," I say, and Bleys walks to me and grasps my hand.

"I knew you would," Bleys says, almost in a whisper. "It's the only way."

"No," I reply, shaking my head. "It's not the only way. It's only one way. But I think it's the fastest." Bleys only smiles.

Through the streets of this weird, small town we walk, and always when we approach we hear screams and running feet. But whenever we come upon a scene it is frozen, a grey still-life replete with figures frozen in terror. First, near a church, a group of old people lie motionless on the ground, hiding their eyes in their hands. Next, a schoolyard shows a host of children pressing their hands and faces flat against the school wall. Finally, a door left open looks into a small house on a family—three teenaged youths and their mother —huddling together on the floor of the kitchen, the grey faces of all three youths frozen with the look of the adolescent trying to avoid crying. After this third, I watch no longer.

die.

"What is it, Bleys?" I ask at last. "What's going on here?" He does not answer, and I decide to press. "Why are all these people terrified of you? And how do you freeze the scene?" A ridiculous-sounding question, that last, as if I were an interviewer and he the artist. But I have to know.

"It doesn't matter," my brother replies.

"That's not true," I counter. "And you know it. I'm expected to go walking through what seems to be a normal town, as normal as anything here, that is, and not notice that you're cutting a swath of horror as you walk. You never did that in Amber, and you never reported it in any of your other Shadows." I pause. "Besides, I don't like it. These people don't deserve this. What have they done?"

"Oh, come off it, Random," Bleys says, and for the first time I hear the voice I remember as being his. "You're a king, for God's sake. You know all about this kind of stuff."

"What kind of stuff?" I ask. "Nobody's ever fallen into a deep, scary sleep just because I happened to be on their street."

Bleys pauses, then nods. "We just do it differently here, that's all. These people have a more elaborate sense of servitude."

Or slavery, I think, but I don't say it. I want to press

the issue, but Bleys is becoming annoyed and I'll have to be careful. He tends to stop talking if things aren't going his way.

"Okay," I respond. "I can handle that, even if I don't like it. But explain something else to me. When it happens, the whole scene appears to freeze. Almost like a drawing. Why?"

Bleys hesitates a moment, then says, "Because it *is* a drawing, Random." He looks at me, his face filled with honest surprise. "Haven't you figured that out yet?"

I shake my head. Suddenly I feel stupid, inadequate. As if I've been on the wrong path all along. "You've entered a drawing, brother," Bleys contin-

"You've entered a drawing, brother," Bleys continues. "That's all this is. It's not alive, no more real than any other drawing you've ever seen. There's no color to it, because the artist didn't conceive it in color. Sometimes I go nuts looking at all this grey, and I wonder why Dworkin didn't pick a painting, instead of a drawing, to put us into. One with lots of color. Anything but this.

Dworkin! He's behind all this? It stands to reason, of course. The person who drew the Trumps would be interested in other, more elaborate drawings. I decide not to say anything. Bleys seems in the mood to talk.

"But he didn't, and here we are. We all came here of our own free will, but we're certainly not going to leave that way. So we might as well make the best of it. Me, I like to be in power. I've done that on every Shadow I've ever visited, and I'll continue to do it as long as I can. I'm only second-in-command here, but it's enough. In fact, it's better than being king. Kings have too many little things to worry about." He looks at me. "As you know."

"Bleys," I say, "I can't tell you how little I understand of what you've just said." I decide to open up. "First of all, what does Dworkin have to do with everything? Second of all, what do you mean, we can't leave? And third of all, but probably not last, who's vour king?"

Bleys suddenly laughs. "You really don't know what's happening, do you?" I shake my head, and he laughs again. "Oh, well," he continues, "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. You just got here. Still, I thought Brand would have told you."

"How many of us have you met?"

I tell him.

"Julian, You know about Gérard, Eric's dead, Me. Brand. You're vou. Caine. That's seven of us. Nobody can find Corwin. At least, not when I left. That's eight. There's only one left, Random, only one of the nine princes of Amber. And he's been king before. A little place called Avalon."

"Benedict."

"Of course," Bleys says. "Who do you think? Who else would want to be a king?"

"Brand would," I reply.

"Not really," says Bleys. "He just wants power. Benedict likes all the monarch stuff. You know how he is."

"Of course," I say. "But what about Dworkin?" "Oh, him," Bleys replies. "He's just trying to take over Amber. Him and Llewella. I thought you knew that "

I almost drop to my knees.

"Llewella?" I ask.

"Sure," he replies. "You mean you didn't know?" "Uh, no. I must have missed that." The look on my

face is obviously funny, since Bleys laughs out loud. "Random, Random, Random," he says at last. "Most of us think you're a good king. We really do.

We like having you on the throne, and we hope you

stay there as long as we live. You leave us free to do pretty much what we want, and you never pull the heavy ruler stuff that Benedict or Brand would have. Even Corwin thought you were a good choice.

"But you've got a fair bit to learn. For one thing, we think you should get us together more often, just to discuss how Amber is faring. A little like a committee, with all of us agreeing that you're in charge. For another, Llewella has been after your throne ever since you took it. But our sister is fairly smart. She knows we wouldn't approve of her coup, just as we wouldn't approve of having one of the girls on the throne. So she went to Dworkin for help."

"Why Dworkin?" I interrupt.

"Why not?" Bleys asks in reply. "He doesn't particularly like any of us. And, besides, for him it's a challenge. He's gone all his life creating great works of art, things that really do effect the reality of things, and this gave him an opportunity to design something truly dramatic.

"His idea, as far as I can tell, was to trap us inside some of his pictures. All of us. That way, we wouldn't even be around to oppose Llewella. She wouldn't even need to bloody up her coup."

I pause for a moment, then ask, "What does he get out of it? Aside from the challenge, I mean."

"If it comes to that, I don't think he needs anything else. But I don't know what Llewella promised him. Something pretty silly, I imagine. Maybe even herself."

I laugh. "Oh, come on now," I say. "Dworkin?" Bleys looks at me. "Random," he says, "you really do have a lot to learn." I can feel myself blushing as we continue our walk down the road.

Turn to section 83.

* 81 *

We ascend the stairs and enter the room. It is dark totally so. I hear Benedict behind me, telling Bleys to light the lamps. A shuffle of feet, and a pale light paints the room.

After a few seconds, my eyes adjust. A large support beam comes into focus directly in front of me, and behind it I see some kind of shape. Against the far wall is a picture, but I cannot make out its details.

Benedict taps my shoulder.

"I'm going to leave you here, Random, to sort this out for yourself. We've done all we can, and I don't think we can be of any help. Bleys will wait below. I'll be in my offices. Call if you need anything."

For some reason, this startles me. "I'm not sure I want to be here by myself," I say. "Is it necessary?" It has seemed so abrupt.

"Probably," Benedict replies. "If not necessary, at least it's convenient. I've got a lot to do. In case you didn't notice, we're about to go under siege. I'd like to be there when it happens."

"Fine," I reply. "But leave Bleys here. I may need him."

My two brothers exchange looks. Finally Bleys speaks. "Look, Random," he says, "this isn't my favorite place. I don't like the looks of that statue, and the drawing terrifies me. Besides, the priest's translation asked for the king, not for me. Maybe it has to be *only* the king."

Or maybe, I think to myself, this is only an elaborate trap. They seem so anxious to leave me here, and

without even so much as an orientation. My kingly paranoia bristles my neck. I take a quick look around, knowing I must decide immediately.

If Random decides to stay, turn to section 85.

If he decides to try to escape, turn to section 89.

* 82 *

I turn and run. Bleys does not follow. Whatever I was supposed to do for him must depend on my total willingness. I'm just not willing to do what he wants.

willingness. I'm just not willing to do what he wants. But now I am alone, unfriended, wandering through a town I know nothing about. Its greyness is stifling, and the people unwavering in their dedication to continuing their life as they feel they must. Nothing changes here. Ever. The people are as colorless as the town.

