

Roger Zelazny. Hall of Mirrors

Neither of us realized there had been a change until a halfdozen guys tried an ambush.

We had spent the night in the Dancing Mountains, Shask and I, where I'd witnessed a bizarre game between Dworkin and Suhuy. I'd heard strange tales about things that happened to people who spent the night there, but I hadn't had a hell of a lot of choice in the matter. It had been storming, I was tired, and my mount had become a statue. I don't know how that game turned out, though I was mentioned obliquely as a participant and I'm still wondering.

The next morning my blue horse Shask and I had crossed the Shadow Divide 'twixt Amber and Chaos. Shask was a Shadow mount my son Merlin had found for me in the royal stables of the Courts. At the moment, Shask was traveling under the guise of a giant blue lizard, and we were singing songs from various times and places.

Two men rose on either side of the trail from amid rocky cover, pointing crossbows at us. Two more stepped out before us one with a bow, the other bearing a rather beautiful looking blade, doubtless stolen, considering the guy's obvious profession.

"Halt! and no harm'll happen," said the swordsman.

I drew rein.

"When it comes to money, I'm pretty much broke right now," I said, "and I doubt any of you could ride my mount, or would care to."

"Well now, maybe and maybe not," said the leader, "but it's a rough way to make a living, so we take whatever we can."

"It's not a good idea to leave a man with nothing," I said. "Some people hold grudges."

"Most of them can't walk out of here."

"Sounds like a death sentence to me."

He shrugged.

"That sword of yours looks pretty fancy," he said. "Let's see it."

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said.

"Why not?"

"If I draw it, I may wind up killing you," I said.

He laughed.

"We can take it off your body," he said, glancing to his right and left.

"Maybe," I said.

"Let's see it."

"If you insist."

I drew Grayswandir with a singing note. It persisted, and the eyes of the swordsman before me widened as it went on to describe an arc calculated

to intersect with his neck. His own weapon came out as mine passed through his neck and continued. His cut toward Shask and passed through the animal's shoulder. Neither blow did any damage whatsoever.

"You a sorcerer?" he asked as I swung again, delivering a blow that might have removed his arm. Instead, it passed harmlessly by.

"Not the kind who does things like this. You?"

"No," he answered, striking again. "What's going on?"

I slammed Grayswandir back into the scabbard.

"Nothing," I said. "Go bother someone else."

I shook the reins, and Shask moved forward.

"Shoot him down!" the man cried.

The men on either side of the trail released their crossbow bolts, as did the other man before me. All four bolts from the sides passed through Shask, three of the men injuring or killing their opposite numbers. The one from ahead passed through me without pain or discomfort. An attempted sword blow achieved nothing for my first assailant.

"Ride on," I said.

Shask did so and we ignored their swearing as we went.

"We seem to have come into a strange situation," I observed.

The beast nodded.

"At least it kept us out of some trouble," I said.

"Funny. I'd a feeling you would have welcomed trouble," Shask said.

I chuckled.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," I replied. "I wonder how long the spell lasts?"

"Maybe it has to be lifted."

"Shit! That's always a pain."

"Beats being insubstantial."

"True."

"Surely someone back at Amber will know what to do."

"Hope so."

We rode on, and we encountered no one else that day. I felt the rocks beneath me when I wrapped myself in my cloak to sleep that night. Why did I feel them when I didn't feel a sword or a crossbow bolt? Too late to ask Shask whether he had felt anything, for he had turned to stone for the night.

I yawned and stretched. A partly unsheathed Grayswandir felt normal beneath my fingers. I pushed it back in and went to sleep.

Following my morning ablutions, we rode again. Shask was taking well to hellrides, as well as most Amber mounts did. Better, in some ways. We raced through a wildly changing landscape. I thought ahead to Amber, and I thought back to the time I'd spent imprisoned in the Courts. I had honed my sensitivity to a very high degree through meditation, and I began to wonder whether that, coupled with other strange disciplines I'd undertaken, could have led to my intangibility. I supposed it might have contributed, but I'd a feeling the Dancing Mountains were the largest donor.

