

lay upon the silent forest, and this was good.

I was perhaps fifty pounds underweight and still occasionally experienced double vision, but I was improving. I had escaped the dungeons of Amber and recuperated somewhat, with the assistance of mad Dworkin and drunken Jopin, in that order. Now I had to find me a place, a place resembling another place--one which no longer existed. I located the path. I took it.

After a time, I stopped at a hollow tree that had to be there. I reached inside and drew forth my silvered blade and strapped it to my waist. It mattered not that it had been somewhere in Amber. It was here now, for the wood that I walked was in Shadow.

I continued for several hours, the unseen sun somewhere behind my left shoulder. Then I rested awhile, then moved on. It was good to see the leaves and the rocks and the dead tree trunks, the live ones, the grass, the dark earth. It was good to smell all the little smells of life, and to hear its buzzing/humming /chirping sounds. Gods! How I treasured my eyes! Having them back again after nearly four years of blackness was a thing for which I lacked words. And to be walking free...

I went on, my tattered cloak flapping in the morning breeze. I must have looked over fifty years old, my face creased, my form sparse, lean. Who would have known me for what I was?

As I walked, walked in Shadow, moved toward a place, I did not reach that place. It must be that I had grown somewhat soft. Here is what happened--

I came upon seven men by the side of the road, and six of them were dead, lying in various stages of red dismemberment. The seventh was in a semi-reclined position, his back against the mossy bole of an ancient oak. He held his blade across his lap and there was a large wet wound in his right side, from which the blood still flowed. He wore no armor, though some of the others did. His gray

"Sir, I thank you," he said as he passed it back. "I only regret it were not stronger. Damn this cut!"

"I've some of that, too. If you're sure you can handle it."

He held out his hand and I unstopped a small flask and gave it to him. He must have coughed for twenty seconds after a slug of that stuff Jopin drinks.

Then the left side of his mouth smiled and he winked lightly. "Much better," he said. "Mind if I pour a drop of this onto my side? I hate to waste good whisky, but--"

"Use it all, if you have to. On second thought, though, your hand looks shaky. Maybe I'd better do the pouring."

He nodded, and I opened his leather jacket and with my dagger cut away at his shirt until I had exposed the wound. It was nasty-looking, deep, running from front to back a couple inches above the top of his hip. He had other, less serious gashes on his arms, chest, and shoulders.

The blood kept oozing from the big one, and I blotted it a bit and wiped it clean with my kerchief.

"Okay," I said, "clench your teeth and look away," and I poured. His entire body jerked, one great spasm, and then he settled down to shivering. But he did not cry out. I had not thought he would. I folded the kerchief and pressed it in place on the wound. I tied it there, with a long strip I had torn from the bottom of my cloak. "Want another drink?" I asked him.

"Of water," he said. "Then I fear I must sleep." He drank, then his head leaned forward until his chin was resting upon his breast. He slept, and I made him a pillow and covered him over with dead men's cloaks.

Then I sat there at his side and watched the pretty black birds.

He had not recognized me. But then, who would? Had I revealed myself to him, he might possibly have known me. We had never

I had sailed, had begun this walk toward Avalon.

Centuries before, I had lived there. It is a long, complicated, proud and painful story, and I may go into it later on, if I live to finish much more of this telling.

I was drawing nearer to my Avalon when I came upon the wounded knight and the six dead men. Had I chosen to walk on by, I could have reached a place where the six men lay dead and the knight stood unwounded--or a place where he lay dead and they stood laughing. Some would say it did not really matter, since all these things are possibilities, and therefore all of them exist somewhere in Shadow.

Any of my brothers and sisters--with the possible exceptions of Gerard and Benedict--would not even have given a second glance. I have become somewhat chickenhearted, however. I was not always that way, but perhaps the shadow Earth, where I spent so many years, mellowed me a bit, and maybe my hitch in the dungeons of Amber reminded me somewhat of the quality of human suffering. I do not know. I only know that I could not pass by the hurt I saw on the form of someone much like someone who had once been a friend. If I were to speak my name in this man's ear, I might hear myself reviled, I would certainly hear a tale of woe.

So, all right. I would pay this much of the price: I would get him back on his feet, then I would cut out. No harm done, and perhaps some small good within this Other.

I sat there, watching him, and after several hours, he awakened. "Hello," I said, unstoppering my canteen. "Have another drink?"

"Thank you." He extended a hand.

I watched him drink, and when he handed it back he said, "Excuse me for not introducing myself. I was not in good manner..." "I know you," I said. "Call me Corey."

He looked as if he were about to say, "Corey of What?" but thought better of it and nodded.

nodded.

"Good show. What am I going to do with you now?"

He tried to see my face, failed. "I do not understand," he said. "Where are you headed?"

"I have friends," he said, "some five leagues to the north. I was going in that direction when this thing happened. And I doubt very much that any man, or the Devil himself, could bear me on his back for one league. And I could stand. Sir Corey, you'd a better idea as to my size."

I rose, drew my blade, and felled a sapling--about two inches in diameter--with one cut. Then I stripped it and hacked it to the proper length.

I did it again, and with the belts and cloaks of dead men I rigged a stretcher.

He watched until I was finished, then commented: "You swing a deadly blade. Sir Corey -and a silver one, it would seem. . ."

"Are you up to some traveling?" I asked him.

Five leagues is roughly fifteen miles.

"What of the dead?" he inquired.

"You want to maybe give them a decent Christian burial?" I said.

Screw them! Nature takes care of its own. Let's get out of here. They stink already."

"I'd like at least to see them covered over. They fought well." I sighed.

"All right, if it will help you to sleep nights. I haven't a spade, so I'll build them a cairn. It's going to be a common burial, though."

"Good enough," he said.

I laid the six bodies out, side by side. I heard him mumbling something, which I guessed to be a prayer for the dead.

I raised him in my arms and set him on the stretcher. He clenched his teeth as I did so.

"Where do we go?" I asked.

He gestured.

"Head back to the trail. Follow it to the left until it forks. Then go right at that place. How do you propose to...?"

I scooped the stretcher up in my arms, holding him as you would a baby, cradle and all. Then I turned and walked back to the trail, carrying him.

"Corey?" he said.

"Yes?"

"You are one of the strongest men I have ever met--and it seems I should know you."

I did not answer him immediately. Then I said, "I try to keep in good condition. Clean living and all."

"...And your voice sounds rather familiar."

He was staring upward, still trying to see my face. I decided to get off the subject fast.

"Who are these friends of yours I am taking you to?"

"We are headed for the Keep of Ganelon."

"That ratfink!" I said, almost dropping him.

"While I do not understand the word you have used, I take it to be a term of opprobrium," he said, "from the tone of your voice. If such is the case, I must be his defender in--"

"Hold on," I said. "I've a feeling we're talking about two different guys with the same name. Sorry." Through the stretcher, I felt a certain tension go out of him.

"That is doubtless the case," he said.

So I carried him until we reached the trail, and there I turned to the left.

He dropped off to sleep again, and I made better time after that, taking the fork he had told me about and sprinting while he snored.

enemy. Are you certain you are not the Devil?"

"Yeah, sure," I said. "Don't you smell the brimstone? And my right hoof is killing me."

He actually sniffed a couple times before he chuckled, which hurt my feelings a bit.

Actually, we had traveled over four leagues, as I reckoned it. I was hoping he would sleep again and not be too concerned about distances. My arms were beginning to ache.

"Who were those six men you slew?" I asked him.

"Wardens of the Circle," he replied, "and they were no longer men, but men possessed. Now pray to God, Sir Corey, that their souls be at peace."

"Wardens of the Circle?" I asked. "What Circle?"

"The dark Circle--the place of iniquity and loathsome beasts..." He took a deep breath. "The source of the illness that lies upon the land."

"This land doesn't look especially ill to me," I said.

"We are far from that place, and the realm of Ganelon is still too strong for the invaders. But the Circle widens. I feel that the last battle will be fought here."

"You have aroused my curiosity as to this thing."

"Sir Corey, if you know not of it 'twere better you forgot it, skirted the Circle, and went your way. Though I should dearly love to fight by your side, this is not your fight--and who can tell the outcome?"

The trail began winding upward. Then, through a break in the trees, I saw a distant thing that made me pause and caused me to recall another, similar place.

"What...?" asked my charge, turning. Then, "Why, you moved much more quickly than I had guessed. That is our destination, the Keep of Ganelon."

I thought then about a Ganelon. I did not want to, but I did. He had been a traitorous assassin and I had exiled him from Avalon

sisting any wave of iniquity that was sweeping across the land. He would be right in there pitching for the loathsome beasts, I felt sure. A thing that caused me difficulty was the man that I carried. His counterpart had been alive in Avalon at the time of the exiling, meaning that the time lag could be just about right.

I did not care to encounter the Ganelon I had known and be recognized by him. He knew nothing of Shadow. He would only know that I had worked some dark magic on him, as an alternative to killing him, and while he had survived that alternative it might have been the rougher of the two.

But the man in my arms needed a place of rest and shelter, so I trudged forward.

I wondered, though...

There did seem to be something about me that lent itself to recognition by this man. If there were some memories of a shadow of myself in this place that was like yet not like Avalon, what form did they take? How would they condition a reception of the actual me should I be discovered?

The sun was beginning to sink. A cool breeze began, hinting of a chilly night to come. My ward was snoring once more, so I decided to sprint most of the remaining distance. I did not like the feeling that this forest after dark might become a place crawling with unclean denizens of some damned Circle that I knew nothing about, but who seemed to be on the make when it came to this particular piece of real estate.

So I ran through lengthening shadows, dismissing rising notions of pursuit, ambush, surveillance, until I could do so no longer. They had achieved the strength of a premonition, and then I heard the noises at my back: a soft pat-pat-pat, as of footfalls.

I set the stretcher down, and I drew my blade as I turned.

There were two of them, cats.

"Slay it here," said the first.

"What of the one who guards it with the blade I like not at all?"

"Mortal man?"

"Come find out," I said, softly.

"It is thin, and perhaps it is old."

"Yet it bore the other from the cairn to this place, rapidly and without rest. Let us flank it."

I sprang forward as they moved, and the one to my right leaped toward me.

My blade split its skull and continued on into the shoulder. As I turned, yanking it free, the other swept past me, heading toward the stretcher. I swung wildly.

My blade fell upon its back and passed completely through its body. It emitted a shriek that grated like chalk on a blackboard as it fell in two pieces and began to burn. The other was burning also. But the one I had halved was not yet dead. Its head turned toward me and those blazing eyes met my own and held them. "I die the final death," it said, "and so I know you, Opener. Why do you slay us?" And then the flames consumed its head. I turned, cleaned my blade and sheathed it, picked up the stretcher, ignored all questions, and continued on.

A small knowledge had begun within me, as to what the thing was, what it had meant.

And I still sometimes see that burning cat head in dreams, and then I awaken, wet and shivering, and the night seems darker, and filled with shapes I cannot define.

The Keep of Ganelon had a moat about it, and a drawbridge, which was raised. There was a tower at each of the four corners where its high walls met. From within those walls many other towers reached even higher, tickling the bellies of low, dark clouds, occluding the early stars, casting shadows of jet down the high hill

here."

I waited as he called this information to another sentry, and I heard more voices raised as the message was passed along the line. After a pause of several minutes, a reply came back in the same manner.

Then the guard called down:

"Stay clear! We're going to lower the drawbridge! You may enter!" The creaking began as he spoke, and in a brief time the thing banged to earth on our side of the moat. I raised my charge once more and walked across it.

Thus did I bear Sir Lancelot du Lac to the Keep of Ganelon, whom I trusted like a brother. That is to say, not at all.

There was a rush of people about me, and I found myself ringed by armed men. There was no hostility present, however, only concern. I had entered a large, cobbled courtyard, lit by torches and filled with bedrolls. I could smell sweat, smoke, horses, and the odors of cooking. A small army was bivouacked there. Many had approached me and stood staring and murmuring, but then there came up two who were fully arrayed, as for battle, and one of them touched my shoulder.

"Come this way," he said.

I followed and they flanked me. The ring of people parted as we passed. The drawbridge was already creaking back into place. We moved toward the main complex of dark stone.

Inside, we walked along a hallway and passed what appeared to be a reception chamber. Then we came upon a stairway. The man to my right indicated that I should mount it. On the second floor, we stopped before a heavy wooden door and the guard knocked upon it.

"Come in," called out a voice which unfortunately seemed very familiar. We entered.

would do much harm, which relieved me somewhat. I had not fetched Lance all that distance to have him bled.

Then Ganelon turned to me once more. "Where did you find him?" he asked.

"Five leagues to the south of here."

"Who are you?"

"They call me Corey," I said.

He studied me too closely, and his worm-like lips twitched toward a smile beneath his mustache. "What is your part in this thing?" he asked.

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

I had let my shoulders sag a bit. I spoke slowly, softly, and with a slight falter. My beard was longer than his, and lightened by dust. I imagined I looked like an older man. His attitude on appraisal tended to indicate that he thought I was.

"I am asking you why you helped him," he said.

"Brotherhood of man, and all that," I replied.

"You are a foreigner?"

I nodded.

"Well, you are welcome here for so long as you wish to stay."

"Thanks. I will probably move on tomorrow."

"Now join me in a glass of wine and tell me of the circumstances under which you found him."

So I did.

Ganelon let me speak without interrupting, and those, piercing eyes of his were on me all the while. While I had always felt laceration by means of the eyeballs to be a trite expression, it did not feel so that night. He stabbed at me with them. I wondered what he knew and what he was guessing concerning me.

Then fatigue sprang and seized me by the scruff of the neck. The exertion, the wine, the warm room--all of these worked together, and suddenly it was as if I were standing off in the corner some-

That night I slept the sleep of the dead. It was a big, black thing, about fourteen hours long.

In the morning, I ached all over.

I bathed myself. There was a basin on the high dresser, and soap and a washcloth someone had thoughtfully set beside it.

My throat felt packed with sawdust and my eyes were full of fuzz. I sat down and assessed myself.

There had been a day when I could have carried Lance the entire distance without going to pieces afterward. There had been a day when I had fought my way up the face of Kolvir and into the heart of Amber itself.

Those days were gone. I suddenly felt like the wreck I must have looked.

Something would have to be done.

I had been putting on weight and picking up strength slowly. The process would have to be accelerated.

A week or two of clean living and violent exercise could help a lot, I decided. Ganelon had not given any real indication of having recognized me. All right. I would take advantage of the hospitality he had offered.

With that resolve, I sought out the kitchen and conned a hearty breakfast. Well, it was really around lunchtime, but let's call things by their proper names. I had a strong desire for a smoke and felt a certain perverse joy in the fact that I was out of tobacco. The Fates were conspiring to keep me true to myself.

I strolled out into the courtyard and a brisk, bright day. For a long while, I watched the men who were quartered there as they went through their training regime.

There were bowmen off at the far end, thwanging away at targets fastened to bales of hay. I noted that they employed thumb rings and an oriental grip on the bowstring, rather than the three-fingered technique with which I was more comfortable. It made me

seem especially winded. This was my chance for some of the exercise I was seeking.

I moved forward, smiled, and said, "I'm Corey of Cabra. I was watching you."

I turned my attention to the big, dark man who was grinning at his resting buddy.

"Mind if I practice with you while your friend rests?" I asked him. He kept grinning and pointed at his mouth and his ear. I tried several other languages, but none of them worked. So I pointed at the blade and at him and back to myself until he got the idea. His opponent seemed to think it was a good one, as the smaller fellow offered me his blade.

I took it into my hands. It was shorter and a lot heavier than Grayswandir. (That is the name of my blade, which I know I have not mentioned up until now. It is a story in itself, and I may or may not go into it before you learn what brought me to this final pass. But should you hear me refer to it by name again, you will know what I am talking about.) I swung my blade a few times to test it, removed my cloak, tossed it off to the side, and struck an *en garde*. The big fellow attacked. I parried and attacked. He parried and riposted. I parried the riposte, feinted, and attacked. Et cetera. After five minutes, I knew that he was good. And I knew that I was better. He stopped me twice so that I could teach him a maneuver I had used. He learned both very quickly. After fifteen minutes, though, his grin widened. I guess that was around the point where he broke down most opponents by virtue of sheer staying power, if they were good enough to resist his attacks up until then. He had stamina, I'll say that. After twenty minutes, a puzzled look came onto his face. I just didn't look as if I could stand up that long. But then, what can any man really know of, that which lies within a scion of Amber? After twenty-five minutes, he was sheathed in sweat, but he continued on. My brother Random looks and acts, on occasion, like an

stand what he said, but I gathered that he was pleased with the workout. So was I.