The weather grows cold that night, and I seek refuge in one of the small grey houses. Approaching one chosen at random, I knock on the wooden door and wait for an answer. A woman answers, and her eyes scream at the sight of me. I speak, explaining why I am here, but immediately I know that she does not understand. But she motions me inside, and huddled in another room I see her husband and two small children. All are grey, and all are afraid.

Then the husband nods at his wife, and the woman takes me by the hand and leads me to their bedroom. She unfastens the grey robe that drapes around her body, and when it falls to the floor it reveals a body both beautiful and grey. For a moment I want her, but then I think of her family below, and of the terror in their eyes, and I lift the robe off the floor and tie it back around her. I smile at her, and she weakly smiles back.

On the second day of my wanderings, Caine attacks. In the town, nothing changes, not until the first band of defenders flees, streaming back among the buildings. Then the grey monotony turns to a grey fear, and everyone stops and listens. More grey men stumble back, the terror in their eyes telling me all I need to know about the progress of the war.

And then the smoke comes. Clouds of it drift in from the battlefield, obscuring the town and burning my eyes. Mercilessly it comes, surrounding everything, breaking down the town and its order. Suddenly I am lost, standing in smoke, and I realize all the townspeople are lost as well. I hear screams from all around me.

I am choking. My eyes sting. The town is on fire. I take out my Trumps and shuffle until I find Fiona's. Concentrating through my coughs, spitting out the blackness that settles in my mouth, I manage at last to make contact. Reaching for Fiona's hand, I feel the grey world slip quickly away.

Turn to section 29.

* 83 *

Benedict joins us in his palace, and I'll admit that my heart warms a little just to see another familiar face. He and Bleys lead me from the throne room up many long flights of grey-stone stairs into the top level of

their tower. Above us is yet another passageway, and Benedict promises me that the room beyond will be dark and frightening, but for now I am in awe of the view I have from where we stand. Through the windows from this height I look down on the town and its surrounding lands. Even in grey, the sight is stunning.

Caine's hillside town lies far in the distance, barely visible. Smoke from the buildings, chimney smoke I presume, is all I can make out, but down the long road to the valley there comes an army, an entire host of horses and riders, and their horses throw dust as they approach. Brand's valley town is lost amid the countless rolling hills, though from that direction too issues a long line of figures, most of these on foot. To their right—the south, I guess, but direction has no meaning here—comes still another line of marchers, and smaller lines appear in scattered areas. From this distance I can't tell who is who or what the differences are, but they have at least one thing in common. They are all marching this way.

Then I look down and I see the defending army. It rings the town, and it is dug in hard. There is no battle before the town now, but a couple miles away Caine's soldiers rest, apparently awaiting reinforcements. Straining, I can see Caine himself, alive and fully in command. A smile crosses my face.

I turn to the rear windows and look through them. Below me, the town goes on as always, encircling this tower and yielding its shades of grey. And before the town the defenders wait. But then I look farther out, and once again I am filled with awe. This time, though, the awe is mixed with disbelief, with vertigo, with horror.

Once past the town, the scene ceases to exist.

Ceases. Stops. Doesn't happen anymore. Is gone. Becomes void. Nothingness. Any of those words, maybe all of them. There's simply nothing there. Nothing at all. Not even plain blank space.

I stare for several minutes. Then I feel a hand on my shoulder. Turning, I see Benedict looking straight into my eyes.

"Strange, isn't it?" he says. I nod. "I suppose you'd like to know what's going on." I nod again. "Okay," he says. "Sit down."

I sit on a tall wooden chair. Bleys brings me an ornate grey cup filled with clear wine. I drink.

"Why does everything just stop?" I ask. "I can see past the town, where the army is, but that's it. It just stops."

"That's true," Benedict replies. "There's nothing beyond that."

I think for a moment. "What would happen if I left the town and walked into that void? Would I disappear?"

Rising, Benedict scratches his head. "I've thought about that a lot," he says. "Nobody knows, because nobody's tried it. As far as we know, that is. But what I think would happen is this: You simply couldn't do it. The void isn't really void. It's just nothing. Absolutely nothing. It's not even there. You couldn't get there because that space doesn't exist. You'd just stop where it began."

"A barrier, you mean?"

"I don't think so. I mean, a barrier is at least something. What I mean is—at least I think this is what I mean—is that you couldn't physically go there because there is nothing physical about the place. Actually, there's no *place* at all. It isn't. Pure and simple. You would be performing a self-contradictory action. A equals Not-A. That kind of thing. It just isn't possible. The other possibility is that you would cease to exist. That you would not ever have existed,

and that all memory of you would be wiped out. That way, we wouldn't know if you'd tried it or not."

I nod. "Then why do you have troops there?" "Oh, that," Benedict says. "They're guarding against the future."

"I don't understand," I say, shaking my head. "What does time have to do with all of this?" "Okay," replies Benedict. "Sit tight for a minute,

and let me try to explain. This is all from my own brain, mind you, so it's hardly infallible, but I think it works.

"We are inside a drawing. A piece of visual art. Now, the normal theory behind works of art is that they are spatial, not temporal. They depict space, but not time. If anything, in fact, they are praised for freezing time. For capturing forever a moment in time. 'The Last Supper.' Keats's 'Grecian Urn.' All the famous ones. 'Mona Lisa.' The many 'Madonna and Child' paintings.

"But what if that's not true. What if, instead of freezing *time*, they freeze *space*, and let time continue. Achilles's shield, in the *Iliad*—you must have read that on Shadow Earth—shows a great number of scenes, and all of them are being played out. They're moving around. They have a past and a future, even though spatially they're frozen. That's what I think is happening here. We're inside this drawing, but there's all kinds of things happening here with us. We're moving around, and so are Caine's armies, and so are all the people. The overall space is frozen, but time continues."

"Terrific," I say. "How the hell does that answer my question? The one about defending out the back here?"

"I was coming to that," Benedict replies. "Simply put, I'm worried about the picture itself changing. My

idea is that someone, outside the picture, might look at it and alter it. Give it more space, more room, a little shot of expansion. I'm worried about the void out back turning into real space. If what I'm saying is true, that space is frozen but not time, then someone, given unlimited *time*, is going to be able to unfreeze the *space*. Move beyond the borders. That's what art viewers do all the time. You look at a work of art and imagine what's going on in the spaces that *don't* exist. A good piece of work forces you to do that.

"I have a feeling that Llewella and Dworkin are out there right now, trying to expand the geography in this drawing. If they succeed, this town is history. Unless we guard that entrance."

"I don't understand," I say. "If that's the case, why doesn't Dworkin just redraw it?"

"He can't. It's not his drawing. He copied it. As a spectator, he can revise it. Personally. But he can't change the original. Even if we're only inside an imitation of the original."

"But how can he change it at all?" I ask.

Benedict pauses a moment. "Dworkin and Llewella are pretty powerful, Random. They aren't like the typical tourist couple at the Louvre. They won't just look at the drawing and say, 'Nice, that,' and walk to the next. They'll concentrate on it until they get it changed. They have enough power to do that. I'm sure of it."

"But why?" I almost shout. "Why do they want to take this town? What's so special about it? They've already got us trapped in here, don't they?"

For a long minute, Benedict is silent. Bleys moves to fill up my cup, and I sip the chill wine as I wait for Benedict's reply. Finally he raises his head, stares through my eyes, and points his right hand toward the ceiling.

"The answer," he begins, "is through there. Through that passageway in the ceiling. The one thing Dworkin didn't count on, the only thing that can save us, is a way to escape. In that room are two works of art. One of them is an elaborate drawing that neither Bleys nor I can figure out. The other is Caine's wife."

My cup stops halfway to my lips. "Caine's wife?" I manage to blurt out. "A work of art." "Yes," says Benedict. "Our brother has fallen in love with a work of art. It's not unusual. It happens all the time. People just don't usually marry them, that's all. Caine did. In a bizarre ceremony. Now he wants to take her away."

"He was here, then?"

"Sure. A long time ago. But we knew even then that she meant something special to us, that we had to keep her here. So we insisted on it. We also insisted that he stay, too. But he wouldn't. Had to get back to his own town and be Escalitan. So we threw him out and set a guard. He tried to come back, but we wouldn't let him. This time, he's got an army with him."