"I wonder what it represents and where it came from?" I said aloud.

"Your homeland, I'd bet," Shask replied, "left especially for you."

"Why did you read it that way?"

"You've been telling me about your family as we rode along. I wouldn't trust them."

"Those days are past."

"Who knows what might have happened while you were away? Old habits return easily."

"One would need a reason for something like that."

"For all you know, one of them has a very good one."

"Possibly. But it doesn't seem likely. I've been away for some time, and few know I'm free at last."

"Then question those few."

"We'll see."

"Just trying to be helpful."

"Don't stop. Say, what do you want to do after we get to Amber?"

"Haven't made up my mind yet. I've been something of a wanderer."

I laughed.

"You're a beast after my own heart. In that your sentiments are most unbestial, how can I repay you for this transport?"

"Wait. I've a feeling the Fates will take care of that."

"So be it. In the meantime, though, if you happen to think of something special, let me know."

"It's a privilege to help you, Lord Corwin. Let it go at that."

"All right. Thanks."

We passed through shadow after shadow. Suns ran backward and storms assailed us out of beautiful skies. We toyed with night, which might have trapped a less adroit pair than us, found a twilight, and took our rations there. Shortly thereafter, Shask turned back to stone. Nothing attacked us that night, and my dreams were hardly worth dreaming.

Next day we were on our way early, and I used every trick I knew to shortcut us through Shadow on our way home. Home... It did feel good to be headed back, despite Shask's comments on my relatives. I'd no idea I would miss Amber as much as I had. I'd been away far longer on countless occasions, but usually I had at least a rough idea as to when I might be heading back. A prison in the Courts, though, was not a place from which one might make such estimates.

So we tore on, wind across a plain, fire in the mountains, water down a steep ravine. That evening I felt the resistance begin, the resistance which comes when one enters that area of Shadow near to Amber. I tried to make it all the way but failed. We spent that night at a place near to where the Black Road used to run. There was no trace of it now.

The next day the going was slower, but, more and more, familiar shadows cropped up. That night we slept in Arden, but Julian did not find us. I either dreamed his hunting horn or heard it in the distance as I slept; and though it is often prelude to death and destruction, it merely made me feel nostalgic. I was finally near to home.

The next morning I woke before sunup. Shask, of course, was still a

blue lizard curled at the base of a giant tree. So I made tea and ate an apple afterward. We were low on provisions but should soon be in the land of plenty.

Shask slowly unwound as the sun came up. I fed him the rest of the apples and gathered my possessions.

We were riding before too long, slow and easy, since there would be some hard climbing up the back route I favored. During our first break I asked him to become once more a horse, and he obliged. It didn't seem to make that much difference, and I requested he maintain it. I wanted to display his beauty in that form.

"Will you be heading right back after you've seen me here?" I asked.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that," he responded. "Things have been slow back in the Courts, and I'm no one's assigned mount."

"Oh?"

"You're going to need a good mount, Lord Corwin."

"Yes, I'm sure."

"I'd like to apply for the job, for an indefinite period."

"I'd be honored," I said. "You're very special."

"Yes, I am."

We were atop Kolvir that afternoon and onto the grounds of Amber Palace within hours after that. I found Shask a good stall, groomed him, fed him, and left him to turn to stone at his leisure. I found a nameplate, scratched Shasko's name and my own upon it, and tacked it to his door.

"See you later," I said.

"Whatever, Lord. Whatever."

I departed the stables and headed for the palace. It was a damp, cloudy day, with a chill breeze from the direction of the sea. So far, no one had spotted me.

I entered by way of the kitchen, where there was new help on duty. None of them recognized me, though they obviously realized that I belonged. At least, they returned my greeting with due respect and did not object to some fruit I pocketed. They did ask whether I cared to have something sent to one of the rooms, and I answered "yes" and told them to send a bottle of wine and a chicken along with it. The afternoon head chef--a redhaired lady named Clare--began studying me more closely, and more than once her gaze drifted toward the silver rose on my cloak. I did not want to announce my identity just then, and I thought they'd be a little afraid to guess ahead at it, at least for a few hours. I did want the time to rest a bit and just enjoy the pleasure of being back. So, "Thanks," I said, and I went on my way to my quarters.

