

Roger Zelazny. Salesman Tale

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Glad I'd planned on leaving Merlin in the Crystal Cave for a long while. Glad he didn't stay the entire time. As I interrupted our trumped conversation by kicking over my glass of iced tea and shouting "Shit! I spilled it-" I turned over the Trump of Doom in my good hand.

Junkyard Forest. Nice sketch, that. Though it didn't matter what it depicted, which is why I'd had Merlin fan the cards face down and had drawn one at random. That was for show, to confuse the Pattern. All of them led to places within spitting distance of the Crystal Cave- which had been the real reason for their existence in the first place. Their only purpose had been to draw Merlin into the Cave's orbit, at which point a blue crystal warning system was to have alerted me. The plan was for me to get there in a hurry and find a way to make him a prisoner.

Unfortunately, I hadn't gotten the message when he'd drawn the Sphinx to escape from mom. Her neurotoxins had canceled a necessary trigger signal from his nervous system--just one of the many ways she's messed up my plans without half-trying. Didn't matter, though, in the long run. I got Merlin there, anyway. Only... everything changed after that.

"Luke! You fool!" The Pattern's message blasted through me like the closing number at a rock concert. But the Junkyard Forest had already come clear, and I was trumping out, before the Pattern realized that tea rather than my blood was flowing upon it.

I rose to my feet as the Pattern faded, and I moved forward amid the rusty sawblade bushes, the twisted girder trees, the gaily colored beds of broken bottles. I began to run, blood spilling from the slashed palm of my left hand. I didn't even take the time to bind it. Once the Pattern recovered from its shock and discovered itself undamaged, it was going to begin scanning Shadow for me, for the others. They'd be safe within the ambit of the other Pattern, and that left me. The walls of the Crystal Cave had the effect of blocking every paraphysical phenomenon I'd been able to test them for, and I'd a hunch they'd screen me from the Pattern's scrutiny as well. It was just a matter of my getting there before it shadow-shuffled this far.

I increased my pace. I'd stayed in shape. I could run. Past rusting cars and swirls of bedsprings, broken tiles, shattered crates... Down alleys of ashes, up trails of bottlecaps and pulltabs... Alert. Waiting. Waiting for the world to spin and waver, to hear the voice of the Pattern announce, "Gotcha!"

I rounded a bend and caught a glimpse of blue in the distance. The Junkyard Forest--result of an ancient Shadow storm--ended abruptly as I entered upon a downward slope, to be succeeded within paces by a wood of the more normal variety.

Here, I heard a few birdcalls as I passed, and the humming of insects, above the steady striking of my feet upon the earth. The sky was overcast, and I could tell nothing of temperature or wind because of my activity. The shimmering mound of blue grew larger. I maintained my pace. By now, the others should be safe, if they'd made it at all. Hell! By now they should be well out of harm's way. Just a little while in this time-stream was a much longer time back on the main drag. They could be sitting around eating and joking by now. Even napping. I bit back a curse to save breath. That also meant that the Pattern could have been searching for even longer than it seemed... Larger, even larger now, the blue ridge. I decided to see how well my finishing spurt had held up, and I went into high gear and held it there.

The earth and air were vibrated by what seemed a rumble of thunder. It could be a reaction of the irate design on having finally located me. I could also just be a rumble of thunder.

I kept pumping, and moments later, it seemed, I was braking so as not to smash up against that crystal base. No lightning bolts yet, and I scrambled for hand and footholds--never having tried climbing this face of it before--as my lungs worked like a bellows and a light rain began to fall, mingling with a layer of my perspiration. I left bloody smears on the stone, but that should soon wash away.

Achieving the summit, I rushed to its opening on all fours and entered feet first, hanging, then dropping into the dark interior despite the presence of a ladder. Haste was all. Not until I stood within that shadowy blueness, still puffing, did I feel at all safe. As soon as I caught my breath I allowed myself to laugh. I had done it. I had escaped the Pattern. I walked about the chamber beating upon my thighs and slapping the walls. A victory such as this tasted good, and I would not let it pass unmarked. I hustled back to the larder, located a bottle of wine, opened it, and took a drink. Then I repaired to a side cavern which still contained a sleeping bag, seated myself upon it, and continued to chuckle as I reenacted in my mind our experience there at the primal Pattern. My

lady Nayda had been so magnificent. So had Merlin, for that matter. Now...