"Why haven't you escaped?" I ask. "You know how, don't you?"

"No. We know the materials we need, but not how to use them. We tried everything. Spent days at a time up there, trying to figure it out. Finally we asked one of the locals. A priest. He came with us, looked at the artwork, and found an ancient transcription, buried in the drawing itself. 'Only the king can enter,' he translated, and when pressed he could say no more. So I tried to enter, but still nothing happened. That's when I thought of you."

"Why? You're the king here, aren't you?" Benedict smiles. "I am a king in a Shadow, Random. You are the King of Amber. You are much closer than I am to true kingship. If any king can make it

into that picture, you can. If you don't, everything's lost. We're trapped."

I put my cup on the floor and bury my face in my hands. I am tired, and I need sleep. But then I rise and look out across the plain, and I see the armies marching toward us, growing closer and closer with each minute, and I realize I have very little time. I'm not sure I believe that being King of Amber is going to help me here, but I have no choice but to try. Looking at my brother, whose face looks old with its wrinkles of worry, I nod and point toward the passageway. He smiles and, taking my hand, helps me to my feet.

Turn to section 81.

* 84 *

Too strong. Far, far, far, far too strong.

I cannot resist. I cannot escape. Rooted in place, bound by an unseen force, the fury of the white light burns me where I stand.

Turn to section 28.

* 85 *

Benedict and Bleys have gone. I am alone in this dimly lighted room, suddenly afraid of everything around me. I look at the support beam, and I wonder if it will hold. I glance at each wall, expecting an attack—human or animal—from all directions. And I

see again the shape in front of me and the drawing on the wall, and I wonder what new terrors I will find there.

I feel like a fool, scared, lonely, tired, and lost. I do not feel like a king at all. Least of all like the King of Amber.

All right, Random. Forward. Face your future. Deal your destiny. Show courage, determination, conviction.

Screw it. I'm too scared.

But I go anyway. Too stupid perhaps to stay where I am, I take a few steps toward the figure, then I stop again. A few more steps and another pause. Even at this slow pace, though, I cover the distance in only a few minutes. I take one last step, and the statue is suddenly bathed in light.

Caine's wife. A statue as lifelike as possible. Grey, to be sure, but the grey is brilliant. Piercing. Lifelike, if grey can be lifelike. In this world, it is.

Caine's wife. Beautiful beyond words. If he worships her, I understand why. There are statues worthy of worship, and this is surely one.

I walk around her. She stands resting on her left leg, in the classic pose, her arms reaching out toward . . . something. She wears a robe, one shoulder strap dropped to nearly reveal one breast. One leg shows through the slit on the left side of the robe, and the foot on each leg bears a sandal. Bracelets adorn her wrists, and a necklace of grey pearls rests on her neck. Long hair drifts across her shoulders. Her face is perfect.

And then I look in her eyes, and in that moment my world changes. Her eyes are blank, but they grab my own eyes and bore their way into them. For a second I struggle, trying to close my eyes and break from her stare, but after that second I abandon the attempt.

Now I know I would not look away even if I could. Her eyes are too haunting, too enchanting, too perfectly beautiful. They are truth, a truth from which I know I can never hide.

And now they plead, plead for me to join them, plead for me to enter her body through those eyes and place myself forever at their mercy. They plead for my love, my help, my lust, my heart, my life, my self, my soul, they plead for release and they plead for my capture. To the white space behind my eyes they reach, tearing without mercy at the fabric of my brain, and in the sheer joy of that moment I feel myself beginning my final surrender.

But no! I cannot. There is Caine to consider. And Bleys and Benedict. And Corwin. And Brand, Gérard, Julian, Fiona, Flora, Llewella. Llewella! Yes. And Dworkin. Llewella and Dworkin. They're trying to take over Amber. My Amber. The Amber I love. The Amber I love more than this woman!

Amber, Amber, Amber, Amber, Amber.

Break it off, Random! Break it off! You can't let her take you! You can't. If you do, it's over. If you do, Amber is finished. Break it off, damn it! Break it off now!

Make a Wisdom roll.

If it succeeds, turn to section 86.

If not, turn to section 88.

* 86 *

With one last burst of defiance, one last awareness of self, I summon the strength to concentrate. I am still staring at the eyes, but I force myself to think of other things. My brothers and sisters. The Unicorn. And Amber. Above all, Amber.

It works. Slowly I begin to extricate myself from that binding stare. Second by second it grows weaker, returning to me portion after portion of myself. My head begins to ache under the strain, a throb starting in the middle of my forehead, but I realize now I am going to win. Soon the strain fades, and at last I know I am free.

Caine, good brother. What have you done?

I walk around the statue to its back. Exhausted, I slump to the floor, and my eyes close of their own will. I begin to drift off, my head spinning and throbbing, and I dream I feel a hand rest itself on my shoulder. Then the hand begins to stroke my arm, and another moves to my neck and rubs the knots out of my muscles. I relax, and my sleep is deep.

I am being shaken awake. I jump up and back up toward the wall. Into the light walks a woman, her robe falling to the floor, one shoulder strap fallen across her arm. She holds her hand out toward me and drops to one knee.

"I am sorry, Your Majesty," she says. "I did not want to wake you. But there is not much time."

I can only stare. Her beauty is overwhelming.

"We have much to do," she says, "but first I wish to thank you. You have freed me."



"I see that," I say. "But how?"

"By resisting," she says. "It has never happened before."

"How many have tried?"

"Many. Everyone here. But none have managed."

"Everyone? Bleys? Benedict? Those two?"

She nods. "Yes. Benedict especially was determined. But he too could not last. He was king only in name."

"You mean I'm not?" I ask, trying to bait her.

Smiling, she shakes her head. "No," she says. "You are Random, King of Amber. The choice of the Unicorn. You are the real king."

For a moment I pause. "I suppose," I say at last. "But what about Caine?"

"My husband? He brought me here, from his own town. We came to visit, to establish trade, to play the true role of rulers. But one night I could not sleep, and I wandered about the palace. Stupidly I ventured up here, even though I knew I was not supposed to. There was a drawing. I stared at it. It captured me. It imprisoned me as a statue. The one you saw."

I hesitate. "Why didn't it just draw you in? The way it usually does?"

"I don't know what you mean," she says.

I shake my head. "It's not important." It is, actually, but she seems to be telling the truth. Maybe it's got something to do with the fact that she's from inside a picture to begin with. Those inside, I suspect, can't come out. So the picture made her into a work of art instead. A statue, because a drawing has only two dimensions.

"You said there isn't much time," I say. "What do you mean?"

The woman looks at me, her grey eyes almost as piercing now as they were when she was a statue. "I am worried about Caine," she says. "If he comes here with his army, I am certain he will die. I will do anything to ensure that does not happen." She closes her eyes and lowers her head.

"But how do you know what I have to do?" I ask.

Again she looks at me. "I know you must do something with that picture. The one on the wall. I don't know why you must, but I know that you must. While I was a statue, I was still able to hear. Benedict, when he visited the room, would often mention the drawing. He would say that he wished he could do something. But he could not. He was not strong enough. Only the king is strong enough."

I have to admit, I'm getting a little tired of this "only the king" bit. I realize that sort of thing happens in legends, and fairy tales, but it doesn't in real life. Then again, neither does getting chosen by a unicorn. Sometimes I don't know what to think.

I turn to her. "Do you know what happens if I succeed?"

"No," she says, and then she smiles. "All I know is that you will be able to return Caine to me. That is all I care about."

I shake my head. "I'm not sure about that. If I get through this drawing, I have a feeling all of us will leave with it. Even Caine."

Her brows furrow. "No!" she almost shouts. "That cannot be. He will not leave me here."

I nod. "No, he won't," I say. "If he has a choice. But the whole thing may just be automatic. As soon as I break this thing open." What I don't tell her is my other belief: If I succeed, she will likely cease to exist.

And now I turn to the drawing. I walk up to it and stand a few feet away. It is not large, and I draw closer. Finally I see it all, in as much detail as possible. But all the detail in the world, I quickly discover, is not going to be of much help. The drawing is stranger, by far, than any of the others.

