

Before the Fall

Onto Amber night fell and brought darkness unbroken by stars. The absent crescent moon could not appear through the clouds. Another crescent, this one of hills, rose from the ground by Mount Kolvir's foot, sliced in half by a dead river. In the slice lay a dark canyon, inhabited by a shadow and a terror unlike even the night. From that canyon emerged Spait the dragon, a wingless wyrm. Outside stood Random, waiting. It rained like the flood.

"What are you doing here, prince?" demanded the dragon. His injured claws flailed at nothing, and his healthy ones grasped dead grass. "You're not a hero. Your brother was, and he is dead. Your other brothers are gone. Call one of them and flee."

Random began walking to his left, keeping his sword hand facing the dragon. "I am no prince. I am the King of Amber, wyrm."

"Then call for your kin! Flee before me, and summon someone greater. Be, in truth, the merest shadow of your father."

"No," said Random, and he struck.

The Amberite rushed forward as the dragon struck. Rain and Random fell. The king lunged and drove his blade through the roof of Spait's mouth, aiming for the brain, but the lizard's head was longer than he expected. Spait's brainpan was further back, in what seemed to be the neck. The sword of Oberon broke.

Meanwhile the dragon bit him about the middle, lofted him to rip him apart, and fragments of the blade tumbled back down the dragon's armored gullet. Spait had eaten weapons before, but the blade of Oberon was a dire thing, full of dark spells. Even Spait was not immune. The beast gagged, dropped Random, and ill luck kept turning, for Random dropped fifty feet onto his head. The king lay still.

Spait exulted, and struck again. Shards of metal cut apart his mouth. Spait roared and bit again. Fragments of Oberon's blade lodged in every corner of the dragon's mouth. Spait could drink lava like water, eat shattered spears, and his saliva etched stone, but the broken edges of Oberon's sword lacerated his mouth.

The beast tried to rid himself of them, but the dragon's stubby legs were too short to reach his mouth. Spait gnashed his teeth and bled from his lips.

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By a high window of Castle Amber, Fiona suddenly looked up from reverie. Intuition bit her.

"A curse of the blood is invoked," whispered the princess and then words unbidden escaped her. The same intuition that broke her bizarre immobility forced her to speak when she would have otherwise remained silent. "Amber is going to fall."

And she knew she had spoken a prophecy.

Dread caught Fiona. She had two pockets of cards, one in a little box and another in a little bag. The little bag held odd trumps, lesser arcana of purposes only she knew, while the box held the greater arcana. The greater bore pictures of her family, and she splayed them out before her. Her hands found Corwin's of their own volition, but it was cold and dead, as it had been for centuries and then again for nearly two decades more.

She held it, but would not let herself look at it. Then she shuffled all the cards together and added another from her private stash. She added Death.

Random's card shuffled out.

In a private alcove over a grim rainstorm, Fiona battled herself terribly and finally her curiosity won out. She lifted Random's card and stared at it. Contact did not come. An image did. She held the card up high, so the roiling clouds were around her, and in their gyrations, she could see anything. She saw patterns and repetition of infinite complexity. Unfocusing her eyes, Fiona allowed herself to see everything and the clouds become one with the trump.

She saw Random, covered in blood, and bitten. She saw Spait, blood pouring from his mouth, facing her inert brother. She knew the wyrm had beaten him. And Fiona knew that Random was dead as if a voice had told her so.

She put her cards away, hating herself for breaking her own rule and using them when her heart said no.

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For all that dark night wrapped the city and gloomy storms stuffed the eyes up with shadow, something saw through the unnatural and unseasonable storm to watch Spait's rages over fallen Random. That thing did not move itself, but shortly figures appeared within the cavern. They gleamed with corpselight, and their shrouds hung wet. They appeared from nowhere and faced the dragon before throwing back their hoods as one. Each wore a great ring on the fourth finger of their left hands, rings with huge gems. They were elves, and they emitted the light of Valinor. Yet they were blind, their eyes burned out and empty.

"Hail, Spait," said the Lady Galadriel.

"Hail, dragon!" echoed her comrades, Elrond and Glorfindel.

"We come from the Dark Lord himself and offer you a trade. This city, and all who dwell here, for that mortal that lays on the ground before you," she said.

"He is mine!" roared Spait.

"But you cannot eat him," said Elrond.