I wondered whether the Pattern really held grudges. That is, how long would it be before it was safe to me to go forth without feeling in imminent peril? No real way to tell. Unfortunate. Still, the Pattern must have too much to occupy it to behave in any manner similar to those people who hung about in its vicinity-i.e., Amberites. Mustn't it? I took another drink. I might be here for a long time.

I would use a spell to alter my appearance, I decided. When I left here I would have dark hair and a beard (over the beginnings of a real beard), gray eyes, a straight nose, higher cheekbones, and a smaller chin. I would seem taller and a lot thinner. I would switch from my usual bright ones to dark garments. Not just some light, cosmetic spell either. It would have to be a strong one, with depth and substance to it.

Musing upon this, I got up and went in search of food. I found some tinned beef and biscuits, and I used a small spell to heat a can of soup. No, that was not a violation of the physical laws of the place. The crystal walls block sendings in and out, but my spells came in with me and operated as normal in the interior.

Eating, I thought again of Nayda, of Merlin, and of Coral. Whatever was happening to them--good or bad--time was favoring them in getting it done. Even if I stayed here for but a short while developments back home would be incommensurate with time's apparent lapse here. And what kind of time did the Pattern really keep? All of them, I supposed--that is to say, its own--but I also felt it to be especially keyed to the mainline of its flow in Amber. In fact, I was almost sure of it, since that's where the action was. So if I wanted to be back in action quickly I should just stay here long enough for my hand to heal.

But really, how badly could the Pattern want me? How much would I actually matter to it? What was I in its view? King of a minor Golden Circle realm. Assassin of one Prince of Amber. Son of the man who had once sought to destroy it... I winced at that, but reflected that the Pattern had let me live my entire life up to now without reprisal for dad's actions. And my part in the current business had been minimal. Coral had seemed its main concern, and then Merlin. Perhaps I was being ultra-cautious. Likely, it had dismissed me from its main considerations the moment I had vanished. Still, I wasn't going to step out of here without that disguise.

I finished eating and sipped at the wine. And when I did step out? What exactly would I be about then? Numerous possibilities tumbled through my mind. I also began yawning and the sleeping bag looked very good.

Lightning flashed, blue wave through the walls. Then the thunder came, like surf. Tomorrow then. Tomorrow I would plan... I crawled inside and got comfortable. In a moment, I was gone.

I've no idea how long I slept. On rising, I made the rounds to establish a security habit, ran through a vigorous routine of exercises, cleaned myself up, then ate a leisurely breakfast. I felt better than I had the day before, and my hand had already commenced healing. Then I sat and stared at the wall, probably for hours. What was my best course of action?

I could rush back to Kashfa and the kingship, I could hunt after my friends, I could simply go underground, lie low, and investigate until I learned what was going on. It was a question of priorities. What was the most important thing I could do for everybody concerned? I thought about it till lunchtime and then I ate again.

Afterwards, I took up my small sketchpad and a pencil and I began recalling a certain lady, feature by feature. I fiddled with it all afternoon, to pass the time, though I knew I had her right. When I knocked off for dinner the next day's activities had already taken shape in my mind.

The next morning my injury was considerably diminished, and I conjured myself a mirror upon a smooth surface of the wall. Using an oil lamp so as not to waste an illumination spell, I conjured that tall, dark, lean figure upon my own form, cast those aquiline features upon my own--complete with beard--and I looked upon my work and saw that it was good. I transformed the appearance of my garments then, also, to keep the new me company--this latter a single spell. I'd have to fetch real garments as soon as I could. No use wasting a high-powered working on something that trivial. I did this all first thing, because I'd wanted to wear the guise all day, let it soak in, see whether there were any hidden weaknesses to my working. Then I wanted to sleep in it, for the same reason.

That afternoon I took up the sketchpad again. I studied my pervious day's work, then turned to a fresh page and executed a Trump. It felt exactly right. The next morning, following the usual routine, I reviewed myself in the mirror again, was satisfied, and mounted the ladder to emerge from the cave. It was a damp, cool morning with a few blue breaks in the cloud cover high overhead. Could rain again. But what the hell did I care? I was on my way out.

I reached for my pad, then paused. I was reminded of other Trumps I had dealt with over the years, and of something else. I withdrew my deck of cards. Uncasing them, I moved slowly through until I came to the sad one--dad's. I had kept his card for sentiment's sake,

not utility. He looked just as I remembered him, but I hadn't sought it for purposes of reminiscence. It was because of the item he wore at his side.