The horrible thing was, I felt it. I found myself slightly heady. But I needed more. I promised me I would kill myself and exercise that day, glut myself with food that night, sleep deeply, wake, and do it again.

So I went over to where the archers stood. After a time, I borrowed a bow, and in my three-fingered style unleashed perhaps a hundred arrows. I did not do too badly. Then, for a time, I watched the men on horseback, with their lances, shields, maces. I moved on. I watched some practice in hand-to-hand combat.

Finally, I wrestled three men in succession. Then I did feel beat. Absolutely. Entirely.

I sat down on a bench in the shade, sweating, breathing heavily. I wondered about Lance, about Ganelon, about supper. After perhaps ten minutes, I made my way back to the room I had been given and I bathed again.

By then I was ravenously hungry, so I set forth to find me dinner and information.

Before I had gone very far from the door, one of the guards whom I recognized from the previous evening--the one who had guided me to my chamber--approached and said, "Lord Ganelon bids you dine with him in his quarters, at the ringing of the dinner bell." I thanked him, said I would be there, returned to my chamber, and rested on my bed until it was time. Then I made my way forth once again.

I was beginning to ache deeply and I had a few additional bruises. I decided this was a good thing, would help me to seem older. I banged on Ganelon's door and a boy admitted me, then dashed off to join another youth who was spreading a table near to the fireplace.

and killed two of those bastard cats on the way. And he told me about the cairn you built, of big stones--"

"How is Lance feeling today?" I interrupted.

"I had to place a guard in his chamber to be sure he rested. The muscle-bound clod wanted to get up and walk around. He'll stay there all week, though, by God!"

"Then he must be feeling better."

I nodded.

"Here's to his health."

"I'll drink to that."

We drank. Then: "Had I an army of men like you and Lance," he said, "the story might have been different."

"What story?"

"The Circle and its Wardens," he said. "You've not heard of it?"

"Lance mentioned it. That's all."

One boy tended an enormous chunk of beef on a spit above a low fire. Occasionally, he sloshed some wine over it as he turned the shaft. Whenever the odor drifted my way, my stomach would rumble and Ganelon would chuckle. The other boy left the room to fetch bread from the kitchen.

Ganelon was silent a long while. He finished his wine and poured himself another glass. I sipped slowly at my first.

"Have you ever heard of Avalon?" he finally asked.

"Yes," I replied. "There is a verse I heard long ago from a passing hard: 'Beyond the River of the Blessed, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Avalon. Our swords were shattered in our hands and we hung our shields on the oak tree. The silver towers were fallen, into a sea of blood. How many miles to Avalon? None, I say, and all. The silver towers are fallen.'"

"Avalon fallen...?" he said.

"I think the man was mad. I know of no Avalon. His verse stayed in my mind, though."

as the bard said, 'No miles, and all,' " he misquoted my lyric. "Do you recall the bard's name?"

"I am sorry, but I do not."

"Where is this Cabra place you hie from?"

"Far to the east, across the waters," I said. "Very far. It is an island kingdom."

"Any chance they could furnish us with some troops? I can afford to pay quite a bit." I shook my head.

"It is a small place with a small militia, and it would be several months' travel both ways--sea and land. They have never fought as mercenaries, and for that matter they are not very warlike."

"Then you seem to differ a great deal from your countrymen," he said, looking at me once more. I sipped my wine.

"I was an arms instructor," I said, "to the Royal Guard."

"Then you might be inclined to hire out, to help train my troops?"

"I'll stay a few weeks and do that," I said.

He nodded a tight-lipped microsecond of a smile, then, "It saddens me to hear this indication that fair Avalon is gone," he said. "But if it is so, it means that my exiler is also likely dead." He drained his wineglass. "So even the demon came to a time when he could not defend his own," he mused. "That's a heartening thought. It means we might have a chance here, against these demons."

"Begging your pardon," I said, sticking my neck out for what I thought good reason, "if you were referring to that Corwin of Amber, he did not die when whatever happened happened." The glass snapped in his hand.

"You know Corwin?" he said.

"No, but I know of him," I replied. "Several years ago, I met one of his brothers--a fellow named Brand. He told me of the place called Amber, and of the battle in which Corwin and a brother of his named Bleys led a horde against their brother Eric, who held the city. Bleys fell from the mountain Kolvir and Corwin was taken

it is not as if I gave him no cause for what he did. He was strong--stronger than you or Lance, even--and clever. Also, he could be merry on occasion. Eric should have killed him quickly, not the way that he did. I've no love for him, but my hate's died down a bit. The demon deserved better than he got, that's all."

The second boy returned with a basket of bread. The one who had prepared the meat removed it from the spit and set it on a platter in the center of the table.

Ganelon nodded toward it.

"Let's eat," he said.

He rose and moved to the table.

I followed. We did not talk much during the meal.

After stuffing myself until my stomach would hold no more and soaking down its contents with another glass of too-sweet wine, I began to yawn. Ganelon cursed after the third one.

"Damn it, Corey! Stop that! It's contagious!" He stifled a yawn of his own.

"Let's take some air," he said, rising.

So we walked out along the walls, passing the sentries in their rounds. They would come to attention and salute Ganelon as soon as they saw who it was approaching, and he would give them a word of greeting and we would move on. We came to a battlement, where we paused to rest, seating ourselves on the stone, sucking in the evening air, cool and damp and full of the forest, and noting the appearance of the stars, one by one, in the darkening sky. The stone was cold beneath me. Far off in the distance, I thought I could detect the shimmer of the sea. I heard a night bird, from somewhere below us. Ganelon produced a pipe and tobacco from a pouch he wore at his belt. He filled it, tamped it, and struck a flame. His face would have been satanic in the spark light, save for whatever turned his mouth downward and drew the muscles in his cheeks up

He spoke more rapidly now, and his voice grew more retined and his choice of words came as an echo from out of his past.

"Yes, I remember Avalon," he said, "a place of silver and shade and cool waters, where the stars shone like bonfires at night and the green of day was always the green of spring. Youth, love, beauty--I knew them in Avalon. Proud steeds, bright metal, soft lips, dark ale. Honor..."

He shook his head.

"One later day," he said, "when war commenced within the realm, the ruler offered full pardon to any outlaws who would follow him in battle against the insurgents. This was Corwin. I threw in with him and rode off to the wars. I became an officer, and then--later--a member of his staff. We won the battles, put down the uprising. Then Corwin ruled peacefully once more, and I remained, at his court. Those were the good years. There later came some border skirmishes, but these we always won. He trusted me to handle such things for him. Then he granted a Dukedom to dignify the House of a minor noble whose daughter he desired in marriage. I had wanted that Dukedom, and he had long hinted it might one day be mine. I was furious, and I betrayed my command the next time I was dispatched to settle a dispute along the southern border, where something was always stirring. Many of my men died, and the invaders entered into the realm. Before they could be routed, Lord Corwin himself had to take up arms once more. The invaders had come through in great strength, and I thought they would conquer the realm. I hoped they would. But Corwin, again, with his foxy tactics, prevailed. I fled, but was captured and taken to him for sentencing. I cursed him and spat at him. I would not bow. I hated the ground he trod, and a condemned man has no reason not to put up the best front he can, to go out like a man. Corwin said he would show me a measure of mercy for favors past. I told him to shove his mercy, and then I realized that he was mocking me. He ordered me

did I take in this place at the hands of man and beast, only barely preserving my life. He had left me in the wickedest portion of the realm. But then one day my fortunes took a turn. An armored knight bade me depart the roadway that he might pass. At that point, I cared not whether I lived or died, so I called him a pock-marked whoreson and bade him go to the Devil. He charged me and I seized his lance and pushed its point into the ground, so unhorsing him. I drew him a smile beneath his chin with his own dagger, and thus obtained me mounting and weapons. Then did I set about paying back those who had used me poorly. I took up my old trade on the highways once again and I gained me another band of followers. We grew. When there were hundreds of us our needs were considerable. We would ride into a small town and make it ours. The local militia would fear us. This, too, was a good life, though not so splendid as the Avalon I never shall know again. All the roadside inns came to fear the thunder of our mounts, and travelers would soil their britches when they heard us coming. Ha! This lasted for several years. Large parties of armed men were sent to track us and destroy us, but always we evaded them or ambushed them. Then one day there was the dark Circle, and no one really knows why."

He puffed more vigorously on his pipe, stared off into the distance.

"I am told it began as a tiny ring of toadstools, far to the west. A child was found dead in its center, and the man who found her--her father--died of convulsions several days later. The spot was immediately said to be accursed. It grew quickly in the months that followed, until it was half a league across. The grasses darkened and shone like metal within it, but did not die. The trees twisted and their leaves blackened. They swayed when there was no wind, and bats danced and darted among them. In the twilight, strange shapes could be seen moving--always within the Circle, mind you--

committed many atrocities and defiled places of worship. They put things to the torch when they left them. They never stole objects of silver. Then, after many months, other creatures than men began to come forth--strangely formed, like the hellcats you slew. Then the Circle slowed in its growth, almost halting, as though it were nearing some sort of limit. But now all manner of raiders emerged from it--some even faring forth during the day--laying waste to the countryside about its borders. When they had devastated the land about its entire circumference, the Circle moved to encompass those areas, also. And so its growth began again, in this fashion. The old king, Uther, who had long hunted me, forgot all about me and set his forces to patrolling that damned Circle. It was beginning to worry me, also, as I did not relish the notion of being seized by some hell-spawned bloodsucker as I slept. So I got together fifty-five of my men--that was all who would volunteer, and I wanted no cowards--and we rode into that place one afternoon. We came upon a pack of those dead-faced men burning a live goat on a stone altar and we lit into the lot of them. We took one prisoner and tied him to his own altar and questioned him there. He told us that the Circle would grow until it covered the entire land, from ocean to ocean. One day it would close with itself on the other side of the world. We had best join with them, if we wished to save our hides. Then one of my men stabbed him and he died. He really died, for I know a dead man when I see one. I've made it happen often enough. But as his blood fell upon the stone, his mouth opened and out came the loudest laugh I ever heard in my life. It was like thunder all about us. Then he sat up, unbreathing, and began to burn. As he burned, his form changed, until it was like that of the burning goat--only larger--there upon the altar. Then a voice came from the thing. It said, 'Flee, mortal man! But you shall never leave this Circle!' And believe me, we fled! The sky grew black with bats and other--things. We heard the sound of hoofbeats. We rode with our blades in our

agreed. Then I fell ill, I am told that I was delirious for three days. I was as weak as a child after my recovery, and I learned that everyone who had entered the Circle had been likewise taken. Three had died. I visited the rest of my men, told them the story, and they were enlisted. The patrols about the Circle were strengthened. But it would not be contained. In the years that followed, the Circle grew. We fought many skirmishes. I was promoted until I stood at Uther's right hand, as once I had at Corwin's. Then the skirmishes became more than skirmishes. Larger and larger parties emerged from that hellhole. We lost a few battles. They took some of our outposts. Then one night an army emerged, an army--a horde--of both men and the other things that dwelled there. That night we met the largest force we had ever engaged. King Uther himself rode to battle, against my advice--for he was advanced in years--and he fell that night and the land was without a ruler. I wanted my captain, Lancelot, to sit in stewardship, for I knew him to be a far more honorable man than myself.... And it is strange here. I had known a Lancelot, just like him, in Avalon--but this man knew me not when first we met. It is strange.... At any rate, he declined, and the position was thrust upon me. I hate it, but here I am. I have held them back for over three years now. All my instincts tell me to flee. What do I owe these damned people? What do I care if the bloody Circle widens? I could cross over the sea to some land it would never reach during my lifetime, and then forget the whole thing. Damn it! I didn't want this responsibility! Now it is mine, though!"

"Why?" I asked him, and the sound of my own voice was strange to me.

There was silence.

He emptied his pipe. He refilled it. He relit it. He puffed it. There was more silence.

Then, "I don't know," he said. "I'd stab a man in the back for a pair of shoes, if he had them and I needed them to keep my feet

had gone in there and it had told me I'd never make it back out again, but I did. I lived through the sickness that followed after. It knows it's me that has been fighting it all along. We won that great bloody engagement on the night Uther died, and I met the thing again in a different form and it knew me. Maybe this is a part of what is holding it back now."

"What form?"

"A thing with a manlike shape, but with goat horns and red eyes. It was mounted on a piebald stallion. We fought for a time, but the tide of the battle swept us apart. Which was a good thing, too, for it was winning. It spoke again, as we swaggered swords, and I knew that head-filling voice. It called me a fool and told me I could never hope to win. But when morning came, the field was ours and we drove them back to the Circle, slaying them as they fled. The rider of the piebald escaped. There have been other sallyings forth since then, but none such as that night's. If I were to leave this land, another such army--one that is readying even now--would come forth. That thing would somehow know of my departure--just as it knew that Lance was bringing me another report on the disposition of troops within the Circle, sending those Wardens to destroy him as he returned. It knows of you by now, and surely it must wonder over this development. It must wonder who you are, for all your strength. I will stay here and fight it till I fall. I must. Do not ask me why. I only hope that before that day comes, I at least learn how this thing came to pass--why that Circle is out there."

Then there came a fluttering near to my head. I ducked quickly to avoid whatever it was. It was not necessary, though. It was only a bird. A white bird. It landed on my left shoulder and stood there, making small noises. I held up my wrist and it hopped over onto it. There was a note tied to its leg. I unfastened it, read it, crumpled it in my hand. Then I studied invisible things distant.

"What is the matter. Sir Corey?" cried Ganelon.

"It sounds like a promise of assistance," I said, dismissing the bird, which cooed twice, then circled my head and departed. Ganelon shook his head.

"I do not understand."

"Why number the teeth of a horse you may receive for nothing?" I said. "You have only succeeded in containing that thing."

"True," he said. "Perhaps he could destroy it."

"And perhaps it's just a joke," I told him. "A cruel one."

He shook his head again.

"No. That is not his style. I wonder what he is after?"

"Sleep on it," I suggested.

"There is little else that I can do, just now," he said, stifling a yawn.

We rose then and walked the wall. We said our good nights, and I staggered off toward the pit of sleep and fell headlong into it.

grew firm once more. I think I put on fifteen pounds that week. Slowly, very slowly, I began feeling like my old self.

The country was called Lorraine, and so was she. If I happened to be in the mood to hand you a line, I would tell you we met in a meadow behind the castle, she gathering flowers and me walking there for exercise and fresh air. Crap.

I guess a polite term would be camp follower. I met her at the end of a hard day's work, spent mainly with the saber and the mace. She was standing off on the side lines waiting for her date when I first caught sight of her. She smiled and I smiled back, nodded, winked, and passed her by. The next day I saw her again, and I said "Hello" as I passed her. That's all.

Well, I kept running into her. By the end of my second week, when my aches were gone and I was over a hundred-eighty pounds and feeling that way again, I arranged to be with her one evening. By then, I was aware of her status and it was fine, so far as I was concerned. But we did not do the usual thing that night. No. Instead, we talked, and then something else happened.

Her hair was rust-colored with a few strands of gray in it. I guessed she was under thirty, though. Eyes, very blue. Slightly pointed chin. Clean, even teeth inside a mouth that smiled at me a lot. Her voice was somewhat nasal, her hair was too long, her make-up laid on too heavily over too much tiredness, her complexion too freckled, her choice in clothing too bright and tight. But I liked her. I did not think I'd actually feel that way when I asked her out that night because, as I said, liking her was not what I had in mind. There was no place to go but my chamber, so we had gone there. I had become a captain, and I took advantage of my rank by having dinner brought to us, and an extra bottle of wine.

"The men are afraid of you," she said. "They say you never grow tired."

"I do," I said, "believe me."

"I didn't think so. But your beard fooled everyone."

"Beards often do that."

"You look better every day. Bigger..."

"Thanks. I feel better than I did when I arrived."