The drawing is of a young man, who is in the bottom left corner, standing in an art gallery looking at the art. Drawings are lined along the wall, and in front of this man is another man, who walks from print to print also studying each print. But one of the drawings, the one the first man is staring at, has lost its sense of boundary. The frame, nearly straight at the left side of the picture, expands at the top and distorts at the bottom, until the picture within that frame spills out into the rest of the picture and creates, in effect, another level of the gallery. So heavy is it that the gallery's beams sag under the weight, as the town within that picture threatens to flow from the drawing he is viewing into the one we are viewing. And in one building within the town, in fact inside the building that has most nearly spilled out of the picture, a woman stares out the window straight at the man. The pictures merge, as the distinction between viewer and viewee begins to disappear.

And the drawing has begun to draw me inside. I can feel it begin to happen, and I try to turn my head to stop the assault. But I'm still groggy from the strain of resisting the statue, and I do not know if I have the strength. For a time, I know, I am safe. The drawing is still reaching out, still asserting its hold on me. For a few minutes, I can look at what is before me.

The town itself does not seem to matter. Early European it looks, perhaps Renaissance, perhaps a little later. What matters, I suddenly realize, is the woman staring out the window, and maybe even the building she's in. The building is on the verge of becoming one with the viewer's world, and just as the gallery the man is standing in is now grabbing me. If I get pulled inside the print gallery, and the print gallery pulls the town inside it, then I will be part of the town. And since the town is only a picture *within* a picture, and since I am already inside a picture, I will
then be four levels removed from the reality of Amber. At least, I think that's how it works.

But then I see another face, a man's, this time from the window that adjoins the woman's window. I stare hard at it, because I feel myself drawn more fully to his face than to the woman's. First it is indistinct, blurry and almost wavy, but after a moment's staring it begins to come into focus. It is bearded, and it is old, and its eyes are black and piercing. And, above all this, the face is mad. The madness of the artist stares back at me from across a diminishing artistic void, but the madness holds me in my place, toying with me, hating me, making me as still as stone.

The face belongs to Dworkin.

I wrench myself free, but I know it will last only a second. There's something I must know, and in desperation I summon enough energy to shut out Dworkin's eyes. Then I turn them slightly, toward the woman beside him, and again I begin to search for details. Slowly my eyes focus on the face, and on the hair, and on the eyes that stare blankly and purposelessly. And then I nod, because at last I know who she is.

Llewella. My sister. Then Benedict has told me the truth.

But she is in Amber. I left her there. What is she doing in the picture?

And why is Dworkin there? He creates pictures. He doesn't have to become part of them.

Now I begin to think. If I was right, and that picture is about to become part of mine, then why are Dworkin and Llewella in it? Wouldn't that make *them* four levels removed from Amber? Why would they want to be there? Isn't that self-defeating?

Yes. It is. There must be another answer.

Then it dawns on me. Somehow, that picture is of Amber, and they are in it. I do not recognize the town,

but perhaps it has been altered for this drawing. Perhaps it is spilling into the gallery because it is reaching out for me. Maybe it wants its king!

Don't be an ass, Random. Llewella and Dworkin are in that picture, and they want no part of Amber's king. They want the throne for themselves.

Then what the hell is going on? Is it Amber, or isn't it? If it is, I want to be drawn into it. Once there, I might be able to save it. If it isn't, then I'll have to try to escape through four levels of reality rather than just two. And I don't even know if that's the real Dworkin and the real Llewella, or just an artistic representation of them. Animated and alive, but only fakes.

I bury my face in my hands. I feel tears running between my fingers and down onto my wrists. Even the King of Amber sometimes must cry.

If Random allows himself to be drawn into the picture, turn to section 87.

If he attempts to resist, turn to section 90.

* 87 *

All right. I'll go. I don't know where it will lead me, but I'll go. Perhaps I could resist, but I don't know what the cost would be. This way I'll go somewhere I don't understand, but at least I'll be alive. At least, I hope so.

I close my eyes and surrender.

My world goes black, and my head spins. I feel myself being drawn, quickly and quietly, inside the picture I was looking at. My head spins, and my brain

reels, and everything in me tells me to resist, go back, fight against all this. But I refuse, even though the pressure on my mind is almost unbearable. I've made my choice, and I determine to stick with it.

A crescendo of images assaults me. Images of houses, building, towers, bridges, auditoriums, doors, windows. All the parts of a city, especially the parts of this one. Men, women, children, horses. Shopkeepers, freemen, minstrels, innkeepers. Men of leisure, men of slavery, women of family, women of the streets. All the varied nuances of life meet me now, all of them within a single instant, all of them merging to give me an image both complete and indistinct. The total image of a total city.

And now I see the city's past, its founding, settling, the nature of its gods. I see the laying of the streets, the christening of the churches, the establishment of trade, the wars against the enemy, the laughter of the peasants and the machinations of the rulers, the frustration of the judges and the horror of the slaves. And I see victims of torture and practitioners of treason, and the dreams in the children's eyes and the emptiness in the faces of the old. And the city grows and decays, and the heroism of war becomes the treachery of the princes, and the purity of the founders becomes the corruption of the invaders. The past has become the present.

And then the whirling stops, and time stands still, and I open my eyes to the glare of a brilliant sun. For a second the sun washes everything white, but slowly my eyes grow used to the shine. And in that moment I see, for the first time in many long days, the sharpness that comes with color.

Color! Red and blue and green and yellow and orange and pink and brown and crimson and purple. They strike at me in a blizzard, and at the sight my

mind rejoices but my head pounds with a violence. The unvaried grey of the far town has disappeared, and in its place is an orgy of dazzling hues.

The sight is beyond belief. For several minutes I stand still and do nothing but look. If this scene had a rainbow, I know I'd kneel down and pray. As it is, my eyes stray freely to the brilliant blue that constitutes the sky. When they come back down, I find myself staring at the figure of Llewella waving to me from inside her building.

I walk toward her. She raises her hands to her mouth and begins to shout.

"Random! Wait there. I'll come down."

I do as she asks.

In a couple of minutes, she emerges from the building and walks toward me. She is dressed in emerald green, and covered with color she looks beautiful beyond words. For a second I wish she wasn't my sister.

"Random," she says, holding out her hand to me. "How are you, brother?"

"Fine," I reply. "You?"

"Never better, I assure you. I'm glad you're here. We have a lot to discuss."

I nod. "So it seems," I say. "Benedict told me a great deal. Mostly about you. And Dworkin."

Llewella's smile disappears. "What Benedict says is rarely true," she says. "You should know that by now."

Smiling, I reply, "Hardly, Llewella. Of all our brothers and sisters, Benedict tends to be the most truthful of all. Even more than Corwin. You know that. Don't try to convince me otherwise."

"All right," she says. "I won't. But hear me out, just this once. Even if you think you have no reason to." "I don't. But I'll try."

My sister pauses, then nods. "Thank you. I guess that's all I can ask." She stops, then turns and looks toward her building. "Will you come with me?"

"Where?"

"There. Where I just came from."

I shrug. "Why should I? Why can't we talk here?"

"Because Dworkin is in there. And he's the one who wants to see you. He can clear everything up."

I smile out of the side of my mouth. "I doubt it. No more than you could. But I want to see him anyway. Lead on, Llewella. My destiny is in your hands." I bow low. Llewella doesn't seem to appreciate my sarcasm.

"You've never appreciated me, Random," she says. "You've never given me anything to go on."

"Oh, come off it," I reply. "Try not to do yourself in with excuses. You want to take over my throne. You have no reason to do so. You simply want it. So don't overexplain yourself."

Llewella's eyes blaze. "My explanations are up to me, brother, not you. You're in no position to tell me what to do. But just so you know, I want the throne of Amber because it's about bloody time one of us women had it. Ever since Dad died it's always been in the hands of you men, and you've busted it up pretty bad."

Laughing out loud, I manage to spit out a response. "Don't give me that," I almost shout. "Even if it was time for one of you to have it, why should it be you? If I gave it up willingly to Fiona or Flora, would you go along with it?" When she does not answer, I say, "All right. So what's your *real* reason for wanting the throne?"

