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ing Joslon cried, “Insults!” He pounded the beautifully inlaid teak-and-mahogany conference table with his fist. “Insults and yet more insults!” He quivered with anger from the tip of his pointed gray beard to the arches of his bushy gray eyebrows.

I found him almost comical, dressed in that intricately-embroidered sea-green robe, but I suppressed my urge to laugh. No point in adding to his imagined list of slights.

“You need to control your son,” I said calmly, leaning back in my chair. Playing a patient and reasonable king did not come easily, but I could manage it if I had to. Kyar’s rich farmlands could easily supply my army with meat and grains for years to come.

With more patience than I really felt, I continued: “Let me remind you that good relations between Amber and Kyar will benefit both our peoples. For trust and friendship to grow between us, your son must treat guests with proper respect. Like you, I *am* a king.”

The ring on my right index finger pulsed twice sharply. A warning? I kept my expression neutral, but began to surreptitiously search the room for any sign of danger. We were alone; where could the threat come from?

“Respect?” Joslon leaned forward, mouth turning down and

John Gregory Betancourt

deep-set eyes glaring. “You have received nothing *but* respect since your arrival! You abuse your position here, King Oberon —”

“Enough.” I shoved back my chair and stood. “Listen well, Joslon,” I said in a low but earnest voice. I leaned forward across the table, towering over him. “Prince Adric *insulted* me. He called me a coward and challenged me to a duel. I *will* fight him. If he ends the duel at first blood, honor will be satisfied.”

“You will kill him! I will lose my favorite son!”

“I want him alive as much as you do because this treaty is important to me. To *Amber*. This will be your last chance to sign it. My patience is at an end.”

Joslon leaned back, jaw set stubbornly. “Then do not duel my son.”

“I cannot let insults pass unanswered. My honor — the honor of Amber — demands satisfaction.”

My ring pulsed again, more urgently than before. What did it mean? I tightened my right hand into a fist, running my thumb along the spikard’s smooth gold surface.

Casually I began to pace, letting my attention wander the room. Intricate frescoes covered every wall, showing detailed forest scenes. The high beamed ceiling held a wrought-iron chandelier, in which two dozen thick tallow candles burned. Heavy carpets covered the floors. I saw no sign of danger anywhere, but my ring had never been wrong before. Could it sense assassins sent by the king’s son?

Joslon placed his hands carefully on the table and stood. Behind him, I noticed the wall bulging slowly in toward us, like a water-skin filling up — a neat trick, since the wall behind the fresco was made of

Shadows of Amber

heavy plaster. Magic? I chewed my lip thoughtfully. This had to be what the ring wanted to warn me about.

“Leave,” the king said in a heavy voice. He pointed dramatically toward the door. “Depart my lands. I will have nothing more to do with you – or with Amber!”

I drew my sword. “Get out of this room,” I said, watching the wall behind him. I had a very bad feeling about it.

King Joslon recoiled in fear. “You *dare* to raise a weapon against *me*, in my own castle?”

“Do as I say, Joslon!” I pointed with the tip of my sword. The wall behind him began to crack. Dust and chips of painted plaster fell silently to the floor. “Take a look!”

He stared at me blankly. “What –”

“I have no time for your squawking. Something big is coming . . . big and very dangerous. If you want to live, you had better get out of this room, and you had better do it now!”

Instead of running for his life, though, he turned and stared – a huge mistake, and his last. Heavy stone blocks suddenly spewed outward from the bulging wall, striking him in his head and his chest. He fell with a shriek, and I lost sight of him beneath the débris and roiling cloud of dust.

A hole ten feet high and fifteen feet wide now gaped before me. Inside lay an unnatural darkness that seemed to suck the color from everything around us. It radiated a numbing cold. My breath began to mist in the air.

The ring on my finger tightened painfully. When something in the darkness *moved*, every fiber of my body screamed, “Run!” But I

John Gregory Betancourt

forced myself to stand and watch. I had to know more. I couldn't just leave – not without seeing whatever lay inside.

Part of that darkness stretched, *reached*. Like the tentacle of a squid, only blunt and featureless, a thick black limb thrust into the conference room. Quickly, I retreated toward the door. The limb had an oddly murky, nearly translucent quality, almost like smoke or fog. And the cold grew worse, a bone-freezing, life-sucking chill like nothing I had ever felt before.

What *was* that thing? My eyes never left it. Even when I bumped up against the door, I kept staring.

Tentatively at first, like a man probing the space where a pulled tooth had been, the limb turned this way and that. It seemed to be blindly exploring . . . or seeking something. *Me?*

“What do you want?” I demanded. My voice rang out in the silence. Could it hear me? Was it intelligent?

Extending slowly, the limb passed like a ghost through the teak-and-mahogany conference table. As it did, the wood turned gray and fell to dust. Still the limb advanced on my position.

I reached back and grasped the door's latch. How could I possibly defend against *that*? It had passed through the table! Would a sword even cut it? Somehow, I didn't think so.

“Answer me!” I said loudly, lifting the latch. Best to make a strategic retreat for now . . . at least until I found out more about it. “What do you want?”

No reply.

Yanking open the door, I backed out into the castle's great hall, then kicked the door shut. That slamming noise echoed far too

Shadows of Amber

loudly. Then the latch fell into place with an audible *click*. Hopefully the creature wouldn't figure out how I'd disappeared – at least, not for a few more minutes. That would give me time to gather up my brother and return to Amber.

“King Oberon?” a quavering voice called from behind me. “What have you done?”

Laoni, Joslon's head minister, had spotted me, of course. Realizing how suspicious everything must look to him, I winced inwardly. How could I have left the conference room with a drawn sword in hand? *Stupid, stupid, stupid!* They would all think I'd murdered their king. Why didn't anything ever go as planned?

When I glanced around the hall, I found dozens of servants and retainers, not to mention the king's advisors and a half a dozen guards, staring at me with horrorstruck expressions. I put on a smile anyway. Maybe they would think I had made some joke for Joslon's benefit, or shown the king my weapon.

Laughing, as if I'd made some great jest, I sheathed my sword.

“Oberon?” my brother Conner said.

He stood in a quiet alcove to the right. Short like our father, and with our father's dark intense eyes, he had been talking with Laoni and several other ministers while I met with the king.

With more confidence than I felt, I crossed over to them. Conner wore green as usual, a rich forest-dark shirt laced at the neck, with black pants and boots. A large emerald ring on his right index finger glinted as it caught the light.

Conner's eyebrows raised slightly. *Trouble?* asked his eyes. Almost casually, he dropped one hand to the hilt of his own sword. Though