I started up the back stairs the servants use for being unobtrusive and the rest of us for being sneaky.

Partway up, I realized that the way was blocked by sawhorses. Tools lay scattered about the stairs though there were no workmen in sight--and I couldn't tell whether a section of old stair had simply given way or whether some other force had been brought to bear upon it.

I returned, cut around to the front, and took the big stairway up. As I

made my way, I saw signs of exterior repair work, including entire walls and sections of flooring. Any number of apartments were open to viewing. I hurried to make sure that mine was not among their number.

Fortunately, it was not. I was about to let myself in when a big redhaired fellow turned a corner and headed toward me. I shrugged. Some visiting dignitary, no doubt...

"Corwin!" he called out. "What are you doing here?"

As he drew nearer, I saw that he was studying me most intently. I gave him the same treatment.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure," I said.

"Aw, come on, Corwin," he said. "You surprised me. Thought you were off by your Pattern and the '57 Chevy."

I shook my head.

"Not sure what you're talking about," I said.

He narrowed his eyes.

"You're not a Pattern ghost?" he said.

"Merlin told me something about them," I said, "after he effected my release at the Courts. But I don't believe I've ever met one."

I rolled up my left sleeve.

"Cut me. I bleed," I said.

As he studied my arm, his gaze appeared more than a little serious. For a moment, I thought he'd actually take me up on it.

"All right," he said then. "Just a nick. For security purposes."

"I still don't know who I'm talking to," I said.

He bowed.

"Sorry. I am Luke of Kashfa, sometimes known as Rinaldo I, its king. If you are who you say you are, I am your nephew. My dad was your brother Brand."

Studying him, I saw the resemblance. I thrust my arm farther forward.

"Do it," I said.

"You're serious."

"Dead right."

He drew a Bowie knife from his belt then and looked into my eyes. I nodded. He moved to touch my forearm with its tip and nothing happened. That is to say, something happened, but it was neither desired nor wholly anticipated.

The point of his blade seemed to sink a halfinch or so into my arm. It kept going then, finally passing all the way through. But no blood came.

He tried again. Nothing.

"Damn," he said. "I don't understand. If you were a Pattern ghost, we'd at least get a flare. But there's not even a mark on you."

"May I borrow the blade?" I asked.

"Sure."

He passed it to me. I took it in my hand and studied it, I pushed it into my arm and drew it along for perhaps threequarters of an inch. Blood oozed.

"I'll be damned," Luke said. "What's going on?"

"I'd say it's a spell I picked up when I spent a night in the Dancing Mountains recently," I replied.

"Hm," Luke mused, "I've never had the pleasure, but I've heard stories of the place. I don't know any simple ways to break its spells. My room's off toward the front." He gestured southward. "If you'd care to stop by, I'll see what I can figure out about it. I studied Chaos magic with my dad, and with my mother, Jasra."

I shrugged.

"This is my room right here," I said, "and I've a chicken and a bottle of wine on the way up. Let's do the diagnosis in here, and I'll split the meal with you."

He smiled.

"Best offer I've had all day," he said. "But let me stop back at my room for some tools of the trade."

"All right. I'll walk you back, so I'll know the way in case I need it."

He nodded and turned. We headed up the hall.

Turning the corner, we moved from west to east, passing Flora's apartments and moving in the direction of some of the better visitors' quarters. Luke halted before one room and reached into his pocket, presumably after the key. Then he halted.

"Uh, Corwin?" he said.

"What?" I responded.

"Those two big cobrashaped candle holders," he said, gesturing up the hall. "Bronze, I believe."

"Most likely. What of them?"

"I thought they were just hall decorations."

"That's what they are."

"The last time I looked at them, they kind of bracketed a small painting or tapestry," he said.

"My recollection, too," I said.