Still she says nothing. She simply leads on, into the

doorway and up the front stairs. There can be, of course, no real reason for taking over a throne. Not if the current occupant is even marginally competent, as I certainly am. No, Llewella wants it for the sake of being in power. Everyone who wants a throne wants it for the same reason.

Maybe that's why the Unicorn chose me. I didn't even want it. The power meant nothing to me. It still means nothing. The throne, for me, is a duty, one I fulfill willingly, but a duty nevertheless. Still, I won-der if I would easily give it up now. At one time, I would have. To just about anybody.

We arrive at the third floor and stand before a richly brown oak door. Knocking first, Llewella opens it and, taking my hand, leads me in. I follow without protest.

The room is decorated with taste, and I find it boring. After weeks of unrelenting grey, the subtleties of color design strike me as useless. Why waste the ability to dazzle? I say to myself. Why use subdued colors when the world is filled with bright colors? Gaudy colors? Colors that fry your brain? Maybe with time I'll understand it again. For now, I vow that if I ever return, the palace at Amber will be redecorated with every imaginable color. I want it bright, and I want it burning.

And then I remember that Amber itself is a color. At this I laugh, and a voice from behind a tall chair of subdued blue surprises me.

"You should not laugh, Random," it says. "You are in no position to laugh." The voice's owner emerges, and I see the figure I was expecting.

Dworkin. All dressed in red. A glowing red. "I'm afraid, Dworkin," I say, and the defiance is sincere, "I'm afraid I'll laugh whenever I want." When I get no response, I continue. "As for that, this

whole scene is as funny as any I've looked at for several days."

"Why is that?" Dworkin asks.

"Because I see a terrified sister trying to take over my throne, and a damned fool would-be artist trying to help her. An artist who still believes that the way to true art is through imitation. How bloody useless!"

And I mean it. Everything Dworkin has done—the Trumps, the drawings, the tapestries—all are imitative art, imitative to the degree that they are almost still-lifes. All he is able to do as an artist (and admittedly he does this well) is to copy what he sees. He certainly adds a touch or two of his own, and his art has the power to draw, but it merely copies.

I go on. "You try to capture reality, Dworkin, but reality can't be captured. The only true art is art that creates its own reality. Art that translates for the senses a unique perception of the world. One that nobody—or no culture—has thought of before."

"What if I disagree?" he asks.

"That wouldn't matter," I tell him. "I don't believe in pluralism either. There's only one truth, Dworkin, and it's about time we all realize that."

Dworkin is silent for a moment. Then he speaks. "I don't believe you just said that, Random. You, who have spent a good portion of your life in Shadows. How can you say there is only one truth? What about the Shadows?"

"Shadows of truth, I guess," I reply after a short pause. "Look, even Amber isn't fully real. The Pattern attests to that. It's the thing that controls it all, unless there's something we haven't seen that controls it. Amber is only secondary..."

That's it. Something that controls the Pattern. Me. The king. I'm the one who controls the Pattern. Dad used to. Corwin did, when he was temporarily king.

Brand tried and almost succeeded, but he couldn't succeed. Not really. He wasn't king. The Pattern, Random. Control the Pattern.

I close my eyes and ignore the questions coming from Dworkin's soft, low voice. The voice almost hypnotizes, but I refuse to let it. Instead, I form in my mind the picture of the Pattern of Amber, and as I see it draw its circles and angles and pathways and barriers, I feel a stronger sense of meaning than I have ever known

The Pattern controls Amber, but Amber also controls the Pattern. Amber is the Pattern's product, but it is also the Pattern's creator. Amber is both art and artist. It draws itself. It self-replicates. It selfreproduces. It self-sustains. It self-exists.

It is the other side of the Pattern, and without it the Pattern is nothing. Yin and Yang. Heaven and Hell. Good and Evil. Hope and Despair. Man and Woman. All the great dualities are bound up in it. And like all

the great dualities, it needs both parts or it cannot be. And then I open my eyes and stare at the wall, and I hear Dworkin's voice droning on and on and Llewella's laughter echoing throughout the room. But they do not see what I see. They do not see the image that forms itself on the wall in front of me.

The Pattern of Amber occupies the entire wall. Its myriad shapes glow with every color in the spectrum, all of them throbbing with a pulsing light. For a moment I can do nothing but marvel at its beauty, for it is without doubt the greatest wonder I have ever seen, but then I grow afraid that the image will not last.

But no, it is not an image. It is the real thing. I know that now.

Along its paths my eyes travel, reveling in the color and dancing with the light. Toward the center they



steadily march, barrier after barrier falling before me. I walk the Pattern with my eyes, but it seems to be enough. I am king, and my eyes are as good as my feet.

Suddenly I am at the center. And here I see three brilliant gems, each shining forth with strong, intense color. The first is red, and it stings my eyes. The second is green, and it assaults my head. The third is white, the white of blinding snow.

My mission is suddenly clear. I must choose one, touch it, and I must do so now.

If Random touches the green gem, turn to section 92.

If he touches the red gem, turn to section 91.

If he touches the white gem, turn to section 93.

* 88 *

I feel at peace now, away from fear and away from worry. I am away from thought as well, as the woman I have joined seems to do everything for me. I am part of her. I need nothing else.

It is beautiful here. I have never known the world through the eyes of another. The difference astounds me. No longer do I find the endless grey oppressive. Suddenly it is filled with its own special kind of colorfulness, and I see beauty where before I saw none.

And I understand too, now, that the perceptions of a woman differ from those of a man. Or at least the perceptions of *this* woman differ from those of Random. I think for a moment of Tiresias, who lived half

his life as a woman and half as a man, and I feel suddenly that all people should live their lives like that. Through knowledge, I guess, comes understanding.

But now a pressure seizes my brain, and it feels as if it will split in two. A searing pain stabs the space behind my eyes. I open my mouth to scream, but nothing comes out. I try to raise my hands to my head, but my arms will not move. I want to bury my eyes in my palms, but this too does not work. My body is frozen.

And suddenly I feel myself drawn out through the eyes of this woman, out into the dim grey room and beyond. And my head continues to throb as I watch the grey world disappear and the swirl of color fill my eyes. But at last the pain is too much, and I fall into sleep, and I dream of the woman whose life I momentarily shared. Caine, oh, Caine, what have you done?

Turn to section 28.

* 89 *

Before I reach the door, my brothers are upon me. Tackling me to the floor, Bleys struggles to pin me, while Benedict draws his sword and advances toward me. Somehow, because I am merely thrashing and pushing, I manage to throw Bleys off of me, and in one motion I leap to my feet and draw my sword.

"What do you want?" I shout.

"You can't leave, Random," Benedict snarls. "You can't get us out of here, and we hate you for that. And I kill what I hate."

Staring into my brother's eyes, I realize that he is telling the truth. He doesn't intend to let a failed king go.

"Fine," I reply. "But at least let me take you on one at a time." A useless plea, I sense, but one worth trying.

Benedict laughs. "What for? To be fair? I've never had any use for fairness, not if I want something badly enough. And I want you, brother. I want you dead." With that he strikes, and Bleys with him.

BENEDICT

To hit Random: 5 To be hit: 5 Hit points: 25 Damage with sword: 2 D6+1

BLEYS

To hit Random: 5 To be hit: 7 Hit points: 23 Damage with sword: 2 D6

Use the combat rules to determine the winner. All will fight to the death.

If Random wins, turn to section 99.

If Random loses, turn to section 28.

* 90 *

No! I can't let myself go! I don't know what will happen to me if I do, and that's reason enough to resist.

"No!" I shout to the wall, and the wall answers with a barrage of dazzling light.

Piercing my brain, it destroys my very sight. Everything around me is a blaze of white, a fiery blast of intensity that will not let me go. I struggle with it, then I fight it, and yet in the end all my efforts seem useless.

With one last burst of energy, I try to tear myself away.

Make a Wisdom roll.

If it fails, turn to section 84.

If it succeeds, turn to section 98.