"Sir Corey of Cabra," she said. "Where's Cabra? What's Cabra?"

Will you take me there with you, if I ask you nicely?"

"I'd tell you so," I said, "but I'd be lying."

"I know. But it would be nice to hear."

"Okay. I'll take you there with me. It's place."

"Are you really as good as the men say?"

"I'm afraid not. Are you?"

"Not really. Do you want to go to bed now?"

"No. I'd rather talk. Have a glass of wine."

"Thank you.... Your health."

"Yours."

"Why is it you are such a good swordsman?"

"Aptitude and good teachers."

"...And you carried Lance all that distance and slew those beasts..."

"Stories grow with the telling."

"But I have watched you. You *are* better than the others. That is why Ganelon made you whatever deal he did. He knows a good thing when he sees it. I've had many friends who were swordsmen, and I've watched them at practice. You could cut them to pieces. The men say you are a good teacher. They like you, even if you do scare them."

"Why do I frighten them? Because I am strong? There are many strong men in the world. Because I can stand up and swing a blade for a long while?"

"They think there is something supernatural involved."

I laughed.

"If he is still alive, he is."

"Strange, that's what you are," she said. "And why? Tell me. *Are* you a supernatural creature?"

"Let's have another glass of wine."

"It'll go to my head."

"Good." I poured them.

"We are all going to die," she said.

"Eventually."

"I mean here, soon, fighting this thing."

"Why do you say that?"

"It's too strong."

"Then why stick around?"

"I've no place else to go. That's why I ask you about Cabra"

"And why you came here tonight?"

"No. I came to see what you were like."

"I am an athlete who is breaking training. Were you born around here?"

"Yes. In the wood."

"Why'd you pick up with these guys?"

"Why not? It's better than getting pig shit on my heels every day."

"Never have a man of your own? Steady, I mean?"

"Yes. He's dead. He's the one who found...the Fairy Ring."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. He used to get drunk whenever he could borrow or steal enough to afford it and then come home and beat me. I was glad when I met Ganelon."

"So you think that the thing is too strong, that we are going to lose to it?"

"Yes."

"You may be right. But I think you're wrong." She shrugged.

"You'll be fighting with us?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Thanks."

She finished her wine, so I poured her another.

"I know he is a supernatural creature," she said.

"Let's get off the subject."

"All right. But will you do me a thing?"

"Name it."

"Put on armor tomorrow, pick up a lance, get hold of a horse, and trounce that big cavalry officer Harald."

"Why?"

"He beat me last week, just like Jarl used to. Can you do it?"

"Yes "

"Will you?"

"Why not? Consider him trounced."

She came over and leaned against me.

"I love you," she said.

"Crap."

"All right. How about, I like you?"

"Good enough. I--"

Then a chill and numbing wind blew along my spine. I stiffened and resisted what was to come by blanking my mind completely. Someone was looking for me. It was someone of the House of Amber, doubtless, and he was using my Trump or something very like it. There was no mistaking the sensation. If it was Eric, then he had more guts than I gave him credit for, since I had almost napalmed his brain the last time we had been in contact. It could not be Random, unless he was out of prison, which I doubted. If it was Julian or Caine, they could go to hell. Bleys was probably dead. Possibly Benedict, too. That left Gerard, Brand, and our sisters. Of these, only Gerard might mean me well. So I resisted discovery, successfully. It took me perhaps five minutes, and when it was finished I was shaking and sweating and Lorraine was staring at me strangely.

"I think it was my father. God, it's strange. . ."

"What happened?" she repeated.

"A spell," I said. "I sometimes get them, and people think they see my father on the castle wall or floor. Don't worry about it. It's not contagious."

"Crap," she said. "You're lying to me."

"I know. But please forget the whole thing."

"Why should I?"

"Because you like me," I told her. "Remember? And because I'm going to trounce Harald for you tomorrow."

"That's true," she said, and I started shaking again and she fetched a blanket from the bed and put it about my shoulders. She handed me my wine and I drank it. She sat beside me and rested her head on my shoulder, so I put my arm about her. A devil wind began to scream and I heard the rapid rattle of the rainfall that came with it. For a second, it seemed that something beat against the shutters. Lorraine whimpered slightly.

"I do not like what is happening tonight," she said.

"Neither do I. Go bar the door. It's only bolted right now."

As she did this, I moved our seat so that it faced my single window. I fetched Grayswandir out from beneath the bed and unsheathed it. Then I extinguished every light in the room, save for a single candle on the table to my right.

I reseated myself, my blade across my knees.

"What are we doing?" Lorraine asked, as she came and sat down at my left.

"Waiting," I said.

"For what?"

"I am not positive, but this is certainly the night for it."

She shuddered and drew near.

"You know, perhaps you had better leave," I said.

I wondered how it was that Lorraine had seen something I had not daring the attempted contact. She could not simply have imagined anything that close to home.

"There is something strange about *you*," I said.

She was silent for four or five flickerings of the candle, then said, "I've a touch of the second sight. My mother had more of it. People say my grandmother was a sorceress. I don't know any of that business, though. Well, not much of it. I haven't done it for years. I always wind up losing more than I gain."

Then she was silent again, and I asked her, "What do you mean?"

"I used a spell to get my first man," she said, "and look what he turned out to be. If I hadn't, I'd have been a lot better off. I wanted a pretty daughter, and I made that happen--" She stopped abruptly and I realized she was crying.

"What's the matter? I don't understand..."

"I thought you knew," she said. "No, I'm afraid not."

"She was the little girl in the Fairy Circle. I thought you knew..."

"I'm sorry."

"I wish I didn't have the touch. I never use it any more. But it won't let me alone. It still brings me dreams and signs, and they are never over things I can do anything about. I wish it would go away and devil somebody else!"

"That's the one thing it will not do, Lorraine. I'm afraid you are stuck with it."

"How do you know?"

"I've known people like you in the past, that's all."

"You've a touch of it yourself, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Then you feel that there is something out there now, don't you?"

"Yes."

"So do I. Do you know what it is doing?"

somehow, that is what my father's ghost... I do not know. If its servant finds me and names me, it will know what preparations to make. If it finds me and destroys me, it will have solved the problem. If I destroy the servant, it will know that much more about my strength. Whichever way it works out, the horned one will be something ahead. So why should it risk its own pronged dome at this stage in the game?"

We waited, there in the shadow-clad chamber, as the taper burned away the minutes.

She asked me, "What did you mean when you said, if it finds you and names you...? Names you what?"

"The one who almost did not come here," I said.

"You think that it might know you from somewhere, somehow?" she asked.

"I think it might," I said. She drew away from me then.

"Don't be afraid," I said. "I won't hurt you."

"I am afraid, and you will hurt me!" she said. "I know it! But I want you! Why do I want you?"

"I don't know," I said.

"There is something out there now!" she said, sounding slightly hysterical. "It's near! It's very near! Listen! Listen!"

"Shut up!" I said, as a cold, prickly feeling came to rest on the back of my neck and coiled about my throat. "Get over on the far side of the room, behind the bed!"

"I'm afraid of the dark," she said.

"Do it, or I'll have to knock you out and carry you. You'll be in my way here."

I could hear a heavy flapping above the storm, and there came a scratching on the stone of the wall as she moved to obey me. Then I was looking into two hot, red eyes which were looking back into my own. I dropped mine quickly. The thing stood there on the ledge outside the window and regarded me.

into my eyes for long, it would know me, as the hellcat had known me.

When it spoke, it sounded like a bassoon blowing words.

"You are not the one," it said, "for you are smaller and older. Yet...That blade...It could be his. Who are you?"

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Strygalldwir is my name. Conjure with it and I will eat your heart and liver."

"Conjure with it? I can't even pronounce it," I said, "and my cirrhosis would give you indigestion. Go away."

"Who are you?" it repeated.

"*Misli, gammi gra'dil, Strygalldwir*," I said, and it jumped as if given a hotfoot.

"You seek to drive me forth with such a simple spell?" it asked when it settled again. "I am not one of the lesser ones."

"It seemed to make you a bit uncomfortable."

"Who are you?" it said again.

"None of your business, Charlie. Ladybird, Ladybird, fly away home--"

"Four times must I ask you and four times be refused before I may enter and slay you. Who are you?"

"No," I said, standing. "Come on in and burn!"

Then it tore away the latticework, and the wind that accompanied it into the chamber extinguished the candle.

I lunged forward, and there were sparks between us when Grayswandir met the dark rune-sword. We clashed, then I sprang back. My eyes had adjusted to the half dark, so the loss of the light did not blind me. The creature saw well enough, also. It was stronger than a man, but then so am I. We circled the room. An icy wind moved about us, and when we passed the window again, cold droplets lashed my face. The first time that I cut the creature--a long slash across the breast--it remained silent, though tiny flames

It howled then, but did not fall. Grayswandir was torn from my grasp and flames bloomed about the wound. It stood there wearing them. It advanced a step toward me and I picked up a small chair and held it between us.

"I do not keep my heart where men do," it said.

Then it lunged, but I blocked the blow with the chair and caught it in the right eye with one of the legs. I throw the chair to the side then, and stepping forward, seized its right wrist and turned it over. I struck the elbow with the edge of my hand, as hard as I could. There came a sharp crack and the runesword clattered to the floor. Then its left hand struck my head and I fell.

It leaped for the blade, and I seized its ankle and jerked. It sprawled, and I threw myself atop it and found its throat. I turned my head into the hollow of my shoulder, chin against my breast, as it clawed for my face with its left hand.

As my death grip tightened, its eyes sought mine, and this time I did not avoid them. There came a tiny shock at the base of my brain, as we both knew that we knew.

"You!" it managed to gasp, before I twisted my hands hard and the life went out of those red red eyes.

I stood, put my foot upon its carcass, and withdrew Grayswandir.

The thing burst into flames when my blade came free, and kept burning until there was nothing remaining but a charred spot upon the floor.

Then Lorraine came over and I put my arm about her and she asked me to take her back to her quarters and to bed. So I did, but we didn't do anything but lie there together until she had cried herself to sleep. That is how I met Lorraine.

gave me the right to be eccentric. I had worn it for over two weeks, since my battle with Strygalldwir. I had put it on the following morning before I trounced Harald to keep my promise to Lorraine, and I had decided that as my girth increased I had better keep my face concealed.

I weighed perhaps fourteen stone now, and felt like my old self again. If I could help clean up this mess in the land called Lorraine, I knew that I would have a chance at least to try what I most wanted, and perhaps succeed.

"So that's it," I said. "I don't see any troops mustering."

"I believe we will have to ride north," said Lance, "and we will doubtless only see them after dark."

"How far north?"

"Three or four leagues. They move about a bit."

We had ridden for two days to reach the Circle. We had met a patrol earlier that morning and learned that the troops inside the thing continued to muster every night. They went through various drills and then were gone--to someplace deeper inside--with the coming of morning. A perpetual thunderhead, I learned, rode above the Circle, though the storm never broke.

"Shall we breakfast here and then ride north?" I asked.

"Why not?" said Ganelon. "I'm starved and we've time."

So we dismounted and ate dried meat and drank from our canteens.

"I still do not understand that note," said Ganelon, after belching, patting his stomach, and lighting his pipe. "Will he stand beside us in the final battle, or will he not? Where is he, if he intends to help? The day of conflict draws nearer and nearer."

"Forget him," I said. "It was probably a joke."

"I can't, damn it!" he said. "There is something passing strange about the whole business!"

"I know of him. Long ago, he ruled in this land. Do you not recall the stories of the demon lordling? They are the same. That was Corwin, in days before my days. The best thing he did was abdicate and flee when the resistance grew too strong against him." That was not true! Or was it?

Amber casts an infinity of shadows, and my Avalon had cast many of its own, because of my presence there. I might be known on many earths that I had never trod, for shadows of myself had walked them, mimicking imperfectly my deeds and my thoughts.

"No," said Ganelon, "I never paid heed to the old stories. I wonder if it *could* have been the same man, ruling here. That is interesting."

"Very," I agreed, to keep my hand in things. "But if he ruled so long ago, surely he must be dead or decrepit by now."

"He was a sorcerer," said Lance.

"The one I knew certainly was," said Ganelon, "for he banished me from a land neither art nor artifice can discover now."

"You never spoke of this before," said Lance. "How did it occur?"

"None of your business," said Ganelon, and Lance was silent once again.

I hauled out my own pipe--I had obtained one two days earlier--and Lance did the same. It was a clay job and drew hot and hard. We lit up, and the three of us sat there smoking.

"Well, he did the smart thing," said Ganelon. "Let's forget it now."

We did not, of course. But we stayed away from the subject after that.

If it had not been for the dark thing behind us, it would have been quite pleasant, just sitting there, relaxing. Suddenly, I felt close to the two of them. I wanted to say something, but I could not think what. Ganelon solved that by bringing up current business once more.

"So you want to hit them before they hit us?" he said.

"That's right," I replied. "Take the fight to their home territory."

"Lance," said Ganelon, "should we do as our friend here says? Should we attack?"

He could have shrugged and equivocated. He did not.

"Yes," he said. "They almost had us last time. It was very close the night King Uther died. If we do not attack them now, I feel they may defeat us next time. Oh, it would not be easy, and we would hurt them badly. But I think they could do it. Let us see what we can see now, then make our plans for an attack."

"All right," said Ganelon. "I am sick of waiting too. Tell me that again after we return and I'll go along with it." So we did that thing. We rode north that afternoon, and we hid ourselves in the hills and looked down upon the Circle. Within it, they worshiped, after their fashion, and they drilled. I estimated around four thousand troops. We had about twenty-five hundred. They also had weird flying, hopping, crawling things that made noises in the night. We had stout hearts. Yeah.

All that I needed was a few minutes alone with their leader, and it would be decided, one way or another. The whole thing. I could not tell my companions that, but it was true.

You see, I was the party responsible for the whole thing down there. I had done it, and it was up to me to undo it, if I could.

I was afraid that I could not.

In a fit of passion, compounded of rage, horror, and pain, I had unleashed this thing, and it was reflected somewhere in every earth in existence. Such is the blood curse of a Prince of Amber.

We watched them all that night, the Wardens of the Circle, and in the morning we departed.

The verdict was, attack!

So we rode all the way back and nothing followed us. When we reached the Keep of Ganelon, we fell to planning. Our troops were ready--over-ready, perhaps--and we decided to strike within a fort-

"I know," she said, and I knew that she knew and that was it.
We turned our attention to other subjects, and later we slept.

She'd had a dream.

In the morning, she said to me, "I had a dream."

"What about?" I asked.

"The coming battle," she told me. "I see you and the horned one
locked in combat."

"Who wins?"

"I don't know. But as you slept, I did a thing that might help
you."

"I wish you had not," I said. "I can take care of myself."

"Then I dreamed of my own death, in this time."

"Let me take you away to a place I know."

"No, my place is here," she told me.

"I don't pretend to own you," I said, "but I can save you from
whatever you've dreamed. That much lies within my power, believe
me."

"I do believe you, but I will not go."

"You're a damned fool."

"Let me stay."

"As you wish.... Listen, I'll even send you to Cabra..."

"No."

"You're a damned fool."

"I know. I love you."

"...And a stupid one. The word is 'like.' Remember?"

"You'll do it," she said.

"Go to hell," I said.

Then she wept, softly, until I comforted her once again.

That was Lorraine.

had been brief, guerrilla affairs. We had dispatched our assailants and continued. When we reached the area we had decided upon, we made our camp, posted guards, and retired. We slept undisturbed. I awoke wondering whether my brothers and sisters thought of me as I thought of them. It was a very sad thought. In the privacy of a small grove, my helmet filled with soapy water, I shaved my beard. Then I dressed, slowly, in my private and tattered colors. I was as hard as stone, dark as soil, and mean as hell once more. Today would be the day. I donned my visor, put on chain mail, buckled my belt, and hung Grayswandir at my side. Then I fastened my cloak at my neck with a silver rose and was discovered by a messenger who had been looking for me to tell me that things were about ready. I kissed Lorraine, who had insisted on coming along. Then I mounted my horse, a roan named Star, and rode off toward the front.

There I met with Ganelon and with Lance. They said, "We are ready."