"Well, there seems to be a corridor between them now."

"No, that can't be. There's a proper hallway just a little beyond--" I began.

Then I shut up because I knew. I began walking toward it.

"What's going on?" Luke asked.

"It's calling me," I said. "I've got to go and see what it wants."

"What is it?"

"The Hall of Mirrors. It comes and goes. It brings sometimes useful, sometimes ambiguous messages to the one it calls."

"Is it calling us both, or just you?" Luke said.

"Dunno," I replied. "I feel it calling me, as it has in the past. You're welcome to come with me. Maybe it has some goodies for you, too."

"You ever hear of two people taking it at once?"

"No, but there's a first time for everything," I said.

Luke nodded slowly.

"What the hell," he said, "I'm game."

He followed me to the place of the snakes, and we peered up it. Candles flared along its walls, at either hand. And the walls glittered from the countless mirrors which hung upon them. I stepped forward. Luke followed, at my left.

The mirror frames were of every shape imaginable. I walked very slowly, observing the contents of each one. I told Luke to do the same. For several paces, the mirrors seemed simply to be giving back what was before them. Then Luke stiffened and halted, head turning to the left.

"Mom!" he said explosively.

The reflection of an attractive red-haired woman occupied a mirror framed in green-tinged copper in the shape of an Ouroboros serpent.

She smiled.

"So glad you did the right thing, taking the throne," she said.

"You really mean that?" he asked.

"Of course," she replied.

"Thought you might be mad. Thought you wanted it," he said.

"I did once, but those damned Kashfans never appreciated me. I've got the Keep now, though, and I feel like doing a few years' research here--and it's full of sentimental values as well. So as long as Kashfa stays in the family, I wanted you to know I was pleased."

"Why--uh--glad to hear that, Mom. Very glad. I'll hang onto it."

"Do," she said, and vanished.

He turned to me, a small ironic smile flickering across his lips.

"That's one of the rare times in my life when she's approved of something I've done," he said. "Doubtless for all the wrong reasons, but still... How real are these things? What exactly did we see? Was that a conscious communication on her part? Was--"

"They're real," I said. "I don't know how or why or what part of the other is actually present. They may be stylized, surreal, may even suck you in. But in some way they're really real. That's all I know. Holy cow!"

From the huge gold-framed mirror, ahead and to my right, the grim visage of my father Oberon peered forth. I advanced a pace.

"Corwin," he said. "You were my chosen, but you always had a way of disappointing me."

"That's the breaks," I said.

"True. And one should not speak of you as a child after all these years. You've made your choices. Of some I have been proud. You have been valiant."

"Why, thank you--sir."

"I bid you do something immediately."

"What?"

"Draw your dagger and stab Luke."

I stared.

"No," I said.

"Corwin," Luke said. "It could be something like your proving you're

not a Pattern ghost."

"But I don't give a damn whether you're a Pattern ghost," I said. "It's nothing to me."

"Not that," Oberon interjected. "This is of a different order."

"What, then?" I asked.

"Easier to show than to tell," Oberon replied.

Luke shrugged.

"So nick my arm," he said. "Big deal."

"All right. Let's see how the show beats the tell."

I drew a stiletto from my boot sheath. He pulled back his sleeve and extended his arm. I stabbed lightly.

My blade passed through his arm as if the limb were made of smoke.

"Shit," Luke said. "It's contagious."

"No," Oberon responded. "It is a thing of very special scope."

"That is to say?" Luke asked.

"Would you draw your sword, please?"

Luke nodded and drew a familiar-looking golden blade. It emitted a high keening sound, causing all of the candle flames in the vicinity to flicker. Then I knew it for what it was--my brother Brand's blade, Werewindle.

"Haven't seen that in a long while," I said, as the keening continued.

"Luke, would you cut Corwin with your blade, please?"

Luke raised his eyes, met my gaze. I nodded. He moved the blade, scored my arm with its point. I bled.

"Corwin--If you would...?" Oberon said.

I drew Grayswandir and it, too, ventured into fighting song--as I had only heard it do on great battlefields in the past. The two tones joined together into a devastating duet.