* 91 *

My mind wraps around the red gem, and I feel its power surge within me. It draws me in, and it burns my brain, and when I feel its force I know I have chosen well.

I look behind me, and Dworkin has dropped to the ground. The life has drained from his face, and when I look at his chest I see no rise and fall. If he is still alive, he will not be for long.

And then I see Llewella take a deck of cards from his robe, and she shuffles frantically through them. In response I draw out my own Trumps, dropping them all until I find the one I want.

Llewella's.

Suddenly her mind bores into mine. I clench my teeth and absorb the pain, then turn my eyes to the card in my hand. I force myself to stare through the throb in my eyes, and for the first time in my life I use the Trumps as weapons. I concentrate on Llewella's

forehead, and when I feel the contact I look and see her back away in pain.

But she counters with a surprisingly powerful thrust, and I can do nothing for the time but parry. Her mind is strong, but I know it is not as strong as mine. A fire sears past my temple, but when it misses I lunge toward my sister's mind.

She falls. I strike again. She is suddenly silent.

I have won.

But the Pattern has disappeared. And, with it, the gems. I am alone.

And then I realize what that means.

I am stuck here, here inside this picture. I run to the window and look out. There in the distance, staring back at me, is the young man I saw before, the viewer in the gallery. He watches me, and I stand tall and wave, then I shout to get his attention. But he doesn't seem to notice. He merely stares for a while, then lowers his head and walks away. Viewer after viewer does the same, but each seems farther and farther away. Finally the last viewer leaves, and the security guard turns out the lights.

Trapped in a lightless world, I find myself utterly alone.

Turn to section 28.

* 92 *

My mind wraps around the green gem, and its power surges within me. It draws me in, and it burns my brain, and when I feel its force I know I have chosen well.

I look behind me, and Llewella has dropped to the ground. The life has drained from her face, and when I look at her chest I see it is still. If she is alive, it will not be for long.

And then I see Dworkin raising a deck of cards in front of him, shuffling frantically through them. In response I draw out my own Trumps, dropping them all until I find the one I want.

Dworkin's.

Suddenly his mind bores into mine. I clench my teeth and absorb the pain, then turn my eyes to the card in my hand. I force myself to stare through the throb in my eyes, and for the first time in my life I use the Trumps as weapons. I concentrate on Dworkin's forehead, and when I feel the contact I look and see him back away in pain.

But he counters with his own thrust, and I can do nothing for the time but parry. His mind is strong, despite its age, and I fear it may be stronger than mine. A fire sears through my temple, and for a moment I stand and shudder. But then it subsides, and in the space of a broken second I lunge my mind toward my foe.

He falls. I strike again. He is silent.

I have won.

But the Pattern has disappeared. And, with it, the gems. I am alone.

And then I realize what that means.

I am stuck here inside this picture. I run to the window and look out. There in the distance, staring back at me, is the young man I saw before, the viewer in the gallery. He watches me, and I stand tall and wave, then I shout to get his attention. But he doesn't seem to notice. He merely stares for a while, then lowers his head and walks away. Viewer after viewer does the same, but each seems farther and farther away. Finally the last viewer leaves, and the security guard turns out the lights.

Trapped in a lightless world, I find myself utterly alone.

Turn to section 28.

* 93 *

The red gem calls, but I do not respond. The green gem seems to reach for me, but this too I manage to resist. Finally I orient my mind entirely toward the gem that shines with white, and the moment I do so the others disappear. Now we are alone, alone at the center of Amber's great Pattern.

I see the gem clearly in my mind, but even though I hold it there nothing seems to happen. The white shines, gleams, fires its power across the barrier of physical distance, but I don't seem to be able to do anything with it. I am enthralled, but that is not enough.

Suddenly I feel a hand around my throat. A woman's hand, its fingernails cutting through the flesh and drawing blood. I feel myself begin to choke. I feel the blood from my neck running down into my shirt. I feel my lungs start to strain as I slowly stop breathing. But then I feel the force of the white gem calling out to me, and with every last bit of strength I possess I throw my mind out toward the center of the Pattern.

Colors. Every possible color. All of them, shining, piercing, blinding, each one in turn stabbing my eyes and burning into my brain. All the colors I've ever known, and many that I've never seen at all. Every color I've ever dreamed, every nightmare and every hope of joy, every emotion and every thought, every essence there ever was, all appear to me, drain me, force me into submission. I kneel to the power that lies before me, yielding myself to the mercy it may not possess.

I am inside white. White is all colors. I am inside Color itself.

And suddenly the great design is plain.

White is the only truth we can know, because white is the presence of all. When the presences of everything are all in one place, then and only then can we judge which are true. Then and only then are we free from assumption, free from guesswork, free from memory. We assume, we guess at, we remember only when something is absent. There is no need for any of these when everything is present.

And here at the center of the Pattern of Amber, I understand too the meaning of Art. I see the valiant but failed efforts of all the artists throughout the centuries, and I know that they failed because they could not see all at once. And I see the great work of Dworkin himself, all of it brilliant even in its insis-

tence on imitation, and I understand that he failed in perception, and that is why he was not perfect. But, bathed as I am in the beauty of the light from the pure-white gem, I look at his work and it seems merely pale. It is open to me now, and my mind leaps from the Pattern and into each work.

I call my brothers to me, and they come. Julian. Caine. Benedict. Bleys. Gérard. Brand. All but Corwin, because Corwin I cannot find. And when we are together, their minds shielded by mine from the power of the gem, I take them, one by one, out of the Pattern and back into Amber. And then I draw Dworkin and Llewella out as well, and them too I now send home. Then, bridging with my mind the gap between the Pattern and Dworkin's created worlds, I close off his drawings forever. What happens within the drawings I will never know, but Dworkin will not be able to imprison anyone in them again.

Only the Trumps, now cool and smooth in my hands, I allow to remain. The work of Dworkin, they have long ago become ours. We need them, and they will stay.

It is morning when I return to Amber. A golden glow seems to shine on the city, but maybe I'm just imagining it. I am tired, but I'm not ready to sleep. One by one, I check in on my brothers and sisters, and each is sound asleep. Even Caine, whose eyes are red from the loss of his beloved wife. Perhaps she still lives, but if that is so, then she lives in a world beyond Caine's reach.

I walk to the edge of the Arden Forest, and there I build a small fire and watch it burn to the sky. Into it I toss a picture I brought back with me once from Shadow Earth, a small picture of a woman whose eyes reach out and will not let go. Let the picture return to its home. I do not need it here in mine. It is, I know at least, far too dangerous, and for a while I want nothing to do with the dangers of art.

For now, and maybe forever, Amber is the only art I desire.

Corwin, oh, Corwin, if only you could see me now.

THE END

* 94 *

If you have reached this section, you have not completed all of *Seven No-Trump*. You may wish to go back to the beginning and start over, which will be like rereading the entire book. If you feel you went way off track somewhere, you might want to do this, trying the various pathways through the story. However, you may feel that you would like to begin where you think you went wrong, but you don't remember where that was. This section attempts to give you some guidelines.

The key is the Special Events box of the character record. At certain points within the book you have been instructed to write a name in this box. Five possibilities are shown here. If your Character Record shows one of these names, you may return to the appropriate section in the story and begin from that point.

If the Special Events box contains "Julian," turn to section 17.

If the Special Events box contains "Brand 1," turn to section 38.

If the Special Events box contains "Brand 2," turn to section 39.

If the Special Events box contains "Caine," turn to section 24.

If the Special Events box contains "Bleys," turn to section 75.

Wherever you begin rereading, best of luck.

* 95 *

It takes a long time, but I manage to pick my way over and between the rocks. Now and again I find myself stuck in mud, and occasionally a rock almost crushes my feet as it rolls at my touch, but I make it through, and that's all that matters. I am bruised, and somewhat torn, as I reach the fields that take me through to the town.

Subtract 1 D+1 hit points from Random's hit point total.

Then turn to section 75.

* 96 *

I can't climb this damned stuff! It's impossible. One hand over the other, desperately grasping at anything I can find under the mud, while my feet dig for any hold they can. It seems desperate, but I don't see that I have much choice.