I called for my officers and briefed them. They saluted, turned and rode away. "Soon," said Lance, lighting his pipe. "How is your arm?" "Fine, now," he replied, "after that workout you gave it yesterday. Perfect." I opened my visor and lit my own pipe. "You've shaved your beard," said Lance. "I cannot picture you without it."

"The helm fits better this way," I said. "Good fortune to us all," said Ganelon. "I know no gods, but if any care to be with us, I welcome them." "There is but one God," said Lance. "I pray that He be with us." "Amen," said Ganelon, lighting his pipe. "For today." "It will be ours," said Lance. "Yes," said I, as the sun stirred the east and the birds of morning

And Lance drew his blade. His cried "Charge!" echoed about us.

We were half a mile inside the Circle before anything happened. There were five hundred of us in the lead, all mounted. A dark cavalry appeared, and we met them. After five minutes, they broke and we rode on. Then we heard the thunder. There was lightning, and the rain began to fall. The thunderhead had finally broken. A thin line of foot soldiers, pikemen mainly, barred our way, waiting stoically. Maybe we all smelled the trap, but we bore down upon them. Then the cavalry hit our flanks. We wheeled, and the fighting began in earnest. It was perhaps twenty minutes later... We held out, waiting for the main body to arrive. Then the two hundred or so of us rode on... Men. It was men that we slew, that slew us--gray-faced, dour-countenanced men. I wanted more. One more... Theirs must have been a semi-metaphysical problem in logistics. How much could be diverted through this Gateway? I was not sure. Soon...

We topped a rise, and far ahead and below us lay a dark citadel. I raised my blade. As we descended, they attacked. They hissed and they croaked and they flapped. They meant, to me, that he was running low on people. Grayswandir became a flame in my hand, a thunderbolt, a portable electric chair. I slew them as fast as they approached, and they burned as they died. To my right, I saw Lance draw a similar line of chaos, and he was muttering beneath his breath. Prayers for the dead, no doubt. To my left, Ganelon laid about him, and a wake of fires followed behind his horse's tail. Through the flashing lightning, the citadel loomed larger. The hundred or so of us stormed ahead, and the abominations fell

favor. They pressed us, all the ugly things that were more or less than human, mixed in with human troops. We were drawn up into a tight knot, defending ourselves on all sides, when our bedraggled infantry arrived and began hacking. We pressed for the gate once more and made it this time, all forty or fifty of us. We won through, and then there were troops in the courtyard to be slain.

The dozen or so of us who made it to the foot of the dark tower were faced by a final guard contingent. "Go it!" cried Ganelon, as we leaped from our horses and waded into them.

"Go it!" cried Lance, and I guess they both meant me, or each other. I took it to mean me, and I broke away from the fray and raced up the stairs.

He would be there, in the highest tower, I knew; and I would have to face him, and face him down. I did not know whether I could, but I had to try, because I was the only one who knew where he really came from--and I was the one who put him there. I came to a heavy wooden door at the top of the stairs. I tried it, but it was secured from the other side. So I kicked it as hard as I could.

It fell inward with a crash. I saw him there by the window, a man-formed body dressed in light armor, goat head upon those massive shoulders. I crossed the threshold and stopped. He had turned to stare as the door had fallen, and now he sought my eyes through steel.

"Mortal man, you have come too far," he said. "Or are you mortal man?" and there was a blade in his hand.

"Ask Strygalldwir," I said.

"You are the one who slew him," he stated. "Did he name you?"

"Maybe."

There were footsteps on the stairs behind me. I stepped to the left of

It buried its blade at me, point forward, like a thunderbolt. And the sound of its passage came like a clap of thunder. The elements outside the tower echoed it, a deafening response. With Grayswandir, I parried that blade as though it were an ordinary thrust. It embedded itself in the floor and burst into flames. Without, the lightning responded. For an instant, the light was as blinding as a magnesium flare, and in that moment the creature was upon me. It pinned my arms to my sides, and its horns struck against my visor, once, twice... Then I threw my strength against those arms, and their grip began to weaken. I dropped Grayswandir, and with a final heave broke the hold it had upon me. In that moment, however, our eyes met. Then we both struck, and we both reeled back. "Lord of Amber," it said then, "why do you strive with me? It was you who gave us this passage, this way..." "I regret a rash act and seek to undo it." "Too late--and this a strange place to begin." It struck again, so quickly that it got through my guard. I was slammed back against the wall. Its speed was deadly. And then it raised its hand and made a sign, and I had a vision of the Courts of Chaos come upon me--a vision that made my hackles rise, made a chill wind blow across my soul, to know what I had done.

"...You see?" it was saying. "You gave us this Gateway. Help us now, and we will restore to you that which is yours." For a moment I was swayed. It was possible that it could do just what it had offered, if I would help. But it would be a threat forever after. Allies briefly, we would be at each other's throats after we got what we wanted--and those dark

same.
I heard something snap like a dry stick. I wondered whose neck had
broken. Mine sure hurt.

I opened my eyes and there was the sky. I was lying on my back on
a blanket on the ground.
"I'm afraid he's going to live," said Ganelon, and I turned my head,
slowly, in the direction of his voice.
He was seated on the edge of the blanket, sword across his knees.
Lorraine was with him.
"How goes it?" I said.
"We've won," he told me. "You've kept your promise. When you
killed that thing, it was all over. The men fell senseless, the crea-
tures burned."
"Good."
"I have been sitting here wondering why I no longer hate you."
"Have you reached any conclusions?"
"No, not really. Maybe it's because we're a lot alike. I don't know." I
smiled at Lorraine.
"I'm glad you're very poor when it comes to prophecy. The battle is
over and you're still alive."
"The death has already begun," she said, not returning my smile.
"What do you mean?"
"They still tell stories of how the Lord Corwin had my grandfather
executed--drawn and quartered publicly--for leading one of the
early uprisings against him."
"That wasn't me," I said. "It was one of my shadows."
But she shook her head and said, "Corwin of Amber, I am what I
am," and she rose and left me then.
"What was it?" asked Ganelon, ignoring her departure. "What was
the thing in the tower?"
"Mine," I said; "one of those things which was released when I laid

I shook my head.
"Not so. Our Avalon fell, but in Shadow I may find its like once more."

"Take me with you."

"Are you mad?"

"No, I would look once again on the land of my birth, no matter what the peril."

"I do not go to dwell there," I said, "but to arm for battle. In Avalon there is a pink powder the jewelers use. I ignited a sample of it one time in Amber. I go there only to obtain it and to build guns that I may lay siege to Amber and gain the throne that is mine."

"What of those things from beyond Shadow you spoke of."

"I will deal with them afterwards. Should I lose this time, then they are Eric's problem."

"You said that he had blinded you and cast you into the dungeons."

"That is true. I grew new eyes. I escaped."

"You are a demon."

"This has often been said. I no longer deny it."

"You will take me with you?"

"If you really wish to come. It will differ from the Avalon you knew, however."

"To Amber!"

"You are mad!"

"No. Long have I wished to look upon that fabled city. After I have seen Avalon once again I will want to turn my hand to something new. Was I not a good general?"

"Yes."

"Then you will teach me of these things you call guns, and I will help you in the greatest battle. I've not too many good years remaining before me, I know. Take me with you."

"Your bones may bleach at the foot of Kolvir, beside my own."

"What battle is certain? I will chance it"

one might have been were he anyone else. The stories of their Corwin lingered on, and the demon tag was on all of them. The men I had worked with, fought beside, now looked at me with glances holding something more than fear- glances only, for they quickly dropped their eyes or turned them to another thing. Perhaps they feared that I wished to stay and reign over them. They might have been relieved, all save Ganelon, when I took to the trail. Ganelon, I think, feared that I would not return for him as I had promised. This, I feel, is the reason that he offered to ride with me. But it was a thing that I had to do by myself. Lorraine had come to mean something to me, I was surprised to discover, and I found myself quite hurt by her action. I felt that she owed me a hearing before she went her way. Then if she still chose her mortal captain, they could have my blessing. If not, I realized that I wanted to keep her with me. Fair Avalon would be postponed for so long as it took me to resolve this to ending or continuance. I rode along the trail and the birds sang in the trees about me. The day was bright with a sky-blue, tree-green peace, for the scourge had been lifted from the land. In my heart, there was something like a bit of joy that I had undone at least a small portion of the rottenness I had wrought. Evil? Hell, I've done more of it than most men, but I had picked up a conscience too, somewhere along the way, and I let it enjoy one of its rare moments of satisfaction. Once I held Amber, I could allow it a little more leeway, I felt. Ha! I was heading north, and the terrain was foreign to me. I followed a clearly marked trail, which bore the signs of two riders' recent passage. I followed all that day, through dusk and into evening, dismounting periodically to inspect the way. Finally, my eyes played too many tricks on me, so I located a small glen- several hundred yards to the left of the trail-and there I camped for the night. It was the pains in my neck, doubtless, that made me dream of the horned one and relive that battle. "Help us now, and we will restore to you

been so for long, for the blood was still damp upon her breast where the blade had entered, and her flesh yet warm. There were no rocks with which to build her a cairn, so I cut away the sod with Grayswandir and laid her there to rest. He had removed her bracelets, her rings, and her jeweled combs, which had held all she possessed of fortune. I had to close her eyes before I covered her over with my cloak, and here my hand faltered and my own eyes grew dim. It took me a long while. I rode on, and it was not long before I overtook him, riding as though he were pursued by the Devil, which he was. I spoke not a word when I unhorsed him, nor afterward, and I did not use my blade, though he drew his own. I hurled his broken body into a high oak tree, and when I looked back it was dark with birds. I replaced her rings, her bracelets, her combs, before I closed the grave, and that was Lorraine. All that she had ever been or wanted to be had come to this, and that is the whole story of how we met and how we parted, Lorraine and I, in the land called Lorraine, and it is like unto my life, I guess, for a Prince of Amber is part and party to all the rottenness that is in the world, which is why whenever I do speak of my conscience, something else within me must answer, "Ha!" In the mirrors of the many judgments, my hands are the color of blood. I am a part of the evil that exists in the world and in Shadow. I sometime fancy myself an evil which exists to oppose other evils. I destroy Melkins when I find them, and on that Great Day of which prophets speak but in which they do not truly believe, on that day when the world is completely cleansed of evil, then I, too, will go down into darkness, swallowing curses. Perhaps even sooner than that, I now judge. But whatever... Until that time, I shall not wash my hands nor let them hang useless. Turning, I rode back to the Keep of Ganelon, who knew but would never understand.

Chapter 4

echoed our words as we passed. I sang as we rode, and after a time, Ganelon joined me. We had been traveling for over a week, and the land and the sky and the breezes told me we were near to Avalon now.

We camped in a wood near a lake as the sun slid behind stone and the day died down and ceased. I went off to the lake to bathe while Ganelon unpacked our gear. The water was cold and bracing. I splashed about in it for a long while. I thought I heard several cries as I bathed, but I could not be certain. It was a weird wood and I was not overly concerned. However, I dressed quickly and hurried back to the camp. As I walked, I heard it again: a whine, a plea. Drawing nearer, I realized that a conversation was in progress. Then I entered the small clearing we had chosen. Our gear was spread about and the beginnings of a campfire had been laid. Ganelon squatted on his haunches beneath an oak tree. The man hung from it. He was young and fair of hair and complexion. Beyond that, it was hard to say at a glance. It is difficult, I discovered, to obtain a clear initial impression as to a man's features and size when he is hanging upside down several feet above the ground. His hands had been tied behind his back and he hung from a low bough by a rope that had been knotted about his right ankle. He was talking--brief, rapid phrases in response to Ganelon's questions--and his face was moist with spittle and sweat. He did not hang limply, but swung back and forth. There was an abrasion on his cheek and several spots of blood on his shirt front. Halting, I restrained myself from interrupting for a moment and watched. Ganelon would not have put him where he was without a reason, so I was not immediately overwhelmed with sympathy for the fellow. Whatever it was that had prompted Ganelon to question him thus, I knew that I, too, would be interested in the information.

writhed and cried out, "Please!"
"The rest," said Ganelon. "Tell me everything."
"That's all!" said the other. "I know no more!"
"Why not?"
"They swept on by me then! I could not see!"
"Why did you not follow?"
"They were mounted. I was on foot."
"Why did you not follow on foot then?"
"I was dazed."
"Dazed? You were afraid! You deserted!"
"No!"

Ganelon held his blade forth, snapped it away again at the final moment.

"No!" cried the youth.
Ganelon moved the blade again.
"Yes!" the boy screamed. "I was afraid!"
"And you fled then?"
"Yes! I kept running! I've been fleeing ever since..."
"And you know nothing of how things went after that?"
"No."

"You lie!" He moved the blade again.
"No!" said the boy. "Please..."

I stepped forward then. "Ganelon," I said.
He glanced at me and grinned, lowering the blade. The boy sought my eyes.

"What have we here?" I asked.

"Ha!" he said, slapping the inside of the youth's thigh so that he cried out. "A thief, a deserter--with an interesting tale to tell."

"Then cut him down and let me hear it," I said.

Ganelon turned and cut through the cord with one swipe of his blade. The boy fell to the ground and began sobbing.

"I caught him trying to steal our supplies and thought to question

"It sounds somewhat familiar," he said. "The forces of Avalon were engaged in what seems to have been the largest--and perhaps final--of a long series of confrontations with beings not quite natural." "Oh?"

I studied the boy and his eyes dropped, but I saw the fear that was there before they fell.

"... Women," Ganelon said. "Pale furies out of some hell, lovely and cold. Armed and armored. Long, light hair. Eyes like ice. Mounted on white, fire-breathing steeds that fed on human flesh, they came forth by night from a warren of caves in the mountains an earthquake opened several years ago. They raided, taking young men back with them as captives, killing all others. Many appeared later as a soulless infantry, following their van. This sounds very like the men of the Circle we knew."

"But many of those lived when they were freed," I said. "They did not seem soulless then, only somewhat as I once did--amnesiac. It seems strange," I went on, "that they did not block off these caves during the day, since the riders only came forth by night..." "The deserter tells me this was tried," said Ganelon, "and they always burst forth after a time, stronger than before." The boy was ashen, but he nodded when I looked toward him inquiringly.

"Their General, whom he calls the Protector, routed them many times," Ganelon continued. "He even spent part of a night with their leader, a pale bitch named Lintra--whether in dalliance or parlay, I'm not certain. But nothing came of this. The raids continued and her forces grew stronger. The Protector finally decided to mass an all-out attack, in hopes of destroying them utterly. It was during that battle that this one fled," he said, indicating the youth with a gesture of his blade, "which is why we do not know the ending to the story."

"Is that the way it was?" I asked him.

shoes?"

"Yes, but that was different"

"How so?"

"I got away with it."

I laughed. It broke me up completely, and I could not stop laughing. He looked irritated, then puzzled. Then he began laughing himself. The youth regarded us as if we were a pair of maniacs. "All right," said Ganelon finally, "all right," and he stooped, turned the boy with a single push, and severed the cord that bound his wrists.

"Come, lad," he said. "I'll fetch you something to eat," and he moved to our gear and opened several food parcels. The boy rose and limped slowly after him. He seized the food that was offered and began eating quickly and noisily, not taking his eyes off Ganelon. His information, if true, presented me with several complications, the foremost being that it would probably be more difficult to obtain what I wanted in a war-ravaged land. It also lent weight to my fears as to the nature and extent of the disruption pattern.

I helped Ganelon build a small fire.

"How does this affect our plans?" he asked.

I saw no real choice. All of the shadows near to what I desired would be similarly involved. I could lay my course for one which did not possess such involvement, but in reaching it I would have achieved the wrong place. That which I desired would not be available there. If the forays of chaos kept occurring on my desire-walk through Shadow, then they were bound up with the nature of the desire and would have to be dealt with, one way or another, sooner or later. They could not be avoided. Such was the nature of the game, and I could not complain because I had laid down the rules.

"We go on," I said. "It is the place of my desire."

The youth let out a brief cry, and then--perhaps from some feeling

"I decided against it." He shrugged.
"If he returns and cuts our throats tonight you may find yourself feeling somewhat different."
"I should imagine. But he will not, you know that."
He shrugged again, skewering a piece of meat and warming it over the flames.
"Well, war has taught him to show a good pair of heels," he acknowledged. "Perhaps we will awaken in the morning."
He took a bite and began to chew. It seemed like a good idea and I fetched some for myself.
Much later, I was awakened from a troubled sleep to stare at stars through a screen of leaves. Some omen making portion of my mind had seized upon the youth and used us both badly. It was a long while before I could get back to sleep.

