

The Defile of Kolvir

Random stepped into bitterly cold rain, unlike the storms that should beset Amber at this time of year. Normally they came west from the Chainlink Ocean. Out there, where trade routes met in Amber from a hundred shadows, storms built over oceans unimaginable to man. The deep red seas of Phlogistron never rained, but cycled their alkaline fluids by throwing waterspouts into the sky. They recovered volume in the sheets that fell as one, ballooning or tenting with trapped air as clouds ablated single great layers at a time. Elsewhere the crystal-clear waters of shadow Hyphons fell in invisible rain on near invisible seas. Often Gerard had spoken of the hazards of Hyphons, whose waters were so clear that ships often dropped anchor in ten thousand fathoms of depth. One could find land by looking down at the ocean floor and following the ravines between continents but must beware the seamounts that raised summits miles below the surface. Hyphons blew hot rain. Temmeraie, a shadow there the oceans stacked like pancakes, rained cold and from the left. In Lesse the rains stalked the oceans like titans, and beat ships with aquatic fists, kicked them with tsunami feet, and roared angry challenges at Amberite sea-captains in voices like the boom of breaking waves. The rains of Tollos were rum, and crews without immaculate discipline rarely survived the crossing. Corwin had found that one. Random was not surprised.

This storm was cold, relentless, and sharp, having that peculiar property of raindrops that stung the skin. Random wished he had a coat, but didn't want to go back and bother Vialle for one. He instantly knew she'd be quite happy to get him a coat, and he was being silly, but then he'd have to leave again. Recognizing himself for being absurd, he decided no prince of Amber would retreat in the face of a little water in the face, and he grinned at his pun. His mood improved a thousand-times by leaving the castle, and he assumed it was because he could fight the cold with will.

He could also get rid of the storm with the Jewel of Judgement but didn't think this called for that. The Jewel killed people. Fiona suspected it had done Eric in. Random wasn't sure, but Fiona wasn't stupid.

Oberon had had a few secret trumps in his office, cards that Random hadn't known about but wasn't surprised to discover. The one he'd stepped through on lead to an alcove between a rough bit of Kolvir's foot and a jetty, near the north seawall of the harbor. Rain lay over the city like a blanket of malice, and as Random emerged from the concealed grotto, he intuited that it was getting worse. Oberon had left a few knives hidden in the grotto, a sword, some armor, and a crossbow. He also had a vial prophylactic ninroot. Random did not want to think about the latter, but he took a knife and a sword named 'Ruin on my Enemies.'

'That's Dad,' thought Random and went looking for trouble.

A horde of screaming people ran down the street, every voice shrieking about dragons.

Random pulled out his trumps and decided to call for help, yet when his fingers touched the deck he scowled. Thinking back to Brand's imprisonment, Random put his cards away and took off running. He caught someone and yelled until they gave him directions and kept going. Someone said Benedict had gone that way. They didn't know where he was now. The king dashed up the hillside toward his keep, hoping he wouldn't have to run all the way back up Kolvir to find his problem.

Something finally went right for Random. He did!

On a rain-washed hillside between rows of demolished houses, Random of Amber found Spait the dragon. The wyrm was halfway through a house, chasing someone out a rear window, when the reptilian turned towards the street. Rain fell like God cried, and washed sound from the air. The pound of droplets on stone and mud flooded the street with ambient noise and drowned Random's footsteps. Yet the wyrm turned and looked, for he had powers too.

The beast was, Random decided, somewhat larger than he remembered. Built like an immense lizard yet with small legs, it rose up by the house it was despoiling, head near a smashed-out wall. Its tail pressed against the far side of the street, damming the street until water leaked over the top, finding spaces between a ridge of dorsal scales. Worse were its eyes. One burned red, and the other was gashed open, a ruined sword jutting from the black orb, some acid liquid that burned in air dribbling around the handle. By all means they should see nothing, yet Random found himself convinced they looked at him.