"Your pain prevents you," said Glorfindel.

"But we will let you feast on the city if you give our Dark Lord this one small thing," urged Galadriel.

And the three dark elves bowed.

All three of the elves carried with them an air of immense and yet broken power. Graceful in their movements even with their eyes gouged out, they stood like ancient kings. Older than Random they were in the time of their people. Galadriel was tall and beautiful, yet too thin. Her face gaunt and her form perfected, yet partially eaten and stretched. Her once long hair hung in thin strands. Elrond carried himself like a warrior of power, yet his arms were thin as sticks. His joints bulged. A circlet of power, golden, wrapped Glorfindel's head. His blind eyes could not see it. He and Galadriel both radiated a warm light. They had been blinded by irons. Elrond stood in darkness, and his aura was one of burning corpse-fumes over ancient battlegrounds where the dead had rotted for eons and would continue for eons more.

The dragon complained. "I can feast on what I want. You cannot stop me."

"We've no desire to stop you," said Galadriel.

"Indeed, we would give you gifts to aid you in your work," said Elrond.

"Take the city," whispered Galadriel.

"Consume the people," agreed Elrond.

"Break them. Burn them," whispered the elf-queen.

"Gnash them. Slash them," urged Glorfindel.

"Kill them without mercy, and eat until your hunger slakes and you curl up on a bed of everything they possessed," said Elrond. "For do you not deserve everything?"

Their rings glittered. The elves advanced.

Spait turned side to side, trying to keep all three within sight at once.

"I have no need of rings!" roared the dragon.

"Agreed," said Elrond.

"The Lord of the Rings knows this and does not offer you rings," said Galadriel.

"He offers you something else. Something better," whispered Glorfindel, and his ring lit up with flames like a beacon. "The Dark Lord offers you fire."

"Be no more a cold wyrm, Spait, but a fire drake. Be Spait the Firedrake, and burn all of Amber!" offered Galadriel.

Glorfindel threw a great plume of fire into the wet air between them, and for a moment the canyon burned like noontime. It was a small and weak defile. The walls were not so high. The shadows not so dark. The rocks lay still without the power to dance and threaten in the cloak of shadow. But Glorfindel created flame and Galadriel worked her craft on it, and soon the shadows did move. The rocks did creep and hide. The walls grew and the darkness gathered. The pillar of fire danced before Spait like a beacon.

The dragon gave in to temptation and ate the fire.

Snap! And it was gone. Spait's whole eye burned orange, and the wounded one blazed anew, sending a flare out into the night. The darkness of his irisless eyes blossomed with tongues of flame, licking against the eyeballs from the inside. His blood sizzled. Rain beat his scales and skittered as it boiled. The dragon threw his head back and roared, and his malice and hunger defied rain and storm to echo against the sky, bounce from cloud to sea to mountain, and even in high Kolvir the terrible lust of the dragon's fury shook the castle foundations.

Spait did not wait, for thought he desired the flesh of the king, impatience and hunger for all people and all their gold infected his blood. It breathed through his lungs. Spait turned on the city and charged. His fire lit the hillside, and for an instant the people of Amber saw his coming like a rainbow, diffracted by storm and rain. Then they saw his fire and the terror of his black claws. Fear took them, and they screaming fled.

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Elsewhere, three hooded elves carried Random up a hillside. His eyelids glowed, and sometimes he cried out in sleep. He tried to wake, but something bound him to his dreams. By his lashing and shaking, these tormented him.

The elves carried him to the edge of the city, which even now had started to burn. The rain couldn't put out the fires, or perhaps didn't try. But the elves took the king to a small board beside a bar, an old sign, that now was nothing but vacant wood. The inhabitant was elsewhere.

Approaching the sign as a gateway, the elves walked through, carrying their prisoner. Its vacancy opened before them, and on the other side waited an army of creatures more foul. Orcs stood there, beyond numbers. Armed and armored in crude iron and black leather, they waited in silent malice.

In some way the elven kings who wore Sauron's rings and the orcs resembled each other. The elves stood tall, and two of them carried the light of Valinor. Random thrashed, fighting to wake, and he could not.

"The way is open," said Galadriel.

"Go forth," said Elrond.

"Destroy everything," said Glorfindel.

Unleashed, the orcish hordes poured through the pathways of shadow to Amber.