In the morning we kicked dirt over the ashes and rode on. We made it into the mountains that afternoon and passed through them the following day. There were occasional signs of recent passage on the trail we followed, but we encountered no one.
The following day we passed several farmhouses and cottages, not pausing at any of them. I had opted against the wild, demonic route I had followed when I had exiled Ganelon. While quite brief, I knew that he would have found it massively disconcerting. I had wanted this time to think, so much a journeying was not called for. Now, however, the long route was nearing its end. We achieved Amber's sky that afternoon, and I admired it in silence. It might almost be the Forest of Arden through which we rode. There were no horn notes, however, no Julian, no Morgenstern, no stormhounds to harry us, as there had been in Arden when last I passed that way. There were only the bird notes in the great-boled trees, the complaint of a squirrel, the bark of a fox, the splash of a waterfall, the whites and blues and pinks of flowers in the shade.

The sky of Amber no longer heartened me, though the way was clear for a long while after that. The day was running to evening and the forest had thinned considerably when Ganelon noted the smoke trails to the southeast. We took the first side path that seemed to lead in that direction, although it was tangent to Avalon proper. It was difficult to estimate the distance, but we could tell that we would not reach the place until after nightfall. "Their army--still encamped?" Ganelon wondered. "Or that of their conqueror." He shook his head and loosened his blade in its scabbard. Toward twilight, I left the trail to follow a sound of running water to its source. It was a clear, clean stream that had made its way down from the mountains and still bore something of their chill within it. I bathed there, trimming my new bearding and cleaning the dust of travel from my garments as well. As we were nearing this end of our journeying, it was my wish to arrive with what small splendor I could muster. Appreciating this, Ganelon even splashed water over his face and blew his nose loudly. Standing on the bank, blinking my rinsed eyes at the heavens, I saw the moon resolve itself sharp and clear, the fuzziness fading from its edges. This was the first time it had happened. My breathing jerked to a halt and I kept staring. Then I scanned the sky for early stars, traced the edges of clouds, the distant mountains, the farthest trees. I looked back at the moon, and it still held clear and steady. My eyesight was normal once again. Ganelon drew back at the sound of my laughter, and he never inquired as to its cause. Suppressing an impulse to sing, I remounted and headed back toward the trail once again. The shadows deepened as we rode, and clusters of stars bloomed among the branches overhead. I inhaled a big piece of the night, held it a moment, released it. I was myself

tice."

"If they cannot see us that well, then we are poor targets."
"True, but I am not fully comforted by the thought."
I listened to the sounds of the horses' hoofs on the trail. The way was not straight. It twisted, curved, and wandered for a time, then took an upward turn. As we mounted the rise it followed, the trees thinned even more.

We came to the top of a hill then, and into a fairly open area. Advancing, we achieved a sudden view that covered several miles. We drew rein at an abrupt drop that curved its way into a gradual slope after ten or fifteen precipitous meters, sweeping downward to a large plain perhaps a mile distant, then continuing on through a hilly, sporadically wooded area. The plain was dotted with campfires and there were a few tents toward the center of things. A large number of horses grazed near by, and I guessed there were several hundred men sitting beside the fires or moving about the compound.

Ganelon sighed.
"At least they seem to be normal men," he said.
"Yes."

"...And if they are normal military men, we are probably being watched right now. This is too good a vantage to leave unposted."
"Yes."

There came a noise from behind us. We began to turn, just as a near by voice said, "Don't move!"
I continued to turn my head, and I saw four men. Two of them held crossbows trained on us and the other two had blades in their hands. One of these advanced two paces.
"Dismount!" he ordered. "On this side! Slowly!"
We climbed down from our mounts and faced him, keeping our hands away from our weapons.
"Who are you? Where are you from?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Should we have?"
"Hard to say," he decided. "Remove your weapons. I'm going to send you down to the camp. They will want to question you about anything you may have seen in the east--anything unusual."
"We've seen nothing unusual," I said.
"Whatever, they will probably feed you. Though I doubt you will be hired. You have come a bit late for the fighting. Remove your weapons now."

He called two more men from within the trees while we unbuckled our sword belts. He instructed them to escort us below, on foot. We were to lead our horses. The men took our weapons, and as we turned to go our interrogator cried out, "Wait!" I turned back toward him.

"You. What is your name?" he asked me.
"Corey" I said.
"Stand still."

He approached, drawing very near. He stared at me for perhaps ten seconds.

"What is the matter?" I asked.
Instead of replying, he fumbled with a pouch at his belt. He withdrew a handful of coins and held them close to his eyes.
"Damn! It's too dark," he said, "and we can't make a light."
"For what?" I said.
"Oh, it is not of any great importance," he told me. "You struck me as familiar, though, and I was trying to think why. You look like the head stamped on some of our old coins. A few of them are still about."

"Doesn't he?" he addressed the nearest bowman.
The man lowered his crossbow and advanced. He squinted at me from a few paces' distance.
"Yes," he said then, "he does."
"What was it--the one we're thinking of?"

The camp had the pleasant smell of man and beast, wood smoke, roasting meat, leather and oil, all intermingled in the firelight where men talked, honed weapons, repaired gear, ate, gamed, slept, drank, and watched us as we led our mounts through their midst, escorted in the direction of a nearly central trio of tattered tents. A sphere of silence expanded about us as we went. We were halted before the second-largest tent and one of our guards spoke with a man who was pacing the area. The man shook his head several times and gestured in the direction of the largest tent. The exchange lasted for several minutes, then our guard returned and spoke with the other guard who waited at our left. Finally, our man nodded and approached me while the other summoned a man from the nearest campfire. "The officers are all at a meeting in the Protector's tent," he said. "We are going to hobble your horses and put them to graze. Unstrap your things and set them here. You will have to wait to see the captain."

I nodded, and we set about unstowing our belongings and rubbing the horses down. I patted Star on the neck and watched a small man with a limp lead him and Ganelon's mount Firedrake off toward the other horses. We sat on our packs then and waited. One of the guards brought us some hot tea and accepted a pipeful of my tobacco. They moved then to a spot somewhat to our rear. I watched the big tent, sipped my tea, and thought of Amber and a small night club in the Rue de Char et Pain in Brussels, on the shadow Earth I had so long inhabited. Once I obtained the jewelers rouge I needed from here, I would be heading for Brussels to deal with the arms merchants of the Gun Bourse once again. My order would be complicated and expensive, I realized, because some ammunition manufacturer would have to be persuaded to set up a special production line. I knew dealers on that Earth other than Interannco, thanks to my itinerant military background in that

not make out what was being said. As they drifted farther outside, the man with whom they were speaking moved also and I caught a glimpse of him. The light was at his back and the two officers blocked most of my view, but I could see that he was thin and very tall.

Our guards had not yet stirred, indicating to me that one of the two officers was the captain mentioned earlier. I continued to stare, willing them to move farther and grant me a better look at their superior.

After a time they did, and a few moments later he took a step forward.

At first, I could not tell whether it was just a play of light and shadow... But no! He moved again and I had a clear view for a moment. He was missing his right arm, from a point just below the elbow. It was so heavily bandaged that I guessed the loss to have been quite recent.

Then his large left hand made a downward, sweeping gesture and hovered a good distance out from his body. The stump twitched at the same moment, and so did something at the back of my mind. His hair was long and straight and brown, and I saw the way that his jaw jutted...

He stepped outside then, and a breeze caught the cloak he wore and caused it to flare to his right. I saw that his shirt was yellow, his trousers brown. The cloak itself was a flame-like orange, and he caught its edge with an unnaturally rapid movement of his left hand and drew it back to cover his stump. I stood quickly, and his head snapped in my direction. Our gazes met, and neither of us moved for several heartbeats after that.

The two officers turned and stared, and then he pushed them aside and was striding toward me. I heard Ganelon grunt and climb quickly to his feet. Our guards were taken by surprise, also.

"Corwin," he said, "and still alive."
"Benedict," I said, smiling myself, "and breathing yet. It has been devilish long."
"Indeed. Who is your friend?"
"His name is Ganelon."
"Ganelon," he said, nodding toward him but not offering to clasp hands.
He moved to the table then and poured three cups of wine. He passed one to me, another to Ganelon, raised the third himself.
"To your health, brother," he said.
"To yours."
We drank.
Then, "Be seated," he said, gesturing toward the nearest bench and seating himself at the table, "and welcome to Avalon."
"Thank you--Protector."
He grimaced.
"The sobriquet is not unearned," he said flatly, continuing to study my face. "I wonder whether their earlier protector could say the same?"
"It was not really this place," I said, "and I believe that he could." He shrugged.
"Of course," he said. "Enough of that! Where have you been? What have you been doing? Why have you come here? Tell me of yourself. It has been too long."
I nodded. It was unfortunate, but family etiquette as well as the balance of power required that I answer his questions before asking any of my own. He was my elder, and I had--albeit unknowing--intruded in his sphere of influence. It was not that I begrudged him the courtesy. He was one of the few among my many relatives whom I respected and even liked. It was that I was itching to question him. It had been, as he had said, too long. And how much should I tell him now? I had no notion where his

"It was several years after the defeat of the Moonriders out of Ghenesh and your departure that Eric and I had a major falling out," I began. "Yes, it was a quarrel over the succession. Dad had been making abdication noises again, and he still refused to name a successor. Naturally, the old arguments were resumed as to who was more legitimate. Of course, you and Eric are both my elders, but while Faiella, mother to Eric and myself, was his wife after the death of Clymnea, they--" "Enough!" cried Benedict, slapping the table so hard that it cracked. The lamp danced and sputtered, but by some small miracle was not upset. The tent's entrance flap was immediately pushed aside and a concerned guard peered in. Benedict glanced at him and he withdrew.

"I do not wish to sit in on our respective bastardy proceeding," Benedict said softly. "That obscene pastime was one of the reasons I initially absented myself from felicity. Please continue your story without the benefit of footnotes." "Well--yes," I said, coughing lightly. "As I was saying, we had some rather bitter arguments concerning the whole matter. Then one evening it went beyond mere words. We fought." "A duel?"

"Nothing that formal. A simultaneous decision to murder one another is more like it. At any rate, we fought for a long while and Eric finally got the upper hand and proceeded to pulverize me. At the risk of getting ahead of my story, I have to add that all of this was only recalled to me about five years ago." Benedict nodded, as though he understood.

"I can only conjecture as to what occurred immediately after I lost consciousness," I went on. "But Eric stopped short of killing me himself. When I awakened, I was on a shadow Earth in a place called London. The plague was rampant at the time, and I had contracted it. I recovered with no memory of anything prior to London. I

years ago, and the irony of it is that I have good reason to believe Eric was responsible for the accident. Flora had apparently been resident on that shadow Earth all along, keeping watch over me. "To return to conjecture, Eric must have stayed his hand at the last moment, desiring my death, but not wanting it traceable to him. So he transported me through Shadow to a place of sudden, almost certain death--doubtless to return and say that we had argued and I had ridden off in a huff, muttering something about going away again. We had been hunting in the Forest of Arden that day--just the two of us, together." "I find it strange," Benedict interrupted, "that two rivals such as yourselves should elect to hunt together under such circumstances."

I took a sip of wine and smiled. "Perhaps it was a trifle more contrived than I made it sound," I said. "Perhaps we both welcomed the opportunity to hunt together. Just the two of us." "I see," he said. "So it is possible that your situations could have been reversed?"

"Well," I said, "that is difficult to say. I do not believe I would have gone that far. I am talking as of now, of course. People do change, you know. Back then...? Yes, I might have done the same thing to him. I cannot say for certain, but it is possible." He nodded again, and I felt a flash of anger which passed quickly into amusement.

"Fortunately, I am not out to justify my own motives for anything," I continued. "To go on with my guesswork, I believe that Eric kept tabs on me after that, doubtless disappointed at first that I had survived, but satisfied as to my harmlessness. So he arranged to have Flora keep an eye on me, and the world turned peacefully for a long while. Then, presumably, Dad abdicated and disappeared without the question of the succession having been settled--"

He only nodded, giving rise to uneasy speculations on my part as to his contact in Amber. For all I knew, he could be pro-Eric these days.

"When was the last time you were back there yourself?" I ventured. "A little over twenty years ago," he replied, "but I keep in touch." Not with anyone who had cared to mention it to me! He must have known that as he said it, so did he mean me to take it as a caution-or a threat? My mind raced. Of course he possessed a set of the Major Trumps. I fanned them mentally and went through them like mad. Random had professed ignorance as to his whereabouts. Brand had been missing a long while. I had had indication that he was still alive, imprisoned in some unpleasant place or other and in no position to report on the happenings in Amber. Flora could not have been his contact, as she had been in virtual exile in Shadow herself until recently. Llewella was in Rebma. Deirdre was in Rebma also, and had been out of favor in Amber when last I saw her. Fiona? Julian had told me she was "somewhere to the south." He was uncertain as to precisely where. Who did that leave? Eric himself, Julian, Gerard, or Caine, as I saw it. Scratch Eric. He would not have passed along the details of Dad's non-abdication in a manner that would allow things to be taken as Benedict had taken them. Julian supported Eric, but was not without personal ambitions of the highest order. He would pass along information if it might benefit him to do so. Ditto for Caine. Gerard, on the other hand, had always struck me as more interested in the welfare of Amber itself than in the question of who sat on its throne. He was not over-fond of Eric, though, and had once been willing to support either Bleys or myself over him. I believed he would have considered Benedict's awareness of events to be something in the nature of an insurance policy for the realm. Yes, it was almost certainly one of these three. Julian hated me. Caine neither liked nor disliked me especially, and Gerard and I shared fond memories that went all the

"It is interesting," I said, swirling the wine within my cup. "In this light, then, it appears that everyone may have acted prematurely." "Not everyone," he said. I felt my face redden. "Your, pardon," I said. He nodded curtly. "Please continue your telling." "Well, to continue my chain of assumptions," I said, "when Eric decided that the throne had been vacant long enough and the time had come to make his move, he must also have decided that my amnesia was not sufficient and that it would be better to see my claim quitted entirely. At this time, he arranged for me to have an accident off on that shadow Earth, an accident which should have proven fatal but did not." "How do you know this? How much of it is guesswork?" "Flora as much as admitted it to me--including her own complicity in the thing--when I questioned her later." "Very interesting. Go on." "The bash on my head provided what even Sigmund Freud had been unable to obtain for me earlier," I said. "There returned to me small recollections that grew stronger and stronger--especially after I encountered Flora and was exposed to all manner of things that stimulated my memory. I was able to convince her that it had fully returned, so her speech was open as to people and things. Then Random showed up, fleeing from something--" "Fleeing? From what? Why?" "From some strange creatures out of Shadow. I never found out why."

"Interesting," he said, and I had to agree. I had thought of it often, back in my cell, wondering just why Random had entered, stage left, pursued by Furies, in the first place. From the moment we met until the moment we parted, we had been in some sort of peril; I

wound up in Rebma. By then, I had told Random my true condition, and he proposed my walking the Pattern again as a means of restoring it fully. The opportunity was there, and I took it. It proved effective, and I used the power of the Pattern to transport myself into Amber." He smiled.

"At this point. Random must have been a very unhappy man," he said.

"He was not exactly singing with glee," I said. "He had accepted Moire's judgment, that he wed a woman of her choosing--a blind girl named Vialle--and remain there with her for at least a year. I left him behind, and I later learned that he had done this thing. Deirdre was also there. We had encountered her along the way, in flight from Amber, and the three of us had entered Rebma together. She remained behind, also."

I finished my wine and Benedict nodded toward the bottle. It was almost empty, though, so he fetched a fresh bottle from his chest and we filled our cups. I took a long swallow. It was better wine than the previous. Must have been his private stock. "In the palace," I went on, "I made my way to the library, where I obtained a pack of the Tarots. This was my main reason for venturing there. I was surprised by Eric before I could do much else and we fought, there in the library. I succeeded in wounding him and believe I could have finished him, save that reinforcements arrived and I was forced to flee. I contacted Bleys then, who gave me passage to him in Shadow. You may have heard the rest from your own sources. How Bleys and I threw in together, assaulted Amber, lost. He fell from the face of Kolvir. I tossed him my Tarots and he caught them. I understand that his body was never found. But it was a long way down--though I believe the tide was high by then. I do not know whether he died that day or not." "Neither do I," said Benedict.