I focussed on Werewindle, by all accounts a magical blade, in some way related to Corwin's Greyswandir. And I recalled Merlin's telling me how his father had summoned Greyswandir to him in Shadow, following his escape from the dungeons of Amber. There was some special affinity between him and that weapon. I wondered. Now that the pace had quickened and new adventures were looming, it would probably be advisable to face things prepared with the appropriate steel. Though dad was dead, Werewindle was somehow alive. Though I could not reach my father, might I somehow reach his blade, its whereabouts, of last report, somewhere in the Courts of Chaos? I focussed my attention upon it, calling it with my mind. It seemed that I felt something, and when I touched it the spot it occupied on the card seemed to be growing cold. I reached. Farther. harder.

And then there was clarity and nearness and the feeling of a cold, alien intelligence regarding me.

"Werewindle," I said softly.

If there can be the sound of an echo in the absence of a prior sound this is what I heard.

"Son of Brand," came a reverberation.

"Call me Luke."

There was silence. Then, "Luke," came the vibration.

I reached forward, caught hold of it, and drew it toward me. The scabbard came with it. I drew back. I held it in my hands then and I drew it. It flowed like molten gold around the design it wore. I raised it, extended it, executed a cut. It felt right. It felt perfect. It felt as if enormous power lay behind its every movement.

"Thanks," I said, and the echo of laughter came and went.

I raised my pad and opened it to the appropriate page, hoping it was a good time to make the call. I regarded the lady's delicate features, her unfocussed gaze that somehow indicated the breadth and depth of her vision. After a few moments, the page grew cold beneath my fingertips, and my drawing took on a 3-dimensional quality, seemed faintly to stir.

"Yes?" came her voice.

"Your Highness." I said. "However you may perceive these things, I want you to know that I have intentionally altered my appearance. I was hoping that--"

"Luke," she said, "of course I recognize you--your own Majesty now," her gaze still unfocussed. "You are troubled."

"Indeed I am."

"You wish to come through?"

"If it is appropriate and convenient."

"Certainly."

She extended her hand. I reached forward, taking it lightly in my own, as her studio came clear, banishing gray skies and crystal hill, I took a step toward her and I was there. Immediately, I dropped to my knees, unclasped my swordbelt and offered her my blade. In the distance, I could hear sounds of hammering and sawing.

"Rise," she said, touching my shoulder. "Come and be seated. Have a cup of tea with me."

I got to my feet and followed her to a table in the corner. She took off her dusty apron and hung it on a peg on the wall. As she prepared the tea I regarded the small army of statues which lined one wall and bivouacked in random cluster about the enormous room--large, small, realistic, impressionistic, beautiful, grotesque. She worked mainly in clay, though a few smaller ones were of stone and there were furnaces at the room's far end, though these were cold now. Several metal mobiles of unusual shape were suspended from ceiling beams.

When she joined me again she reached out and touched my left hand, locating the ring she had given me.

"Yes, I value the Queen's protection," I said.

"Even though you are now a monarch yourself from a country on friendly terms with us?"

"Even so," I said. "So much so, in fact, that I wish to reciprocate in part."

"Oh?"

"I'm not at all certain that Amber is aware of recent events to which I have been party or of which I have knowledge, which may affect her welfare. That is, unless Merlin has been in touch recently."

"Merlin has not been in touch," she said. "If you have information vital to the realm, though, perhaps you ought to give it to Random direct, He's not here just now, but I could reach him for you via Trump."

"No," I said. "I know he doesn't like me at all or trust me, as his brother's killer and a friend of the

man who has sworn to destroy Amber. I am sure he would love to see me deposed and some puppet on the throne of Kashfa. I suppose I must have things out with him one day, but this isn't the day. I've too much else going on just now. But the information transcends local politics. It involves Amber and the Courts of Chaos, the Pattern and the Logrus, the death of Swayvill and Merlin's possible succession to the throne in the Courts--"

"You're serious!"

"You bet. I know he'll listen to you. And he'll even understand why I told you. Let me avoid him this way. There are big events in the offing."

"Tell me," she said, raising her cup.

So I did, including everything Merlin had told me, up through the confrontation at the primal Pattern and my flight to the Crystal Cave. We went through the entire pot of tea in the process, and when I was finished we just sat for a time in silence.

Finally, she sighed.

"You have charged me to deliver major intelligence," she said.

"I know."

"Yet I feel it is but a small part of much greater developments."

"How's that?" I asked.