"Cut Luke."

Luke nodded and I sliced the back of his hand with Grayswandir. An incision line occurred, reddening immediately. The sounds from our blades rose and fell. I sheathed Grayswandir to shut her up. Luke did the same with Werewindle.

"There's a lesson there somewhere," Luke said. "Damned If I can see what it is, though."

"They're brother and sister weapons, you know, with a certain magic in common. In fact, they've a powerful secret in common," Oberon said. "Tell him, Corwin."

"It's a dangerous secret, sir."

"The time has come for it to be known. You may tell him,"

"All right," I said. "Back in the early days of creation, the gods had a series of rings their champions used in the stabilization of Shadow."

"I know of them," Luke said. "Merlin wears a spikard."

"Really," I said. "They each have the power to draw on many sources in many shadows. They're all different."

"So Merlin said."

"Ours were turned into swords, and so they remain."

"Oh?" Luke said. "What do you know?"

"What do you deduce from the fact that they can do you harm when another weapon cannot?"

"Looks as if they're somehow involved in our enchantment," I ventured.

"That's right," Oberon said. "In whatever conflict lies ahead--no matter what side you are on--you will need exotic protection against the oddball power of someone like Jurt."

"Jurt?" I said.

"Later," Luke told me. "I'll fill you in."

I nodded.

"Just how is this protection to be employed. How do we lot back to full permeability?" I asked.

"I will not say," he replied, "but someone along the way here should be able to tell you. And whatever happens, my blessing--which is probably no longer worth much--lies on both of you."

We bowed and said thanks. When we looked up again, he was gone.

"Great," I said. "Back for less than an hour and involved in Amber ambiguity."

Luke nodded.

"Chaos and Kashfa seem just as bad, though," he said. "Maybe the state's highest function is to grind out insoluble problems."

I chuckled as we moved on, regarding ourselves in dozens of pools of light. For several paces nothing happened, then a familiar face appeared in a red-framed oval to my left.

"Corwin, what a pleasure," she said.

"Dara!"

"It seems that my unconscious will must be stronger than that of anyone else who wishes you ill," she said. "So I get to deliver the best piece of news of all."

"Yes?" I said.

"I see one of you lying pierced by the blade of the other. What joy!"

"I've no intention of killing this guy," I told her.

"Goes both ways," Luke said.

"Ah, but that is the deadly beauty of it," she said. "One of you must be run through by the other for the survivor to regain that element of permeability he has lost."

"Thanks, but I'll find another way," Luke said. "My mom, Jasra, is a pretty good sorceress."

Her laughter sounded like the breaking of one of the mirrors.

"Jasra! She was one of my maids," she said. "She picked up whatever she knows of the Art by eavesdropping on my work. Not without talent, but she never received full training."

"My dad completed her training," Luke said.

As she studied Luke, the merriment went out of her face.

"All right," she said. "I'll level with you, son of Brand. I can't see any way to resolve it other than the way I stated. As I have nothing against you, I hope to see you victorious."

"Thanks," he said, "but I've no intention of fighting my uncle. Someone must be able to lift this thing."

"The tools themselves have drawn you into this," she said. "They will force you to fight. They are stronger than mortal sorcery."

"Thanks for the advice," he said. "Some of it may come in handy," and he winked at her. She blushed, hardly a response I'd have anticipated, then she was gone.

"I don't like the tenor this has acquired," I said.

"Me neither. Can't we just turn around and go back?"

I shook my head.

"It sucks you in," I told him. "Just get everything you can out of it--that's the best advice I ever got on the thing."

We walked on for perhaps ten feet, past some absolutely lovely examples of mirror making as well as some battered old looking glasses.

A yellow-lacquered one on Luke's side, embossed with Chinese characters and chipped here and there, froze us in our tracks as the booming voice of my late brother Eric rang out:

"I see your fates," he said with a rumbling laugh. "And I can see the killing ground where you are destined to enact them. It will be interesting, brother. If you hear laughter as you lie dying, it will be mine."