Suddenly I hear voices. Below me, ten, maybe twelve soldiers come into view, their torches lighting the way. I am just high enough to be out of their light, but if I slip down I'm done for. Slowly I raise my right hand, striving again to pull myself up the hill.

To get up the hill, Random must make two successful Strength rolls.

If they both succeed, turn to section 97.

If either fails, turn to section 78.

* 97 *

I made it! I can hardly believe it. On my hands and knees I crawl out of the mud.

Now there is grass, and I can walk. The town beckons.

Turn to section 75.

* 98 *

And then, in what must be the final instant, an image of the Trumps flashes into my mind.

The Trumps! Of course. Somehow, they will get me out of this. But how? I can't even see them.

They are cool as I take them into my hand. I try to look at them, but I still see nothing but white. I feel them, hoping that perhaps I can open the connection through touch. But again nothing happens, and for a second I am at a loss.

And then, in a flash of insight, I know what to do.

Eyes closed, hands held in front of me, I walk toward the wall. Almost impenetrable is the shield of light that stands in my way, but step by step I manage to advance. Finally I stand before the wall, before the painting that has sought to own me, and I throw the Trumps against it.

At once, the light force dies.

Opening my eyes, I see an old, faded, ugly picture on the wall. Beneath it, on the floor, lie the charred remains of what was once a deck of cards. My throat clutches at the thought of their loss, but at least I can see, even if I am stranded in a grey world.

Turn to section 28.



* 99 *

They're dead. Both of them. Once my brothers, they now lie on the floor and bleed. I've killed them.

I can't believe it.

Fighting back tears, not trusting my own eyesight, I pick up a Trump card that has fallen to the floor. It shows the face of Llewella, and through the water welling in my eyes I stare at her. In a few seconds I achieve contact, and Llewella pulls me through.

I leave my brothers where they lie. They can't be dead. They just can't be. I'll return for them later. Someday. Someday when I know they're alive.

Turn to section 29.

* 100 *

Lifting Julian's hand toward the Trump, I feel it make contact with Llewella's. In an instant he is gone, and as the Trump contact breaks I almost forget he has ever been here. It seems years since I last saw him.

Once again, the problem with time has shown itself. I wonder what other surprises this place may have. And I wonder if I have the strength to face them. At least in Amber I know the players and the game. A part of me clamors for that contact with Llewella. No matter how weak, she must be able to pull me back to my kingdom.

But what king abandons his quest halfway through? I mock myself. Concentrate on the stairs and get on with saving Gérard. Even if it looks like an unvarying loop, it is a loop that ensnares a prince of Amber.

If Random tries to regain contact with Llewella, turn to section 101.

If he concentrates on the stairs and saving Gérard, turn to section 16.

* 101 *

Back to Llewella's Trump my concentration goes, and for a second I think I have made contact. Her picture flickers, then flashes, then just as quickly fades. Almost desperate, I stop walking completely and turn all my energy to the card. In less than a second I hear Llewella's voice calling me across what seems an enormous, static-filled gulf, and a second later I feel a foot sink into my stomach.

Doubling over in pain, I sink to the step. When I look up, I see a young monk looking down on me, his face as serious as all the others. He seems to be shouting something at me, but I can hear nothing at all. Raising his foot above my head, he prepares to bring it down.

If Random fights, turn to section 102.

If he surrenders to the young monk, turn to section 103.

* 102 *

Use the combat rules to resolve the combat. The monk fights primarily with his feet, doing 1 D6-2 damage. Random uses his fists, with 1 D6-2 damage.

If Random wins, turn to section 104.

If he loses, turn to section 105.

* 103 *

Believing I can't possibly get out of this easily, I open my arms in a silent plea. The monk waits for a moment, his foot now inches from my face, then stands on both feet and reaches toward me. I grasp his hand, and he helps me to my feet.

I turn around and start walking. Behind me, my assailant walks on, as if nothing has happened at all.

Turn to section 16.

* 104 *

As the boot descends, I throw myself to one side. Fast as I am, though, the boot still grazes the side of my head, which now throbs uncontrollably.

Once out of the way, I spring to my feet. The line of monks has stopped behind us, but nobody has spoken. If fights are common, or never before seen, I have no idea. Nobody acts as if anything unusual is happening.

Again the young monk kicks, and again he grazes me, this time in my left rib cage. Once more he attacks, and then another time. But this last time I am ready, and I counter his blow with a punch to the back of his leg. The leg stops swinging, if only for a brief second, and that is all the time I need.

I strike his stomach, and then his head. He reels and, finally, falls. I wait for his counterattack,

It doesn't come. Standing up, the young monk limps back into his place and waits to start walking. As quickly as it began, the fight is over. It has accomplished nothing, except to make me feel even more confused.

Turn to section 16.

* 105 *

As the boot descends, I throw myself to one side. But as fast as I am, the boot still grazes the side of my head, which now throbs uncontrollably.

Once out of the way, I spring to my feet. The line of monks has stopped behind us, but nobody has spoken. I have no idea if fights are common or never before seen here. Nobody acts as if anything unusual is happening.

The young monk kicks again, and he grazes me in my left rib cage. He attacks once more, and then another time. But this last time I am ready, and I counter his blow with a punch to the back of his leg. The leg stops swinging for a brief second, and that is all the time I need.

I strike his stomach, and then his head. He reels and, finally, falls. I wait for his counterattack.

It comes, in the form of a flurry of kicks and punches, a flurry against which I can form no defense. Twice my stomach muscles feel torn as his foot strikes them, and then I feel the air knocked out of me. Clutching my stomach, I fall to my knees, opening my eyes in time to see a heel about to strike my forehead. I collapse on the stairs, where blow after blow brings pain, then numbness, then nothing at all.

Turn to section 28.

* 106 *

From out of the blackness comes a woman's voice. Soft, angelic, tender beyond belief, it tears through the pain in my head until it forces me to listen. Barely conscious, I turn my last energies toward it.

"Random," it says, "touch my hand."

Before me, I see Llewella, but only in faint image. Somehow, she has managed to contact me, and now I must touch her. But my strength is so low, my determination so weak, that I can barely respond to her command.

To demonstrate how weak Random has become, he has a straight 50–50 chance of obeying his sister. Roll one die. On a result of 1, 2, or 3, turn to section 107.

On a result of 4, 5, or 6, turn to section 28.

* 107 *

Through the throbbing of my head and the aching of my body, I somehow manage to lift my hand. Shaking, my arm slowly stretches toward Llewella's waiting hand. Shaken as I am, the wait seems like hours.

But finally, just as Llewella's image begins to fade, I make the connection. My fingers touch her palm, and I feel myself floating. My head throbs one last time, and then I collapse.

Fitfully I sleep, opening my eyes to blurred, unreal images of women walking back and forth, carrying water, and bandages, and hot, steaming beverages in small bowls. Their voices make no sense, their purpose is vague. I sleep often, but I do not sleep well.

Finally, I am no longer in pain. Falling onto the pillow. I sleep the sleep of the dead.

Turn to section 22.

* 108 *

"I know about him," I say. "I know what he's done to his town, how he's terrified his people. And I'm afraid I was forced to kill him."

"What?" says my startled brother.

"I had no choice: he was trying to choke me," I say regretfully.

"In that case, brother, we have a job to do." "No need," I say. "Brand's people are already setting to rights his dirty work. They needed a lot of convincing, but I don't think they'll need any help." "That's good," Caine replies, "but it's not what I

meant. There is something left of Brand's dirty work that you can't possibly know about. Something that I could do nothing about because I had to stay here to guard this town against him. He was constantly coming here, talking trade and diplomacy, but I always knew he wanted the town itself. He admires its perfection. That's why I asked the people here to set me up as Escalitan, which means the person who watches over the Calitan, to make sure he doesn't screw up. I convinced them of the need to defend against Brand, who is, to them at least, an alien being.

So am I, but I try hard not to seem alien. I adopt their practices, and I respect everything they do. Not that it's hard work."

"But what about Brand's 'dirty work'? What has he done?"