That was the worst until it spoke.

"Hello, Lord Random, King of Amber," whispered the lizard, and Random saw himself as King of Amber, wearing Oberon's clothes, wearing Oberon's crown, and terribly, taking Vialle on Oberon's bed. His skin crawled under the relentless assault of rain.

"Die, wyrm," said Random, and he charged.

The dragon struck and Random dodged, hurling himself sideways and somehow staying upright on the mud-slicked road. Spait's immense head smashed the ground, pulverizing rock, and yet recoiled faster than Random could swing the sword. Spait retreated, and lanky Random dashed after him. He slashed once, cutting Spait's triangular snout open from side to side, and the wyrm screamed, lashed his tail, and fled.

Random sprinted across the rain. His feet didn't touch the ground but caught raindrops like stones in a pond. The sword Oberon had left in the hidden grotto gleamed, and King Random felt suddenly consumed with power. Even though his footing vanished underneath him with every step, the power of the sword bore him aloft so he could chase the fleeing dragon. The blade sang when it cut.

And Random, King of Amber, chased the dragon Spait out of the city. It fled faster than a man could run, even a Lord of Amber, yet it did not escape him. A power lay on Random, and he ran on the wind until the wyrm fled no more. It rounded on itself in a canyon like a defile to face the King. When he stopped running the rain fell from under his feet, dropping him to the rocks.

Then Random would have to go into the defile to get Spait out, and before he did that, Random hesitated. The walls loomed close overhead. Clouds painted the night-sky black. The dragon itself was dark as shadow, and from shadow it had come. Within the canyon, it was oil on black canvas.

Random put his first step down towards the beast, and it whispered, "Be careful, King of Amber. This is what your brother Benedict did, before the end."

Of course Random knew it played for time.

Yet the words of a dragon bring images unbidden to the mind of the listener, and Random saw his tall brother with a hook for a single hand facing a dragon through the bars of a tall gate. Random saw a fat human lying insensate in the rain, and a small one crawling about. Random saw Benedict look at a street and the fallen admiral, saw Benedict's eyes as cold and calculating. Random saw Benedict assess the dragon and his chances to flee.

Nothing entered the canyon, not even light, and the dragon was at home in the shadows. But Random saw it as a silhouette against a black field, ebony sculpture on coal dust background, evil in hell. Spait watched him from shadows infesting the foot of Kolvir. Random would have to go in there to get him out.

Or he could leave. Spait would immediately attack the city.

Random stepped back from the canyon. Spait watched. Shadows lay heavy between the toes of Kolvir.

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Fiona found some excuse to leave Julian alone with Caine. The creepy sexed-up asshole of the family remained with his equally creepy sexed-up brother, the latter unconscious, and his attempts at conversation had been juvenile and disgusting. The excuse she hit upon was asking to see where Caine had been found, and Flora left at the same time, as if the two sisters were going together.

They did not. Florimel asked Fiona if the redhead needed help, and Fiona didn't. Flora expressed regret, they came very close to actually touching with pretensions of sadness, and Flora went somewhere else.

Fiona considered going anywhere else as well, but she'd said she wanted to see where Caine had had his attack, so she felt obligated to look in. A bit of detective work with the house staff and Fiona found the alcove overlooking a blur of clouds. This wasn't a spot she frequented, but she knew it. Normally the view was lovely. It smelled like smoke right now, and the open window was letting rain in on the duvet seat. She shut the window. The alcove still stank of smoke. She kicked an empty cigarette box. A minion could pick that up; princesses of Amber were above picking up litter. The alcove was dark enough that the trash was nearly invisible, and someone could come in the morning or with a candle.

Fiona was about to walk away when she noticed that there was a candle, one that had propped open the window, and it was almost gone. It had been sliced in half.

