

Roger Zelazny. Blue Horse, Dancing Mountains

I took a right at the Burning Wells and fled smokeghosts across the Uplands of Artine. I slew the leader of the Kerts of Shern as her flock harried me from hightowered perches among the canyons of that place. The others abandoned the sport, and we were through, beneath a green rain out of a slate-colored sky. Onward and down then, to where the plains swirled dust devils that sang of sad eternities in rock that once they were.

At last the winds fell off and Shask, my deadly mount, blue stallion out of Chaos, slowed to a stop before vermilion sands.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"We must cross this neck of the desert to reach the Dancing Mountains," Shask replied.

"And how long a journey might that be?"

"Most of the rest of the day," he said. "It is narrowest here. We have paid in part for this indulgence already. The rest will come in the mountains themselves, for now we must cross where they are very active."

I raised my canteen and shook it.

"Worth it," I said, "so long as they don't really dance in Richter terms."

"No, but at the Great Divide between the shadows of Amber and the shadows of Chaos there is some natural shifting activity in play where they meet."

"I'm no stranger to shadow-storms, which is what that sounds like--a permanent shadow-storm front. But I wish we could just push on through rather than camp there."

"I told you when you chose me, Lord Corwin, that I could bear you farther than any other mount by day. But by night I become an unmoving serpent, hardening to stone and cold as a demon's heart, thawing come dawn."

"Yes, I recall," I said, --and you have served me well, as Merlin said you might. Perhaps we should overnight this side of the mountains and cross tomorrow."

"The front, as I said, shifts. Likely, at some point, it would join you in the foothills or before. Once you reach the region, it matters not where we spend the night. The shadows will dance over us or near us. Dismount now, please, unsaddle, and remove your gear, that I may shift."

"To what?" I asked as I swung to the ground.

"I've a lizard form would face this desert best."

"By all means, Shask, be comfortable, be efficient. Be a lizard."

I set about unburdening him. It was good to be free again.

Shask as blue lizard was enormously fast and virtually tireless. He got us across the sands with daylight to spare, and as I stood beside him contemplating the trail that led upward through the foothills, he spoke in a sibilant tone: "As I said, the shadows can catch us anywhere around here, and I still have strength to take us up for an hour or so before we camp, rest, and feed. What is your choice?"

"Go," I told him.

Trees changed their foliage even as I watched. The trail was maddeningly irregular, shifting its course, changing its character beneath us. Seasons came and went--a flurry of snow followed by a blast of hot air, then springtime and blooming flowers. There were glimpses of towers and metal people, highways, bridges, tunnels gone in moments. Then the entire dance would shift away and we would simply be mounting a trail again.

At last, we made camp in a sheltered area near to a summit. Clouds collected as we ate, and a few rumbles under rolled in the distance. I made myself a low lean-to. Shask transformed himself into a great dragonheaded, winged, feathered serpent, and coiled nearby.

"A good night to you, Shask," I called out, as the first drops fell.

"And-to-you-Corwin," he said softly.

I lay back, closed my eyes, and was asleep almost immediately. How long I slept, I do not know. I was jarred out of it, however, by a terrific clap of thunder which seemed to occur directly overhead.

I found myself sitting up, having reached out to and half drawn Grayswandir, before the echoes died. I shook my head and sat listening. Something seemed to be missing and I could not determine what.

There came a brilliant flash of light and another thunderclap. I flinched at them and sat waiting for more, but only silence followed. Silence...

I stuck my hand outside the lean-to, then my head. It had stopped raining. That was the missing item--the splatter of droplets.

My gaze was attracted by a glow from beyond the nearby summit. I pulled on my boots and departed the shelter. Outside, I buckled on my sword belt and fastened my cloak at the neck. I had to investigate. In a place like this, any activity might represent a threat.

I touched Shask--who indeed felt stony--as I passed, and made my way to where the trail had been. It was still there, though diminished in width, and I set foot upon it and climbed upward. The light source for which I was headed seemed to be moving slightly. Now, faintly, in the distance, I seemed to hear the sound of rainfall. Perhaps it was coming down on the other side of the peak.

As I advanced, I became convinced that it was storming not too far away. I could now hear the moaning of wind within the splashing.

I was suddenly dazzled by a flash from beyond the crest. A sharp report of thunder kept it company. I halted for only a moment. During that time, amid the ringing in my ears, I thought that I heard the sound of a cackling laugh.