"Oh, you always were a great kidder," I said. "By the way, rest in peace. You're a hero, you know."

He studied my face.

"Crazy brother," he said, and he turned his head away and was gone.

"That was Eric, who reigned briefly as king here?" Luke asked.

I nodded. "Crazy brother," I said.

We moved forward and a slim hand emerged from a steel-framed mirror patterned with roses of rust.

I halted, then turned quickly, somehow knowing even before I saw her who I would behold.

"Deirdre..." I said.

"Corwin," she replied softly.

"Do you know what's been going on as we walked along?"

She nodded.

"How much is bullshit and how much is true?" I asked.

"I don't know, but I don't think any of the others do either--not for sure."

"Thanks. I'll take all the reassurances I can get. What now?"

"If you will take hold of the other's arm, it will make the transport easier."

"What transport?"

"You may not leave this hall on your own motion. You will be taken direct to the killing ground."

"By you, love?"

"I've no choice in the matter."

I nodded. I took hold of Luke's arm.

"What do you think?" I asked him.

"I think we should go," he said, "offering no resistance--and when we find out who's behind this, we take him apart with hot irons."

"I like the way you think," I said. "Deirdre, show us the way."

"I've bad feelings about this one, Corwin."

"If, as you said, we've no choice in the matter, what difference does it make? Lead on, lady. Lead on."

She took my hand. The world began to spin around us.

Somebody owed me a chicken and a bottle of wine. I would collect.

I awoke lying in what seemed a glade under a moonlit sky. I kept my eyes half-lidded and did not move. No sense in giving away my wakefulness.

Very slowly, I moved my eyes. Deirdre was nowhere in sight. My rightside peripheral vision informed me that there might be a bonfire in that direction, with some folks seated around it.

I rolled my eyes to the left and got a glimpse of Luke. No one else seemed to be nearby.

"You awake?" I whispered.

"Yeah," he replied.

"No one near," I said, rising, "except maybe for a few around a fire off to the right. We might be able to find a way out and take it--Trumps, Shadowwalk--and thus break the ritual. Or we might be trapped."

Luke put a finger into his mouth, removed it, and raised it, as if testing the wind.

"We're caught up in a sequence I think we need," he said.

"To the death?" I said.

"I don't know. But I don't really think we can escape this one," he replied.

He rose to his feet.

"Ain't the fighting, it's the familiarity," I said. "I begrudge knowing you."

"Me, too. Want to flip a coin?" he asked.

"Heads, we walk away. Tails, we go over and see what the story is."

"Fine with me." He plunged his hand into a pocket, pulled out a quarter.

"Do the honors," I said.

He flipped it. We both dropped to our knees.

"Tails," he said. "Best two out of three?"

"Naw," I said. "Let's go."

Luke pocketed his quarter, and we turned and walked toward the fire.

"Only a dozen people or so. We can take them," Luke said softly.

"They don't look particularly hostile," I said.

"True."

I nodded as we approached and addressed them in Thari:

"Hello," I said. "I'm Corwin of Amber and this is Rinaldo I, King of Kashfa, also known as Luke. Are we by any chance expected here?"

An older man, who had been seated before the fire and poking at it with a stick, rose to his feet and bowed.

"My name is Reis," he said, "and we are witnesses."

"For whom?" Luke said.

"We do not know their names. There were two and they wore hoods. One, I think, was a woman. --We may offer you food and drink before things begin..."

"Yeah," I said, "I'm out a meal because of this. Feed me."

"Me, too," Luke added, and the man and a couple of his cohorts brought meat, apples, cheese, bread, and cups of red wine.

As we ate, I asked Reis, "Can you tell me how this thing works?"

"Of course," he said. "They told me. When you're finished eating, if you two will move to the other side of the fire, the cues will come to you."

I laughed and then I shrugged.

"All right," I said.

Finished dining, I looked at Luke. He smiled.

"If we've got to sing for our supper," Luke said, "let's give them a ten-minute demonstration and call it a draw."

I nodded.