Now Fiona did bend over and rummage around for the cigarette box. It was empty. That didn't mean anything; it had been knocked over. She rummaged around looking for cigarettes and found something much more interesting: cards. Much of a deck of trumps lay scattered on the ground, some near the open window.

She lit the candle and searched. Bits of loose tobacco had fallen into the cushions. No burned butts, and she found only one cigarette, broken in half and unlit. The candle had burned most of the way down, but when Caine had been found, the sun was still out and the clouds rising. He'd smoked an entire pack with his trumps out. She'd gathered his cards up wearing gloves, and she put them in a little pouch on her belt. Her dress only had one pocket, and it held rings. Instead of going to her rooms, she walked to a different alcove and thought.

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"King of Amber," whispered Spait, and Random again saw images of himself, ruling, and Oberon, greater. "I'm so glad we finally have a chance to talk."

"Don't speak, wyrm. Lizard. Dragon. Hide in your hole in silence."

"Oh, but Lord of Amber, until you come down here, I am trapped by your illustrious power, and must hide from you. Only until you join me, and gift me your royal hospitality."

And Random saw himself plunging into the cavern to seek out Spait in the hole whence he dwelled. He saw himself winning fame and glory, and all recognized his power and united behind him.

"Where's Benedict?" asked Random, trying to ignore the visions.

"He's in here, King of Amber. In here with me."

And Random saw the death of his oldest brother. He saw Benedict die in quick bites before the still form of one of his Admirals.

"I am going to kill you, wyrm."

"Yes, my lord. You will." And the visions came stronger, Random plunging gloriously into darkness and bringing with him the bright sword of Oberon. He would do what Benedict had failed to accomplish, and his fame would be greater.

"You're playing the wrong game, lizard. I am uninterested in that kind of fame."

For a while rain made the only sounds.

"What do you desire, King of Amber?" whispered the dragon.

"You could never understand."

Here the mountain came down to form a crescent hill that eons ago a river had bisected. Upstream the river had been diverted to run mills. Amber had never built its wealth on industry, but rather in the transport of others throughout shadow. Yet ships needed repair. So long as no great calamity beset the navy, such as Corwin and Bleys had unleashed in their doomed play for the throne, Amber did retain enough building power to keep its fleets sailing.

That proved a double edged sword, for the industries of Amber knew how far they were from replenishing their ships. They pushed the crown to find replacements.

Random waited in the center of the hillside crescent. It swooped around him like horns, and behind him a broad and easy valley lead outwards to Garnath. He could see the mountain above the hill, a broad plain of alpine meadow. Time had sowed wildflowers over the plains and erased the signs of the river. The only remnant of the rushing course that had cut the hill in half was the defile itself. The cut looked empty, even when the voice of Spait spoke from within.

"Do you perhaps desire to rule justly?" asked the dragon. In image Amber flourished as it never had under Oberon, ruled by a king more interested in peace and prosperity than his sexual conquests.

"You won't give it to me," said Random.

"No, King of Amber, but if you come in here with me, I will take it from you." The words themselves gloated.

Trying not to think of what he heard and saw, Random instead focused on developing a plan. He didn't know how well Spait could see him, and therefore thought of trumps with suspicion. Even as Fiona stared out at the rainstorm he suffered under, she considered the deck at her belt and the rings in her pocket. Random did not know this, but remembered her recent hesitancy to use the cards.

"The city needs its king," said Spait. "For more of us are coming when Bleys calls."

That echoed in the king's mind.

"Your statement is noted," said Random.

"Do you yearn for before? Were you adored by multitudes, and did the young and beautiful adore you? Did you have many of them, and did they beg to be your playthings?"
But now, Random smiled.

He waited.

Spait's eyes appeared, one gaping open and weeping acid, one dark as the still surface of a deep well.

Random waited.

"So be it," whispered the dragon, but this time his words brought no images.

In curls and loops, Spait emerged from his canyon. Random held the sword he'd taken from Oberon, and they met on a rainy field by the foot of Kolvir.