"What *hasn't* he done, Random? We're talking here of a man who wanted to redraw the Pattern, to re-create the world in his own image. He keeps convincing people—I'm just the latest—that he's reformed, but then he comes back with another whopper. When I think about it, I still can't believe Corwin beat him. I know I couldn't have.

"But this time he's beaten all odds. He's simply managed to change nature, that's all. Our slimy sonof-a-bitch brother has used his power in this world and it is considerable—to divert the course of the river. Little by little. Within a couple of days, the far town in the drawing will be completely swept away by the river's enormous force."

"Why did he do it?" I ask. "And how?"

"The people wouldn't surrender to him. A woman there, their leader, distrusted Brand's intentions right from the start. He claimed he would lead them out of poverty and into prosperity, and all he wanted in return was trade and shared prosperity with his own town. He suggested an emblem in his honor would be nice to show their gratitude. The people loved him everyone loves him at first—and the woman almost succumbed to his charm. But she didn't. She held back and asked him to leave. Finally she had to throw him out. He vowed to return in true villain style.

"No one knows where she is now, but before she disappeared she convinced the people not to listen to Brand. They held true, but it wasn't easy. Finally Brand gave up, and he decided to wipe them out. That's the kind of person he is."

"What do you want us to do?" I asked at last.

"First," Caine replies, "we have to use our own power to undivert the river. We've got to restore things to what they were. And then we have to find the woman. No matter what."

"No matter what?"

"Yes," he says. "This is no ordinary woman, Random."

"Who is she?"

"She's the leader of the town, the people's spiritual guide. She's also my wife."

Write "Caine" in the Special Events box of the character record, then turn to section 45.

* 109 *

Brand is safely ensconced in a suite here in Castle Amber and I finally begin to feel as if we can relax. Still, something feels wrong, a loose end somewhere that I'm just too tired to recall. I actually have about ten minutes of comparative peace in my own rooms when Caine appears. My brother doesn't look happy; his face is drawn and his black hair looks dishevelled and hangs partially out of the leather band he normally gathers it in with. He has even forgotten his nearly everpresent riding gloves.

In a few brisk words Caine explains that his wife is still in trouble at the far town. I don't even let him get to asking for my help, but start in discussing what we'll need. Fifteen minutes later we're in the kitchen panicking the help and preparing our own provisions, all the time talking strategies.

We'll be ready to go within an hour. I'm still battered and tired, but this has to be done.

Turn to section 45.

* 110 *

I wander for hours, recalling every incident and wondering if I could have saved Brand. There had to be a way, and frustration wars with depression. Finally sleep toxins begin to affect even my coordination and I stumble over a shadow, the ordinary sunlight and shade kind.

Returning to Amber I begin to feel as if we can relax. Still something feels wrong, a loose end somewhere that I'm just too tired to recall. I actually have about four hours of sleep in my own rooms when Caine appears. I wake up quickly and feel my pulse race.

My brother doesn't look good; his face is drawn and his black hair looks dishevelled and hangs partially out of the leather band he normally gathers it in with. He has even forgotten his nearly ever-present riding gloves.

In a few brisk words Caine explains his wife is still in trouble at the far town. I don't even let him get to asking for my help, but start in discussing what we'll need. I call for a servant and we send the kitchen a list of provisions to be hurriedly readied. We'll be leaving within an hour. I'm still battered and dead-tired, but there is no question about our having to act now.

Turn to section 45.

AFTERWORD

ROGER ZELAZNY'S AMBER is not an easy world to understand. It seems easy enough—a hierarchical system of Shadows, the truth of Amber, and the greater truth of the Pattern-but the concept of the Shadows presents a whole host of difficulties. Zelazny, of course, wants us to have trouble determining precisely what the Shadows are; that's one of the intriguing things about his world. But the word "shadow" has so many connotations, so many associations with things literary, philosophical, theological, and psychological that writing about Amber means nothing less than cross-referencing everything you've ever learned. When adding to the world of Amber, as I've tried to do in Seven No-Trump, it becomes necessary not only to try to understand Amber, but also to decide exactly how much of that understanding you will finally use. Writing, someone once said, is knowing what to leave out.

My greatest difficulty in writing Seven No-Trump was in coming up with a story and an idea that I felt would please Roger Zelazny. Almost as great was the problem of pleasing his legion of fans. To get past these problems, I read the books through, in little over a weekend, all the while trying to assess Zelazny's intentions and appeal. It wasn't hard. Zelazny's writing is strong, direct, forceful. His characters are fascinating and believable. The concept of Amber and its Shadows is brilliant. And the first-person narration is superbly handled. Furthermore, the books reflect a wealth of Zelazny's artistic concerns, with references to (and even discussions about) art, literature, and philosophy. Fascinating stuff, and scary as hell for me to try to capture.

The first hurdle was jumped for me. I was assigned a story about Random. Fine. I liked Random from the first time I met him, way back at the beginning of *Nine Princes in Amber*. His selection as King of Amber (in *Courts of Chaos*), while surprising, was something I approved of, and I felt that as king he deserved a series of his own.

But what is he really like? This was less easy to determine, primarily because the Amber series (up till *Trumps of Doom*) is told through the eyes of Corwin, and Corwin, like all first-person narrators, knows a lot about himself but less about everybody else. Immediately, then, I cleared the second hurdle. I would maintain the first-person technique, because the entire series had been done this way. The narrator would become Random rather than Corwin, but the story would still be told from the "I" point of view. This had the further advantage of answering another difficulty about the notion of Shadows; it reminded me of the subjectivity of the individual perceptions of Amber itself. Corwin saw Amber his way. The others, presumably, saw it theirs.

Random, as I've developed him, is hesitant and self-questioning, not quite sure he belongs in the position he occupies. I think this portrait conforms fairly well to the one we see at the end of *Courts of Chaos* and in his short appearances in *Trumps of Doom*. But throughout *Seven No-Trump* he grows (I hope) to become at least a little more sure of himself. He is caught in a bizarre situation, but with the

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reader's help he takes whatever charge is necessary to effect a workable conclusion.

The third hurdle (to continue my belabored metaphor) was to present to the reader the same sort of intellectual challenge Zelazny gives us in the original series. I had decided early in my rereading of the books to work with the idea of the visual arts, as Zelazny does in all the books. As it happens, I had been reading Douglas Hofstadter's brilliant *Gödel*, *Escher, Bach* just before beginning *Seven No-Trump*, and Zelazny's mention of Escher, late in the series, turned my thoughts toward that artist's work. Escher concentrates, like Hofstadter and (I think) Zelazny, on the seemingly paradoxical, so I figured I could build this into the story. Dworkin's means of helping Corwin escape, in *Nine Princes*, provided both the focus for my book and gave me a ready-made villain. Dworkin's art, like all great art, draws the viewer inside, trapping and refusing to release. If you've ever fallen under the enchantment of a truly wonderful work of art, from the "Mona Lisa" to *The Lord of the Rings* to Bruce Springsteen's "Jungleland," you'll understand what I mean.

In the end, the effect I strove for in writing Seven No-Trump was the effect of Courts of Chaos. That novel, the last (so far?) about Corwin, seems different to me from the others, more introspective and more intensely Corwin's. It is a strange novel, always skirting the edge of complete chaos, both in concept and in style. But more than any of the others it continues to draw me, and I find myself thinking about Corwin's hellride along the Black Road almost as much as I think about Frodo's walk through the barrens of Mordor. If Seven No-Trump succeeds, it does so only because Courts of Chaos has established an excellent precedent. Amber is unforgettable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

THE AUTHOR OF Storm of Dust, also in the Crossroads series, Neil Randall teaches Canadian Literature and Fantasy at the University of Waterloo (Ontario). He has designed several modules for the James Bond 007 Role-Playing Game, and he is a regular software reviewer for Compute! magazine.

Because he is engaged in such time-consuming projects as book-length studies of interactive fiction and of Tolkien, Randall's family does not see him as often as they would like. For this reason, he is writing a fantasy novel of his own, so that it might bring in monies beyond his wildest imaginings and allow him to retire before he reaches the age of 38. At that time he promises to finish putting up the shelves in the basement.

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