"Sounds good to me."

We put aside our plates, rose, moved to the fire, and passed behind it.

"Ready?" I said.

"Sure. Why not?"

We drew our weapons, stepped back, and saluted. We both laughed when the music began. Suddenly, I found myself attacking, though I had decided to await the attack and put my first energies into its counter. The movement had been thoughtless, though quite deft and speedy.

"Luke," I said as he parried, "it got away from me. Be careful. There's something odd going on."

"I know," he said as he delivered a formidable attack. "I wasn't planning that."

I parried it and came back even faster. He retreated.

"Not bad," he said, as I felt something loosened in my arm. Suddenly I was fencing on my own again, voluntarily, with no apparent control but with fear that it might be reasserted at any moment.

Suddenly, I knew that we were fairly free and it scared me. If I weren't sufficiently vicious, I might be taken over again. If I were, someone might slip in an unsolicited move at the wrong moment. I grew somewhat afraid.

"Luke, if what's happening to you is similar to what's been happening to me, I don't like this show a bit," I told him.

"Me neither," he said.

I glanced back across the fire. A pair of hooded individuals stood among the others. They were not overlarge and there was a certain whiteness within the cowl of the nearer.

"We've more audience," I said.

Luke glanced back; it was only with great difficulty that I halted a cowardly attack as he turned away. When we returned to hard combat, he shook

his head.

"Couldn't recognize either of them," he said. "This seems a little more serious than I thought."

"Yeah."

"We can both take quite a beating and recover."

"True."

Our blades rattled on. Occasionally, one or the other of us received a cheer.

"What say we injure each other," Luke said, "then throw ourselves down and wait for their judgment on whatever's been accomplished. If either of them come near enough, we take them out just for laughs."

"Okay," I said. "If you can expose your left shoulder a bit, I'm willing to take a midline cut. Let's give them lots of gore before we flop, though. Head and forearm cuts. Anything easy."

"Okay. And 'simultaneity' is the word."

So we fought. I stood off a bit, going faster and faster. Why not? It was kind of a game.

Suddenly, my body executed a move I had not ordered it to. Luke's eyes widened as the blood spurted and Grayswandir passed entirely through his shoulder. Moments later, Werewindle pierced my vitals.

"Sorry," Luke said. "Listen, Corwin. If you live and I don't, you'd better know that there's too much crazy stuff involving mirrors going on around the castle. The night before you came back, Flora and I fought a creature that came out of a mirror. And there's an odd sorcerer involved--has a crush on Flora. Nobody knows his name. Has something to do with Chaos, though, I'd judge. Could it be that for the first time Amber is starting to reflect Shadow, rather than the other way around?"

"Hello," said a familiar voice. "The deed is done."

"Indeed," said another.

It was the two cowed figures who had spoken. One was Fiona, the other Mandor.

"However it be resolved, good night, sweet prince," said Fiona.

I tried to rise. So did Luke. Tried also to raise my blade. Could not. Again, the world grew dim, and this time I was leaking precious bodily fluids.

"I'm going to live--and come after you," I said.

"Corwin," I heard her say faintly. "We are not as culpable as you may think. This was--"

"--all for my own good, I'll bet," I muttered before the world went dark, growling with the realization that I hadn't gotten to use my death curse. One of these days....

I woke up in the dispensary in Amber, Luke in the next bed. We both had IVs dripping into us.

"You're going to live," Flora said, lowering my wrist from taking my pulse. "Care to tell me your story now?"

"They just found us in the hall?" Luke asked. "The Hall of Mirrors was

nowhere in sight?"

"That's right."

"I don't want to mention any names yet," I said.

"Corwin," Luke said, "Did the Hall of Mirrors show up a lot when you were a kid?"

"No," I said.

"Hardly ever, when I was growing up either," Flora said. "It's only in recent years that it's become this active. Almost as if the place were waking up."

"The place?" Luke said.

"Almost as if there's another player in the game," she responded.

"Who?" I demanded, causing a pain in my gut.

"Why, the castle itself, of course," she said.

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