Trudging ahead, I came at last to the summit. Immediately, the wind assailed me, bearing a full load of moisture. I drew my cloak closed and fastened it down the front as I made my way forward.

Several paces then, and I beheld a hollow, below and to my left. It was eerily illuminated by dancing orbs of ball lightning. There were two figures within it--one seated on the ground, the other, cross-legged, hanging Upside down in the air with no apparent means of support, across from him. I chose the most concealed route I could and headed toward them.

They were lost to my sight much of the way, as the course I had taken bore me through areas of fairly dense foliage. Abruptly, however, I knew that I was near when the rain ceased to fall upon me and I no longer felt the pressures of the wind. It was as if I had entered the still eye of a hurricane.

Cautiously, I continued my advance, winding up on my belly, peering amid branches at the two old men. Both regarded the invisible cubes of a three-dimensional game, pieces hung above a board on the ground between them, squares of their aerial positions limned faintly in fire. The man seated upon the ground was a hunchback, and he was smiling, and I knew him. It was Dworkin Barimen, my legendary ancestor, filled with ages and wisdom and godlike powers, creator of Amber, the Pattern, the Trumps, and maybe reality itself as I understood it. Unfortunately, through much of my dealing with him in recent times, he'd also been more than a little bit nuts.

Merlin had assured me that he was recovered now, but I wondered. Godlike beings are often noted for some measure of nontraditional rationality. It just seems to go with the territory. I wouldn't put it past the old bugger to be using sanity as a pose while in pursuit of some paradoxical end.

The other man, whose back was to me, reached forward and moved a piece that seemed to correspond to a pawn. It was a representation of the Chaos beast known as a Fire Angel. When the move was completed the lightning flashed again and the thunder cracked and my body tingled. Then Dworkin reached out and moved one of his pieces, a Wyvern. Again, the thunder and lightning, the tingling. I saw that a rearing Unicorn occupied the place of the King among Dworkin's pieces, a representation of the palace at Amber on

the square beside it. His opponent's King was an erect Serpent, the Thelbane--the great needlelike palace of the Kings of Chaos--beside it.

Dworkin's opponent advanced a Piece, laughing as he did so. "Mandor," he announced. "He thinks himself puppet-master and king-maker." After the crash and dazzle, Dworkin moved a piece. "Corwin," he said.

"He is free again."

"Yes. But he does not know he is in a race with destiny. I doubt he will make it back to Amber in time to encounter the hall of mirrors. Without their clues, how effective will he be?"

Dworkin smiled and raised his eyes. For a moment, he seemed to be looking right at me. "I think his timing is perfect, Suhuy," he said then, "and I have several pieces of his memory I found years ago drifting above the Pattern in Rebma. I wish I had a golden piss-pot for each time he's been underestimated."

"What would that give you?" asked the other.

"Expensive helmets for his enemies."

Both men laughed, and Suhuy rotated 90 degrees counterclockwise. Dworkin rose into the air and tilted forward until he was parallel to the ground, looking down on the board. Suhuy tended a hand toward a female figure on one of the higher levels, then drew it back. Abruptly, he moved the Fire Angel again. Even as the air was burned and beaten Dworkin made a move, so that the thunder continued into a roll and the brightness hung there. Dworkin said something I could not hear over the din. Suhuy's response to the probable naming was, "But she's a Chaos figure!"

"So? We set no rule against it. Your move."

"I want to study this," Suhuy said. "More than a little."

"Take it with you," Dworkin responded. "Bring it back tomorrow night?"

"I'll be occupied. The night after?"

"I will be occupied. Three nights hence?"

"Yes. Until then?"

"--good night."

The blast and the crash that followed blinded me and deafened me for several moments. Suddenly, I felt the rain and the wind. When my vision cleared, I saw that the hollow was empty. Retreating, I made my way back over the crest and down to my camp, which the rain had found again, also. The trail was wider now.

I rose at dawn and fed myself while I waited for Shask to stir. The night's doings did not seem like a dream.

"Shask," I said later, "do you know what a hellride is?"

"I've heard of it," he replied, "as an arcane means of traveling great distances in a short time, employed by the House of Amber. Said to be hazardous to the mental health of the noble steed."

"You strike me as being eminently stable, emotionally and intellectually."

"Why, thank you--I guess. Why the sudden rush?"

"You slept through a great show," I said, "and now I've a date with a gang of reflections if I can catch them before they fade."

"If it must be done..."

"We race for the golden piss-pot, my friend. Rise up and be a horse."