"So I was imprisoned and Eric was crowned. I was prevailed upon to

"It was close to four years before I could see again," I said, "and my vision is just getting back to normal now. So--about five years altogether, I would say." He leaned back, sighed, and smiled faintly. "Good," he said. "You give me some small hope. Others of us have lost portions of their anatomy and experienced regeneration also, of course, but I never lost anything significant--until now." "Oh yes," I said. "It is a most impressive record. I reviewed it regularly for years. A collection of bits and pieces, many of them forgotten I daresay, but by the principals and myself: fingertips, toes, ear lobes. I would say that there is hope for your arm. Not for a long while, of course. "It is a good thing that you are ambidextrous," I added. His smile went on and off and he took a drink of wine. No, he was not ready to tell me what had happened to him. I took another sip of my own. I did not want to tell him about Dworkin. I had wanted to save Dworkin as something of an ace in the hole. None of us understood the man's full power, and he was obviously mad. But he could be manipulated. Even Dad had apparently come to fear him after a time, and had had him locked away. What was it that he had told me back in my cell? That Dad had had him confined after he had announced his discovery of a means for destroying all of Amber. If this was not just the rambling of a psychotic and was the real reason for his being where he was, then Dad had been far more generous than I would have been. The man was too dangerous to let live. On the other hand, though. Dad had been trying to cure him of his condition. Dworkin had spoken of doctors, men he had frightened away or destroyed when he had turned his powers against them. Most of my memories of him were of a wise, kindly old man, quite devoted to Dad and the rest of the family. It would be difficult readily to destroy someone like that if there was some hope. He had been confined to what should have

tern and the Tarots. He had often tried to discuss the matter, but it had seemed awfully abstract and boring to most of us. We are a very pragmatic family, damn it! Brand was the only one who seemed to have had any interest in the subject. And Fiona. I had almost forgotten. Sometimes Fiona would listen. And Dad. Dad knew an awful lot of things that he never discussed. He never had much time for us, and there were so many things about him that we did not know. But he was probably as well versed as Dworkin in whatever principles were involved. Their main difference was one of application. Dworkin was an artist. I do not really know what Dad was. He never encouraged intimacy, though he was not an unkind father. Whenever he took note of us, he was quite lavish with gifts and diversions. But he left our upbringing to various members of his court. He tolerated us, I feel, as occasionally inevitable consequences of passion. Actually, I am quite surprised that the family is not much larger. The thirteen of us, plus two brothers and a sister I knew who were now dead, represent close to fifteen hundred years of parental production. There had been a few others also, of whom I had heard, long before us, who had not survived. Not a tremendous batting average for so lusty a liege, but then none of us had proved excessively fertile either. As soon as we were able to fend for ourselves and walk in Shadow, Dad had encouraged us to do so, find places where we would be happy and settle there. This was my connection with the Avalon which is no more. So far as I knew, Dad's own origins were known only to himself. I had never encountered anyone whose memory stretched back to a time when there had been no Oberon. Strange? Not to know where one's own father comes from, when one has had centuries in which to exercise one's curiosity? Yes. But he was secretive, powerful, shrewd--traits we all possess to some degree. He wanted us well situated and satisfied, I feel--but never so endowed as to present a threat to his own reign. There was in him, I guessed, an element of uneasiness, a not un-

but unfortunately I had known Freud too long not to feel self-conscious about it. Also, I was now beginning to wonder about the validity of any of our claims. If there had been no abdication and he did indeed still live, then the best of us could really hope to do was sit in regency. I would not look forward--especially from the throne--to his returning and finding things otherwise. Let's face it, I was afraid of him, and not without cause. Only a fool does not fear a genuine power that he does not understand. But whether the title be king or regent, my claim on it was stronger than Eric's and I was still determined to have it. If a power out of Dad's dark past, which none of us really understood, could serve to secure it, and if Dworkin did represent such a power, then he must remain hidden until he could be employed on my behalf. Even, I asked myself, if the power he represented was the power to destroy Amber itself, and with it to shatter the shadow worlds and capsize all of existence as I understood it? Especially then, I answered myself. For who else could be trusted with such power? We are indeed a very pragmatic family. More wine, and then I fumbled with my pipe, cleaning it, repacking it.

"That, basically, is my story to date," I said, regarding my handiwork, rising and taking a light from the lamp. "After I recovered my sight, I managed to escape, fled Amber, tarried for a time in a place called Lorraine, where I encountered Ganelon, then came here." "Why?"

I reseated myself and looked at him again. "Because it is near to the Avalon I once knew," I said. I had purposely refrained from mentioning any earlier acquaintanceship with Ganelon, and hoped that he would take a cue from it. This shadow was near enough to our Avalon so that Ganelon should be familiar with its topography and most of its customs. For whatever it was worth, it seemed politic to keep this information

"I guess that we all have a few of them in Amber."
"I like to think so," he said. Then, "I understand you left the partly whittled cell door locked behind you, had set fire to your bedding, and had drawn pictures on the wall."
"Yes," I said. "Prolonged confinement does something to a man's mind. At least, it did to mine. There are long periods during which I know I was irrational."
"I do not envy you the experience, brother," he said. "Not at all. What are your plans now?"
"They are still uncertain."
"Do you feel that you might wish to remain here?"
"I do not know," I said. "What is the state of affairs here?"
"I am in charge," he said--a simple statement of fact, not a boast. "I believe I have just succeeded in destroying the only major threat to the realm. If I am correct, then a reasonably tranquil period should be at hand. The price was high"--he glanced at what remained of his arm--"but will have been worth it--as shall be seen before very long, when things have returned to normal."
He then proceeded to relate what was basically the same situation the youth had described, going on to tell how they had won the battle. The leader of the hellmaids slain, her riders had bolted and fled. Most of them were also slain then, and the caverns had been sealed once more. Benedict had decided to maintain a small force in the field for mopping-up purposes, his scouts the while combing the area for survivors.
He made no mention of the meeting between himself and their leader, Lintra.
"Who slew their leader?" I asked him.
"I managed it," he said, making a sudden movement with his stump, "though I hesitated a moment too long on my first blow." I glanced away and so did Ganelon. When I looked back, his face had returned to normal and he had lowered his arm.

Their joining the hunt at that point meant that it was not my welfare that concerned them, but the possibility of obtaining evidence of fratricide against Eric, so as to displace him or blackmail him. "I sought for you in the vicinity of Avalon," he continued, "and I found this place and was taken by it. It was in a pitiful condition in those days, and for generations I worked to restore it to its former glory. While I began this in memory of you, I developed a fondness for this land and its people. They came to consider me their protector, and so did I."

I was troubled as well as touched by this. Was he implying that I had fouled things up terribly and that he had tarried here to put them in order--so as to clean up after his kid brother this one last time? Or did he mean that he realized I had loved this place--or a place very much like it--and that he had worked to set it in good order as something I might have wished done? Perhaps I was becoming oversensitive.

"It is good to know that I was sought," I said, "and it is very good to know that you are the defender of this land. I would like to see this place, for it does remind me of the Avalon that I knew. Would you have any objections to my visiting here?"

"That is all that you wish to do? Visit?"

"That is all that I had in mind."

"Know then that what is remembered of the shadow of yourself that once reigned here is not good. Children are not named Corwin in this place, nor am I brother to any Corwin here."

"I understand," I said. "My name is Corey. Can we be old friends?" He nodded.

"Old friends of mine are always welcome to visit here," he said. I smiled and nodded. I felt insulted that he would entertain the notion that I had designs upon this shadow of a shadow: I, who had--albeit but for an instant--felt the cold fire of Amber's crown upon my brow.

if the latter, what my plans were for stoking them. So... Who was going to raise the matter? I took several good puffs on my pipe, finished my wine, poured some more, puffed again. I listened to the sounds of the camp, the wind, my stomach... Benedict took a sip of wine. Then, "What are your long-range plans?" he asked me, almost casually.

I could say that I had not made up my mind yet, that I was simply happy to be free, alive, seeing.... I could tell him that that was enough for me, for now, that I had no special plans.... ...And he would know that I lied in my teeth. For he knew me better than that.

So, "You know what my plans are," I said. "If you were to ask for my support," he said, "I would deny it. Amber is in bad enough shape without another power grab." "Eric is a usurper."

"I choose to look upon him as regent only. At this time, any of us who claims the throne is guilty of usurpation."

"Then you believe Dad still lives?"

"Yes. Alive and distressed. He has made several attempts to communicate."

I succeeded in keeping my face from showing anything. So I was not the only one, then. To reveal my experiences at this point would sound hypocritical, opportunistic, or a flat lie--since in our seeming contact of five years ago he had given me the go-ahead to take the throne. Of course, he could have been referring to a regency then....

"You did not lend support to Eric when he took the throne," I said.

"Would you give it to him now that he holds it, if an attempt were made to unseat him?"

"It is as I said," he told me. "I look upon him as regent. I do not say that I approve of this, but I desire no further strife in Amber."

damn well create as much strife as I could to prevent a recurrence of my previous situation." The lines went out of his face and he slowly lowered his eyes. "I did not mean to imply that I would betray you. Do you think that I am without feelings, Corwin? I would not see you imprisoned again, blinded--or worse. You are always welcome to visit here, and you may leave your fears along with your ambitions at the border." "Then I would still like to visit," I said. "I have no army, nor did I come here to recruit one." "Then you know that you are most welcome." "Thank you, Benedict. While I did not expect to find you here, I am glad that I did." He reddened faintly and nodded. "It pleases me, also," he said. "Am I the first of us you have seen--since your escape?" I nodded. "Yes, and I am curious as to how everyone is faring. Any major reports?" "No new deaths," he said. We both chuckled, and I knew that I would have to turn up the family gossip on my own. It had been worth the attempt, though. "I am planning on remaining in the field for a time," he said, "and continuing my patrols until I am satisfied that none of the invaders remain. It could be another week before we withdraw." "Oh? Then it was not a total victory?" "I believe that it was, but I never take unnecessary chances. It is worth a little more time to be certain." "Prudent," I said, nodding. "...So unless you have a strong desire to remain here in camp, I see no reason why you should not proceed on toward town and get near the center of things. I maintain several residences about Avalon. I have in mind for your use a small manor house that I have found

"I seldom do," I said. "Is it all right if we sleep at that spot where we left our gear?"

"Certainly," he said, and we finished the wine. As we left his tent, I seized the flap up high when I opened it and was able to squeeze it several inches to the side when I cast it before me. Benedict bade us good night and turned away as he let it fall, not noticing the gap of several inches that I had created along its one side.

I made my bed up a good distance to the right of our equipment, facing in the direction of Benedict's tent, and I moved the gear itself as I rummaged through it. Ganelon shot me a quizzical look, but I simply nodded and made a movement with my eyes toward the tent. He glanced that way, returned the nod, and proceeded to spread his own blankets farther to the right. I measured it with my eyes, walked over, and said, "You know, I'd much rather sleep here. Would you mind switching with me?" I added a wink for emphasis. "Makes no difference to me," he said, shrugging. The campfires had died or were dying, and most of the company had turned in. The guard only paid us heed a couple of times around. The camp was very quiet and there were no clouds to obscure the brilliance of the stars. I was tired, and the smells of the smoke and the damp earth came pleasantly to my nostrils, reminding me of other times and places such as this and the rest at the day's end.

Instead of closing my eyes, however, I fetched my pack and propped my back against it, filled my pipe again, and struck it to life. I adjusted my position twice as he paced within the tent. Once, he vanished from my field of vision and remained hidden for several moments. But the far light moved then, and I knew that he had opened the chest. Then he came into sight once more and cleared the table, dropped back for an instant, returned and reseated him-

flight or combat.
But he remained alone.
He sat there unmoving for perhaps a quarter of an hour, and when
he finally stirred it was only to replace the cards somewhere in his
chest and to extinguish the lamps.
The guard continued on his monotonous rounds and Ganelon be-
gan to snore.
I emptied my pipe and rolled over onto my side.
Tomorrow, I told myself. If I wake up here tomorrow, everything will
be all right...

town seeking amusement. I had accompanied him on the previous day and learned what I wanted to know at that time. Now I had no time for sight-seeing. I had to think and act quickly. There had been no difficulty at the camp. Benedict had seen us fed and had furnished us with the map and the letter he had promised. We had departed at sunrise and arrived at the manor around midday. We were well received, and after settling into the quarters we were shown, we had made our way into town, where we had spent the balance of the day. Benedict was planning to remain in the field for several more days. I would have to be done with the task I had set myself before he came home. So a hellride was in order. There was no time for leisurely journeying, I had to remember the proper shadows and be under way soon.

It would have been refreshing, being in this place that was so like my Avalon, except that my thwarted purposes were reaching the point of obsession. Realizing this was not tantamount to controlling it, however. Familiar sights and sounds had diverted me only briefly, then I had turned once more to my planning. It should work out neatly, as I saw it. This one journey should solve two of my problems, if I could manage it without arousing suspicion. It meant that I would definitely be gone overnight, but I had anticipated this and had already instructed Ganelon to cover for me.

My head nodding with each creak of the wheel, I forced everything else from my mind and set about remembering the necessary texture of the sand, its coloration, the temperature, the winds, the touch of salt in the air, the clouds... I slept then and I dreamed, but not of the place that I sought. I regarded a big roulette wheel, and we were all of us on it--my brothers, my sisters, myself, and others whom I knew or had known--rising and falling, each with his allotted section. We were all

"Corwin!"

I tried to ignore her cry, for I was almost to the top. It came again, but I tensed myself and prepared to spring upward. If it did not stop for me, I was going to try gimmicking the damned thing, even though falling off would mean my total ruin. I readied myself for the leap.

Another

click...

"Corwin!"

It receded, returned, faded, and I was looking toward the water wheel again with my name echoing in my ears and mingling, merging, fading into the sound of the stream. I blinked my eyes and ran my fingers through my hair. A number of dandelions fell about my shoulders as I did so, and I heard a giggle from somewhere behind me.

I turned quickly and stared.

She stood about a dozen paces from me, a tall, slender girl with dark eyes and close-cropped brown hair. She wore a fencing jacket and held a rapier in her right hand, a mask in her left. She was looking at me and laughing. Her teeth were white, even and a trifle long; a band of freckles crossed her small nose and the upper portions of her well-tanned cheeks. There was that air of vitality about her which is attractive in ways different from mere comeliness. Especially, perhaps, when viewed from the vantage of many years. She saluted me with her blade.

"*En garde*, Corwin!" she said.

"Who the Devil are you?" I asked, just then noticing a jacket, mask, and rapier beside me in the grass.

"No questions, no answers," she said. "Not till we've fenced."

She fitted her mask over her head then and waited.

I rose and picked up the jacket. I could see that it would be easier to fence than argue with her. The fact that she knew my name disturbed me, and the more that I thought of it the more she seemed somehow familiar. It was best to humor her, I decided, shrugging

naturally, as she acknowledged it and came right back at me. I do not ordinarily like to fence with women, no matter how good they are, but this time I discovered that I was enjoying myself. The skill and grace with which she carried the attacks and bore them gave me pleasure to behold and respond to, and I found myself contemplating the mind that lay behind that style. At first, I had wanted to tire her quickly, to conclude the match and question her. Now I found myself desiring to prolong the encounter. She did not tire readily. There was small cause for concern on that count. I lost track of time as we stamped back and forth along the bank of the stream, our blades clicking steadily. A long while must have passed, though, before she stamped her heel and threw up her blade in a final salute. She tore off her mask then and gave me another smile. "Thank you!" she said, breathing heavily. I returned the salute and drew off the bird cage. I turned and fumbled with the jacket buckles, and before I realized it she had approached and kissed me on the cheek. She had not had to stand tiptoe to do it either. I felt momentarily confused, but I smiled. Before I could say anything, she had taken my arm and turned me back in the direction from which we had come. "I've brought us a picnic basket," she said. "Very good. I am hungry. I am also curious..." "I will tell you anything that you want to hear," she said merrily. "How about telling me your name?" I said. "Dara," she replied. "My name is Dara, after my grandmother." She glanced at me as she said it, as though hoping for a reaction. I almost hated to disappoint her, but I nodded and repeated it, then, "Why did you call me Corwin?" I asked. "Because that is your name," she said. "I recognized you." "From where?" She released my arm. "Here it is," she said, reaching behind a tree and raising a basket

clomping around you'd have been awake sure as hell."
"You're probably right," I said.
She paused as though pondering deeply, then spoiled it with a giggle.