"A few small things I have heard, known, guessed at, and perhaps dreamed-and a few, I suppose, I simply fear. Hardly a coherent shape. Yet enough, perhaps, to query the powers of the earth I work with. Yes. Now that I have thought it I must try it, of course. At a time such as this."

She rose slowly, paused, and gestured high.

"That shall be the Tongue," she said, and a draft stirred one of the mobiles causing it to produce many tones.

She crossed the studio to the righthand wall--small figure in gray and green, chestnut hair down to the middle of her back--and ran her fingers lightly over the sculpted figure that stood there. Finally, selecting a broad-faced statue with a narrow torso, she began pushing it toward the center of the room. I was on my feet and moving in an instant.

"Let me do that for you, Your Highness."

She shook her head.

"Call me Vialle," she said. "And no, I must position them myself. This one is named Memory."

She placed it below and somewhat to the northwest of the Tongue. Then she moved to a knot of figures and selected a thin one with slightly parted lips, which she placed to the south on Tongue's compass.

".And this is Desire," she stated.

Quickly locating a third-a tall, squinting figure-she placed it to the northeast.

"Caution," she went on.

A lady, her right hand boldly extended, went to the west.

"Risk," she continued.

To the east she positioned another lady, both arms spread wide.

"Heart," she said.

To the southwest went a high-domed, shaggy-browed philosopher. "Head," she said.

...And to the southeast a smiling lady-impossible to say whether her hand was raised in greeting or to deliver a blow.

"Chance," she finished, fitting her into the circle which had come to remind me both of Stonehenge and of Easter Island.

"Bring two chairs," she said, "and place them here and here,"

She indicated positions to the north and south of her circle.

I did as she'd said, and she seated herself in the northern-most chair, behind a final figure she had placed: Foresight. I took my place back of Desire.

"Be silent now," she instructed

Then she sat still, hands in her lap, for several minutes.

Finally, "At the deepest level," she said, "what threatens the peace?"

From my left, Caution seemed to speak, though the Tongue chimed his words overhead.

"A redistribution of ancient powers," he said.

"In what manner?"

"That which was hidden becomes known and is moved about" answered Risk.

"Are both Amber and the Courts involved?"

"Indeed," answered Desire, from before me.

"Ancient powers," she said. "How ancient?"

"Before there was an Amber, they were," stated Memory.

"Before there was a Jewel of Judgement--the Eye of the Serpent?"

"No," Memory responded.

She drew a sudden breath.

"Their number?" she said.

"Eleven," Memory replied.

She grew pale at that, but I held my silence as she had instructed.

"Those responsible for this stirring of ashes," she said then, "what do they wish?"

"A return to the glory of days gone by," Desire stated.

"Could this end be realized?"

"Yes," Foresight replied.

"Could it be averted?"

"Yes," said Foresight.

"At peril," Caution added.

"How might one begin?"

"Query the guardians," Head stated.

"How bad is the situation?"

"It has already begun," Head answered.

"And the danger is already present," said Risk.

"So is opportunity," said Chance.

"Of what sort?" Vialle inquired.

There came a sound from across the room as my scabbard and blade slid to the floor from where I had leaned them against the wall. Vialle stared.

"My weapon," I said, 'just slipped."

"Name it."

"It was my father's sword, called Werewindle."

"I know of it." Then, "This man, Luke," she said, "there is something about his blade and its sister weapon that figures in all of this. I do not know their stories, though."

"Yes, they are connected," said Memory.

"How?"

"They were created in a similar fashion at near to the same time, and they partake of the powers of which we have spoken," Memory replied.

"Will there be a conflict?"

"Yes," said Foresight.

"On what scale?"

Foresight was silent. Chance laughed.

"I do not understand."

"The laughter of Chance is uncertainty," Head responded.

"Will Luke figure in the conflict?"

"Yes," Foresight answered.

"Should he seek the guardians?"

"He must try," said Heart.

"And if he fails?"

"A Prince approaches even now who knows more of these matters," said Head.

"Who is that?"

"A prisoner freed," Head replied.

"Who?"

"He wears a silver rose," said Head. "He bears the other blade."

Vialle raised her head.

"Have you any questions?" she asked me.

"Yes. But I doubt I'd get an answer if I asked whether

we'll win."

Chance laughed as Vialle rose.

She let me help move the statues back into place. Then, seated once more, I said to her, "'Seek the guardians?'"