"But you didn't the first time, though. Still..."
"The first time?" I said, seeing she wanted me to ask it.
"Yes, I almost rode over you awhile back," she said. "You were sound asleep. When I saw who it was, I went back for a picnic basket and the fencing gear."
"Oh. I see."

"Come and sit down now," she said. "And open the bottle, will you?"
She put a bottle beside my place and carefully unwrapped two crystal goblets, which she then set in the center of the cloth. I moved to my place and sat down.
"That is Benedict's best crystal," I noted, as I opened the bottle.
"Yes," she said. "Do be careful not to upset them when you pour-- and I don't think we should clink them together."
"No, I don't think we should," I said, and I poured. She raised her glass.

"To the reunion," she said.
"What reunion?"
"Ours."

"I have never met you before."
"Don't be so prosaic," she said, and took a drink.
I shrugged.
"To the reunion."

She began to eat then, so I did too. She was so enjoying the air of mystery she had created that I wanted to cooperate, just to keep her happy.

"Now where could I have met you?" I ventured. "Was it some great court? A harem, perhaps...?"
"Perhaps it was in Amber," she said. "There you were..."

"You remember!" she cried. "It was a part-time job. I used to break horses during the day."
"I give up," I said, and I poured more wine.
The really irritating thing was that there *was* something damnably familiar about her. But from her appearance and her behavior, I guessed her age at about seventeen. This pretty much precluded our paths ever having crossed.
"Did Benedict teach you your fencing?" I asked.
"Yes."
"What is he to you?"
"My lover, of course," she replied. "He keeps me in jewels and furs--and he fences with me."
She laughed again.
I continued to study her face.
Yes, it was possible....
"I am hurt," I said, finally.
"Why?" she asked.
"Benedict didn't give me a cigar."
"Cigar?"
"You are his daughter, aren't you?"
She reddened, but she shook her head. "No," she said. "But you are getting close."
"Granddaughter?" I said.
"Well... sort of."
"I am afraid that I do not understand."
"Grandfather is what he likes me to call him. Actually, though, he was my grandmother's father."
"I see. Are there any others at home like you?"
"No, I am the only one."
"What of your mother--and your grandmother?"
"Dead, both of them."

"You're afraid of him," she said.
"I have considerable respect for Benedict, not to mention some affection."

She laughed.

"Is he a better fighter than you, a better swordsman?"
I looked away. She must have just gotten back from someplace fairly removed from things. The townspeople I'd met had all known about Benedict's arm. It was not the sort of news that traveled slowly. I certainly was not going to be the first to tell her.
"Have it as you would," I said. "Where have you been?"
"The village," she said, "in the mountains. Grandpa took me there to stay with some friends of his called Tecys. Do you know the Tecys?"

"No, I don't."

"I've been there before," she said. "He always takes me to stay with them in the village when there is any sort of trouble here. The place has no name. I just call it the village. It is quite strange--the people, as well as the village. They seem to--sort of--worship us. They treat me as if I were something holy, and they never tell me anything I want to know. It is not a long ride, but the mountains are different, the sky is different--everything!--and it is as if there were no way back, once I am there. I had tried coming back on my own before, but I just got lost. Grandpa always had to come for me, and then the way was easy. The Tecys follow all of his instructions concerning me. They treat him as if he were some sort of god."

"He is," I said, "to them."

"You said that you do not know them."

"I don't have to. I know Benedict."

"How does he do it? Tell me."

I shook my head.

"How did you do it?" I asked her. "How did you get back here this time?"

She finished her wine and held out the glass. When I looked up

know this area. I was born here, I grew up here. I've ridden all over, hundreds of leagues in all directions. I was never able to find it when I went looking. But it seemed only a brief while that we rode, and suddenly we were at the Tecys' again. But it had been several years, and I can be more determined about things now that I am grown. I resolved to return by myself." With the knife, she began scraping and digging at the ground beside her, not seeming to notice what she was doing. "I waited till nightfall," she went on, "and studied the stars to take my direction. It was an unreal feeling. The stars were all different. I didn't recognize any of the constellations. I went back inside and thought about it. I was a little bit afraid and did not know what to do. I spent the next day trying to get more information out of the Tecys and the other people in the village. But it was like a bad dream. Either they were stupid or they were purposely trying to confuse me. Not only was there no way to get from there to here, they had no idea where 'here' was and were none too certain about 'there.' That night I checked the stars again, to be sure about what I had seen, and I was about ready to begin believing them." She moved the knife back and forth as if honing it now, smoothing the soil and packing it flat. Then she began to trace designs. "For the next several days, I tried to find my way back," she continued. "I thought I could locate our trail and backtrack along it, but it just sort of vanished. Then I did the only other thing I could think of. Each morning I struck out in a different direction, rode until noon, then headed back. I came across nothing that was familiar. It was totally bewildering. Each night I went to sleep more angry and upset over the way things were turning out--and more determined to find my own way back to Avalon. I had to show Grandpa that he could no longer dump me like a child and expect me to stay put. "Then, after about a week, I began having dreams. Nightmares, sort of. Did you ever dream that you were running and running and not

seemed. I rode the entire distance without stopping once, and this time I paid no special heed to my surroundings, but kept thinking of Avalon--and as I rode, things kept getting more and more familiar until I was here again. Only then did it seem as if I were fully awake. Now the village and the Tecys, that sky, those stars, the woods, the mountains, they all seem like a dream to me. I am not at all certain that I could find my way back there. Is that not strange? Can you tell me what happened?" I rose and circled the remains of our lunch. I sat down beside her. "Do you remember the looks of the burning spider web that really wasn't a spider web, or burning?" I asked her. "Yes-sort of," she said. "Give me that knife," I said. She passed it to me. With its point, I began adding to her doodling in the dirt, extending lines, rubbing some out, adding others. She did not say a word the entire time, but she watched every move that I made. When I had finished, I put the knife aside and waited for a long, silent while. Then, finally, she spoke very softly. "Yes, that is it," she said, turning away from the design to stare at me. "How did you know? How did you know what I had dreamed?" "Because," I said, "you dreamed a thing that is inscribed in your very genes. Why, how, I do not know. It demonstrates, however, that you are indeed a daughter of Amber. What you did was walk in Shadow. What you dreamed was the Great Pattern of Amber. By its power do those of the blood royal hold dominion over shadows. Do you understand what I am talking about?" "I am not certain," she said. "I do not think so. I have heard Grandpa cursing shadows, but I never understood what he meant." "Then you do not know where Amber truly lies." "No. He was always evasive. He told me of Amber and of the family. But I do not even know the direction in which Amber lies. I only

"Oh, eight or nine years ago. I'd say."
"Have you met any of the others?"
"Yes," she said. "Julian and Gerard were here not too long ago. Just a few months back."

I suddenly felt very insecure. Benedict had certainly been quiet about a lot of things. I would rather have been ill advised than kept totally ignorant of affairs. It makes it easier for you to be angry when you find out. The trouble with Benedict was that he was too honest, though. He would rather tell me nothing than lie to me. I felt something unpleasant coming my way, however, and knew that there could be no dawdling now, that I would have to move as quickly as possible. Yes, it had to be a hard hellride for the stones. Still, there was more to be learned here before I essayed it. Time...Damn!

"Was that the first time that you met them?" I asked.
"Yes," she said, "and my feelings were very hurt." She paused, sighed. "Grandpa would not let me speak of our being related. He introduced me as his ward. And he refused to tell me why. Damn it!"

"I'm sure he had some very good reasons."
"Oh, I am too. But it does not make you feel any better, when you have been waiting all your life to meet your relatives. Do *you* know why he treated me like that?"

"These are trying times in Amber," I said, "and things will get worse before they get better. The fewer people who know of your existence, the less chance there is of your getting involved and coming to harm. He did it only to protect you."

She made a spitting noise.
"I do not need protecting," she said. "I can take care of myself."
"You are a fine fencer," I said. "Unfortunately, life is more complicated than a fair dueling situation."
"I know that. I'm not a child. But--"

about it if I did have something rotten in mind, would I?"

"No...I guess not," she said.

"I am going to tell you something Benedict should have told you long ago," I said. "Never trust a relative. It is far worse than trusting strangers. With a stranger there is a possibility that you might be safe."

"You really mean that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Yourself included?"

I smiled.

"Of course it does not apply to me. I am the soul of honor, kindness, mercy, and goodness. Trust me in all things."

"I will," she said, and I laughed.

"I will," she insisted. "You would not hurt us. I know that."

"Tell me about Gerard and Julian," I said, feeling uncomfortable, as always, in the presence of unsolicited trust. "What was the reason for their visit?"

She was silent for a moment, still studying me, then, "I have been telling you quite a few things," she said, "haven't I? You are right. One can never be too careful. I believe that it is your turn to talk again."

"Good. You are learning how to deal with us. What do you want to know?"

"Where is the village, really? And Amber? They are somehow alike, aren't they? What did you mean when you said that Amber lies in all directions, or any? What are shadows?"

I got to my feet and looked down at her. I held out my hand. She looked very young and more than a little frightened then, but she took it.

"Where...?" she asked, rising.

"This way," I said, and I took her to stand at the place where I had slept and regarded the falls and the water wheel.

more numerous. Our trail took an upward turn, and I led her past an outcropping of flint and onto higher ground. A distant, barely perceptible rumble seemed to come from behind us. The sky was a different blue as we moved through an open place, and we frightened a large, brown lizard that had been sunning itself on a rock. As we took a turn about another mass of stone, she said, "I did not know this was here. I have never been this way before." But I did not answer her, for I was busy shifting the stuff of Shadow. Then we faced the wood once more, but now the way led uphill through it. Now the trees were tropical giants, interspersed with ferns, and new noises--barks, hisses, and buzzes--were to be heard. Moving up this trail, the rumble grew louder about us, the very ground beginning to vibrate with it. Dara held tightly to my arm, saying nothing now, but searching everything with her eyes. There were big, flat, pale flowers and puddles where the moisture dripped from overhead. The temperature had risen considerably and we were perspiring quite a bit. Now the rumble grew to a mighty roar, and when at length we emerged from the wood again, it was a sound like steady thunder that fell against us. I guided her to the edge of the precipice and gestured outward and down. It plunged for over a thousand feet: a mighty cataract that smote the gray river like an anvil. The currents were rapid and strong, bearing bubbles and flecks of foam a great distance before they finally dissolved. Across from us, perhaps half a mile distant, partly screened by rainbow and mist, like an island slapped by a Titan, a gigantic wheel slowly rotated, ponderous and gleaming. High overhead, enormous birds rode like drifting crucifixes the currents of the air.

We stood there for a fairly long while. Conversation was impossible, which was just as well. After a time, when she turned from it to look at me, narrow-eyed, speculative, I nodded and gestured with my eyes toward the wood. Turning then, we made our way back in the

how. That place was a shadow, your village was a shadow--and this place is a shadow. Any place that you can imagine exists somewhere in Shadow."

"...And you and Grandpa and the others can go about in these shadows, picking and choosing what you desire?"

"Yes."

"That is what I did, then, coming back from the village?"

"Yes."

Her face became a study in realization. Her almost black eyebrows dropped half an inch and her nostrils flared with a quick inhalation.

"I can do it, too..." she said. "Go anywhere, do anything I want!"

"The ability lies within you," I said.

She kissed me then, a sudden, impulsive thing, then rotated away, her hair bobbing on her slim neck as she tried to look at everything at once.

"Then I can do anything," she said, coming to a standstill.

"There are limitations, dangers..."

"That is life," she said. "How do I learn to control it?"

"The Great Pattern of Amber is the key. You must walk it in order to gain the ability. It is inscribed on the floor in a chamber beneath the palace in Amber. It is quite large. You must begin on the outside and walk it to its center without stopping. There is considerable resistance and the feat is quite an ordeal. If you stop, if you attempt to depart the Pattern before completing it, it will destroy you. Complete it, though, and your power over Shadow will be subject to your conscious control."

She raced to our picnic site and studied the pattern we had drawn on the ground there.

I followed more slowly. As I drew near, she said, "I must go to Amber and walk it!"

"I am certain that Benedict plans for you to do so, eventually," I said.

she said, "if I cannot have them."
"It is not as bad as all that," I said. "The situation in Amber will become stable again--before too very long."
"How will I learn of it?"
"Benedict will know. He will tell you then."
"He has not seen fit to tell me much of anything!"
"To what end? Just to make you feel bad? You know that he has been good to you, that he cares for you. When the time is ready, he will move on your behalf."
"And if he does not? Will you help me then?"
"I will do what I can."
"How will I be able to find you? To let you know?"
I smiled. It had gotten to this point without my half trying. No need to tell her the really important part. Just enough to be possibly useful to me later....
"The cards," I said, "the family Trumps. They are more than a mere sentimental affectation. They are a means of communication. Get hold of mine, stare at it, concentrate on it, try to keep all other thoughts out of your mind, pretend that it is really me and begin talking to me then. You will find that it really is, and that I am answering you."
"Those are all the things Grandpa told me not to do when I handle the cards!"
"Of course."
"How does it work?"
"Another time," I said. "A thing for a thing. Remember? I have told you now of Amber and of Shadow. Tell me of the visit here by Gerard and Julian."
"Yes," she said. "There is not really much to tell, though. One morning, five or six months ago. Grandpa simply stopped what he was doing. He was pruning some trees back in the orchard--he likes to do that himself--and I was helping him. He was up on a ladder,

if Julian and Gerard were to visit here that I was to be introduced as his ward, the orphaned daughter of a faithful servant. He rode away a short while later, leading two spare horses. He was wearing his blade.

"He returned in the middle of the night, bringing both of them with him. Gerard was barely conscious. His left leg was broken, and the entire left side of his body was badly bruised. Julian was quite battered also, but he had no broken bones. They remained with us for the better part of a month, and they healed quickly. Then they borrowed two horses and departed. I have not seen them since."

"What did they say as to how they had been injured?"
"Only that they had been in an accident. They would not discuss it with me."

"Where? Where did it happen?"

"On the black road. I overheard them talking about it several times."

"Where is this black road?"

"I do not know."

"What did they say about it?"

"They cursed it a lot. That was all."

Looking down, I saw that there was some wine left in the bottle. I stooped and poured two final drinks, passed her one.

"To the reunion," I said, and smiled.

"...The reunion," she agreed, and we drank.

She began cleaning the area and I assisted her, my earlier sense of urgency upon me once again.

"How long should I wait before I try to reach you?" she asked.

"Three months. Give me three months."

"Where will you be then?"

"In Amber, I hope."

"How long will you be staying here?"

"Not very. In fact, I have to take a little trip right now. I should be back tomorrow, though. I will probably only be staying for a few

any of this to anybody. Grandpa in particular?"
"That would be prudent."
The splash and gurgle of the stream, as it flowed to the river, on its way to the sea, faded, faded, was gone, and only the creak of the land-locked wheel that cut it as it went, remained for a time in the air.

the general direction of the watercourse until I reached the vicinity of the coast. It was midafternoon. My way was shaded, cool. Gray-swandir hung at my side. I bore west, coming at length to the hills that rose there. I refrained from beginning the shift until after I had reached a point that looked down upon the city that represented the largest concentration of population in this realm that was like my Avalon. The city bore the same name, and several thousand people lived there, worked there. Several of the silver towers were missing, and the stream cut the city at a somewhat different angle farther south, having widened or been widened eightfold by then. There was some smoke from the smithies and the public houses, stirred lightly by breezes from the south; people, mounted, afoot, driving wagons, driving coaches, moved through the narrow streets, entered and departed shops, hostels, residences; flocks of birds wheeled, descended, rose about the places where horses were tethered; a few bright pennons and banners stirred listlessly; the water sparkled and there was a haze in the air. I was too far away to hear the sounds of voices, and of clanking, hammering, sawing, rattling, and creaking as anything other than a generalized hum. While I could distinguish no individual odors, had I still been blind I would have known by sniffing the air that a city was near. Seeing it from up there, a certain nostalgia came over me, a wistful rag-tail of a dream accompanied by a faint longing for the place that was this place's namesake to me in a vanished shadow and of long ago, where life had been just as simple and I happier than I was at that moment.