"There is a custodian--possibly two," she replied. "A self-exiled Prince of Amber and his sister have guarded a portion of this power for a long while. It would seem in order to see that they still live, still discharge the duty."

"Self-exiled? Why?"

"Personal reasons, involving the late King."

"Where are they?"

"I do not know."

"Then how could we find them?"

"There is a Trump."

She rose and moved to a small chest of drawers. Opening one, she withdrew a boxed set of cards.

Slowly, she counted down from the top of the deck and removed one.

When she returned she presented me with the card, portrait of a slim man with hair the color of rust.

"His name is Delwin," she said.

"You think I should just call him and ask whether he still has whatever he had?"

"State quickly that you are not of Amber," she told me, "but give your lineage. Ask whether his stewardship of the spikards remains intact. Try to find out where he is, or to go through and discuss it face to face if you can."

"Right," I said, not wanting to tell her that I had spoken--very briefly--with him before in seeking allies in my war against Amber. He'd dismissed me out of hand, but I didn't want to stir Vialle's memories of those days. So I simply said, "Okay. I'll give it a try."

I decided to fast-talk him at first, to give him time to think, to realize that I was not alone, and not to let slip anything of our earlier exchange. My altered appearance should help in this, too.

I reached for contact.

First, the coldness, then a feeling of personality suddenly alert.

"Who is it?" I felt the question even before the likeness took on depth and life.

"Luke Reynard, otherwise known as Rinaldo," I answered, as the card was suddenly animated and I felt his scrutiny, "King of Kashfa and B.S. in Business Management, University of California at Berkeley." Our gazes locked. He seemed neither belligerent nor friendly. "I wanted to know whether your stewardship of the spikards remains intact."

"Luke-Rinaldo," he said, "just what is your concern in this, and how did you come to learn of the matter?"

"While I am not of Amber," I replied, "my father was. I know it is soon to become a matter of concern in that place because of Merlin--son of Corwin--apparently being in direct line for the succession to the throne in the Courts of Chaos."

"I know who Merlin is," Delwin sated. "Who is your father?"

"Prince Brand."

"And your mother?"

"The Lady Jasra, formerly Queen of Kashfa. Now, might we talk about this matter a little?"

"No," Delwin said. "We may not."

He moved his hand as if to break the contact.

"Wait!" I said. "Do you have a microwave oven?"

He hesitated.

"A what?"

"It's a box-like device that can warm a meal in a matter of minutes. I've worked out a general spell to allow one to operate in most of Shadow. Wake up in the middle of the night with a taste for a steaming hot tuna casserole? Take one out of the freezer, unwrap it, and pop it in. What's a freezer? Glad you asked. It's another box, with eternal winter inside. Store meals in there, take one out and zap it in the mike whenever the fancy hits. And yes, I can supply the freezer, too. You don't want to talk spikards, let's talk business. I can give you a deal on these devices, in quantity, that will meet or beat the price of anyone else capable of supplying them--and I don't think it would be an easy thing to find another supplier. But that's not all I can do for you--"

"I'm sorry," said Delwin. "No solicitors either." His

hand moved again.

"Wait!" I cried. "I'll make you an offer you can't refuse!"

He broke the connection.

"Come back," I willed after his image, but it went 2-dimensional and warmed to room temperature again.

"Sorry," I said to Vialle. "I gave it my best shot, but he wasn't buying any."

"To tell the truth, I didn't think you'd hold him even that long. But I could tell he was interested in you until you mentioned your mother. Then something changed."

"Wouldn't be the first time," I said. "I've a mind to try him again later."

"In that case, keep the Trump."

"I don't need it, Vialle. I'll make my own when the time comes."

"You are an artist and a Trump master?"

"Well, I do paint. Fairly seriously sometimes."

"Then you must see all of my works while you wait. I'd value your opinion."

"My pleasure," I said. "You mean while I wait--"

"--for Corwin."

"Ah, just so. Thank you."

"You can be the first to use one of the new rooms. We've been doing a lot of reconstruction and remodeling since the Logrus and the Pattern had their confrontation."

"I heard about it," I said. "Very well. I wonder when he'll arrive?"

"Soon, I feel," she said. "I'll summon a servant to get you settled now. Another will bring you to dine with me later, and we can discuss art."

"That will be fine."

I wondered where all of this was going to lead. It seemed that the big picture was about to change drastically again.

Glad Delwin wasn't interested in the microwave oven, though. The spell would have been a bitch to work out.



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