But one does not live as long as I have lived without achieving that quality of consciousness which strips naive feelings as they occur and is generally loathe to participate in the creation of sentimentality.

Those days were passed, that thing done with, and it was Amber

then, a slate-like crop of clouds toward which the sun was heading...

Then long shadows, the dying of the wind, stillness... Only the click of hoof on rock and the sounds of breathing... Dimness, as they rushed together and the sun is foiled by clouds... The walls of the day shaken by thunder... An unnatural clarity of distant objects... A cool, blue, and electric feeling in the air... Thunder again... Now, a rippling, glassy curtain to my right as the rain advances... Blue fracture lines within the clouds... The temperature plummeting, our pace steady, the world a monochromatic backdrop now... Gouging thunder, flashing white, the curtain flaring toward us now... Two hundred meters... One-fifty... Enough! Its bottommost edge plowing, furrowing, frothing... The moist smell of the earth... Star's whinny... A burst of speed... Small rivulets of water creeping outward, sinking, staining the ground... Now bubbling muddily, now trickling... Now a steady flow... Streamlets all about us, splashing... High ground ahead, and Star's muscles bunching and relaxing, bunching and relaxing beneath me, as he leaps the rills and freshets, plunges through a racing, roiling sheet, and strikes the slope, hoofs sparkling against stones as we mount higher, the voice of the gurgling, eddying flow beneath us deepening to a steady roar... Higher, then, and dry, pausing to wring out the corners of my cloak.... Below, behind, and to the right a gray, storm-tossed sea laps at the foot of the cliff we hold... Inland now, toward clover fields and evening, the boom of the surf at my back... Pursuing falling stars into the darkening east and eventual silence and night... Clear the sky and bright the stars, but a few small wisps of cloud... A howling pack of red-eyed things, twisting along our trail... Shadow... Green-eyed... Shadow... Yellow... Shadow... Gone...

nostrils... Upriver, it laps at my boots... Dripping from my hair,
running down my arms... Star's head turning, at the laughter...
Then downriver again, clean, slow, winding... Then straight, wid-
ening, slowing...
Trees thickening, then thinning...
Long, steady, slow...
A faint light in the east...
Sloping downward now, and fewer trees... Rockier, and the dark-
ness made whole once again...
The first, dim hint of the sea, lost an odor later... Clicking on, on, in
the nightsend chill... Again, an instant's salt...
Rock, and an absence of trees... Hard, steep, bleak, down... Ever-
increasing precipitousness...
Flashing between walls of stone... Dislodged pebbles vanishing in
the now racing current, their splashes drowned in the roar's ech-
oes... Deeper the defile, widening...
Down, down... Farther still...
Now pale once more the east, gentler the slope... Again, the touch of
salt, stronger...
Shale and grit... Around a comer, down, and brighter still...
Steady, soft and loose the footing...
The breeze and the light, the breeze and the light... Beyond a crop of
rock... Draw rein.
Below me lay the stark seaboard, where rank upon rank of rolling
dunes, harassed by the winds out of the southwest, tossed spumes
of sand that partly obliterated the distant outlines of the bleak
morning sea.
I watched the pink film spread across the water from the east. Here
and there, the shifting sands revealed dark patches of gravel. Rug-
ged masses of rock reared above the swell of the waves. Between the
massive dunes--hundreds of feet in height--and myself, there high
above that evil coast, lay a smashed and pitted plain of angular

Mines of South West Africa, nor a government to approve their amalgamation of coastal mining interests. Here was the desert called Namib in that place some four hundred miles to the north-west of Cape Town, a strip of dunes and rocks ranging from a couple to a dozen miles in width and running along that forsaken coast line for perhaps three hundred miles on the seaward side of the Richtersveld Mountains, within whose shadow I now stood. Here, unlike any conventional mine, the diamonds were scattered as casually as bird droppings across the sand. I, of course, had brought along a rake and a sieve. I broke out the rations and prepared breakfast. It was going to be a hot, dusty day.

As I worked the dunes, I thought of Doyle, the little wispy-haired jeweler with the brick-red complexion and wens on his cheeks, back in Avalon. Jewelers rouge? Why did I want all that jewelers rouge--enough to supply an army of jewelers for a dozen lifetimes? I had shrugged. What was it to him what I wanted it for, so long as I was able to pay for it? Well, if there was some new use for the stuff and good money to be made, a man would be a fool... In other words, he would be unable to furnish me with such a quantity within a week? Small, square chuckles had escaped through the gaps in his smile. A week? Oh, no! Of course not! That was ridiculous, out of the question.... I saw. Well, a quick thanks and perhaps his competitor up the way might be able to produce the stuff, and might also be interested in a few uncut diamonds I was expecting in a matter of days.... Diamonds, did I say? Wait. He was always interested in diamonds himself.... Yes, but he was sadly deficient in the jewelers rouge department. A raised hand. It might be that he had spoken hastily with respect to his ability to produce the polishing material. It was the quantity that had disturbed him. But the ingredients were plentiful and the formula fairly simple. Yes, that was no real

all of the primers I tested were equally inert there, was a thing mitigated only by the knowledge that none of my relatives could bring firearms into Amber either. It was much later, during a visit to Amber, after polishing a bracelet I had brought for Deirdre, that I discovered this wonderful property of jewelers rouge from Avalon when I disposed of the polishing cloth in a fireplace. Fortunately, the quantity involved was small, and I was alone at the time. It made an excellent primer, straight from the container. When cut with a sufficient quantity of inert material, it could also be made to burn properly.

I kept this bit of information to myself, feeling that one day it would be used to decide certain basic issues in Amber. Unfortunately, Eric and I had our run-in before that day arrived and it went into storage along with all my other memories. When things finally did clear for me, my fortunes were quickly cast with those of Bleys, who was preparing an assault on Amber. He had not really needed me then, but had taken me in on the enterprise, I feel, so that he could keep an eye on me. Had I furnished him with guns, he would have been invincible and I would have been unnecessary. More important, had we succeeded in seizing Amber in accordance with his plans, the situation would have become strained indeed, with the bulk of the occupying forces, as well as the officers' loyalty, his. Then I would have required something to adjust the balance of power more equitably. A few bombs and automatic weapons, say. Had I been my whole self even a month earlier, things would have been quite different. I could have been sitting in Amber, rather than being scorched, abraded, and desiccated, with another hellride before me and a knot of troubles to be worked out after that. I spat sand so that I would not choke when I laughed. Hell, we make our own ifs. I had better things to think about than what could have happened. Like Eric... I remember that day, Eric. I was in chains and I had been forced to

dered. "Take Corwin away to the smithy, and let his eyes be burnt from out his head! Let him remember the sights of this day as the last he might ever see! Then cast him into the darkness of the deepest dungeon beneath Amber, and let his name be forgotten!" "Now you reign in Amber," I said aloud. "But I have my eyes, and I have neither forgotten nor been forgotten." No, I thought. Wrap yourself in the kingship, Eric. The walls of Amber are high and thick. Stay behind them. Ring yourself with the futile steel of blades. Antlike, you armor your house in dust. You know now that you will never be secure so long as I live, and I have told you that I will be back. I am coming, Eric. I will bring me up guns out of Avalon, and I will break down your doors and smite your defenders. Then it will be as it was, briefly, another time, before your men came to you and saved you. That day I had only a few drops of your blood. This time, I will have it all. I uncovered another rough diamond, the sixteenth or so, and flipped it into the sack at my waist.

As I faced the setting sun, I wondered about Benedict, Julian, and Gerard. What was the connection? Whatever, I did not like any combination of interests which involved Julian. Gerard was all right. I had been able to sleep back at the camp when I had thought that it was he whom Benedict was contacting. If he was now allied with Julian, though, it was cause for increased uneasiness. If anyone hated me even more than Eric, it was Julian. If he knew where I was, then my danger was great. I was not yet ready for a confrontation.

I supposed Benedict could find a moral justification for selling me out at this point. After all, he knew that whatever I did--and he knew that I was going to do something--would result in strife in Amber. I could understand, even sympathize with, his feelings. He was dedicated to the preservation of the realm. Unlike Julian, he

or fought, on whatever hillside he hunted. He had come home. Should I leave him to his pleasures, despite his offer to accompany me to Amber? But no, he would be questioned on my departure--used badly, if Julian had anything to do with it--and then become an outcast in what must seem his own land to him, if they let him go at all. Then he would doubtless become an outlaw again, and the third time would probably prove his undoing. No, I would keep my promise. He would come with me, if that was he still wanted. If he had changed his mind, well-- I even envied him the prospect of outlawry in Avalon. I would have liked to remain longer, to ride with Dara in the hills, tramp about the countryside, sail upon the rivers....

I thought about the girl. The knowledge of her existence changed things somewhat. I was not certain how. Despite our major hatreds and petty animosities, we Amberites are a very family-conscious bunch, always eager for news of one another, desirous to know everyone's position in the changing picture. A pause for gossip has doubtless stayed a few death blows among us. I sometimes think of us as a gang of mean little old ladies in a combination rest home and obstacle course.

I could not fit Dara into things yet because she did not know where she fit herself. Oh, she would learn eventually. She would receive superb tutelage once her existence became known. Now that I had brought her awareness of her uniqueness it would only be a matter of time before this occurred and she joined in the games. I had felt somewhat serpent-like at points during our conversation in the grove--but hell, she had a right to know. She was bound to find out sooner or later, and the sooner she did the sooner she could start shoring up her defenses. It was for her own benefit. Of course, it was possible--even likely--that her mother and grandmother had lived their lives in ignorance of their heritage... And where had it gotten them? They died violently, she had said.

think things over. She would have many questions and I would seize the opportunity to caution her at length and to give specifics. I gnashed my teeth. None of this should be necessary. When I ruled in Amber, things would be different. They had to be... Why had no one ever come up with a way to change the basic nature of man? Even the erasure of all my memories and a new life in a new world had resulted in the same old Corwin. If I were not happy with what I was it could be a proposition worthy of despair. In a quiet part of the river, I washed away the dust, the sweat, wondering the while about the black road which had so injured my brothers. There were many things that I needed to know. As I bathed, Grayswandir was never far from my hand. One of us is capable of tracking another through Shadow, when the trail is still warm. As it was, my bath was undisturbed, though I used Grayswandir three times on the way back, on less mundane things than brothers. But this was to be expected, as I had accelerated the pace considerably....

It was still dark, though dawn was not too far away, when I entered the stables at my brother's manor. I tended Star, who had grown somewhat wild, talking to him and soothing him as I rubbed him down, then putting out a good supply of food and water. Ganelon's Firedrake greeted me from the opposite stall. I cleaned up at the pump to the rear of the stable, trying to decide where I was going to catch a little sleep. I needed some rest. A few hours' worth would hold me for a time, but I refused to take them beneath Benedict's roof. I would not be taken that easily, and while I had often said that I wanted to die in bed, what I really meant was that in my old age I wanted to be stepped on by an elephant while making love.

"That's because I'm sitting so still," he said.
"Oh," I said. "How drunk are you?"
"Hardly at all," he said, "now. But if you would care to be a good fellow and fetch me a drink..."
I turned.
"Why can't you get your own?"
"It hurts to move."
"All right."
I went and poured him one, carried it to him. He raised it slowly, nodded his thanks, took a sip.
"Ah, that's good!" he sighed. "May it numb things a bit."
"You were in a fight," I decided.
"Aye," he said. "Several."
"Then bear your wounds like a good trooper and let me save my sympathy."
"But I won!"
"God! Where did you leave the bodies?"
"Oh, they are not that bad off. 'Twas a girl did this to me."
"Then I'd say you got your money's worth."
"'Twas not that sort of thing at all. I believe I've embarrassed us."
"Us? How?"
"I did not know she was the lady of the house. I came in feeling jolly, and I thought her some serving wench..."
"Dara?" I said, tensing.
"Aye, the same. I slapped her on the rump and went for a kiss or two--" He groaned. "Then she picked me up. She raised me off the ground and held me up over her head. Then she told me she was the lady of the house. Then she let me fall.... I'm eighteen stone if I'm a pebble, man, and it was a long way down." He took another drink, and I chuckled.
"She laughed, too," he said ruefully. "She helped me up then and was not unkind, and of course I apologized-- That brother of yours

He rose slowly and picked up his glass.
"Let's go outside," he said.
"Good idea."

He picked up the brandy decanter on the way out, which I also thought was a good idea, and we followed a path through the garden behind the house. Finally, he heaved himself onto an old stone bench at the foot of a large oak tree, where he refilled both our glasses and took a drink from his own.
"Ah! He has good taste in liquor, too, your brother," he said. I seated myself beside him and filled my pipe.
"After I told her I was sorry and introduced myself, we got to talking for a time," he said. "As soon as she learned I was with you, she wanted to know all sorts of things about Amber and shadows and you and the rest of your family."
"Did you tell her anything?" I said, striking a light.
"Couldn't have if I wanted to," he said. "I had none of the answers."
"Good."

"It got me to thinking, though. I do not believe Benedict tells her too much, and I can see why. I would be careful what I say around her, Corwin. She seems over-curious."
I nodded, puffing.
"There is a reason for it," I said. "A very good reason. I am glad to know, though, that you keep your wits about you even when you have been drinking. Thanks for telling me."
He shrugged and took a drink.
"A good bashing is a sobering thing. Also, your welfare is my welfare."

"True. Does this version of Avalon meet with your approval?"
"Version? It is my Avalon," he said. "A new generation of people is in the land, but it is the same place. I visited the Field of Thorns to-day, where I put down Jack Hailey's bunch in your service. It was the same place."

city, of the promenades, the decks, the terraces, the flowers, the fountains.... It seemed but a brief while, but it was most of the night for before we staggered off to bed the morning had begun. God! I could almost draw you a map of the place! I must see it before I die."

"I do not remember that night," I said slowly. "I must have been very, very drunk."

He chuckled.

"We had some good times here in the old days," he said. "And they do remember us here. But as people who lived very long ago--and they have many of the stories wrong. But hell! How many people get their stories right from day to day?"

I said nothing, smoking, thinking back.

"...All of which leads me to a question or two," he said. "Shoot."

"Will your attack on Amber put you at great odds with your brother Benedict?"

"I really wish that I knew the answer to that one," I said. "I think that it will, initially. But my move should be completed before he can reach Amber from here, in response to any distress call that goes out. That is, reach Amber with reinforcements. He could get there in no time at all, personally, if someone on the other end were helping. But that would serve little purpose. No. Rather than tear Amber apart, he will support whoever can hold it together, I am certain. Once I have ousted Eric, he will want the strife to stop right there and he will go along with my holding the throne, just to put an end to it. He will not really approve of the seizure in the first place, of course."

"That is what I am getting at. Will there be bad blood between you afterward as a result of that?"

"I do not believe so. This is purely a matter of politics, and we have known one another most of our lives, he and I, and have always

him to the Field of Thorns and describe that battle. Hell! I would serve him well--as well as I served you." He laughed then. "Pardon me. Better than I served you." I chuckled, sipped my drink. "It would be tricky," I said. "Of course I like the idea. But I am not too certain that you could ever enjoy his trust. It would seem too obvious a ploy on my part." "Damn politics! That is not what I meant! Soldiering is all that I know, and I love Avalon!" "I believe you. But would he?" "With only one arm he will be needing a good man about. He could--"

I began to laugh and restrained myself quickly, for the sound of laughter seems to carry for a good distance. Also, Ganelon's feelings were involved.

"I am sorry," I said. "Excuse me, please. You do not understand. You do not really understand who it was we talked with in the tent that night. He may have seemed an ordinary man to you--a handicapped one, at that. But this is not so. I fear Benedict. He is unlike any other being in Shadow or reality. He is the Master of Arms for Amber. Can you conceive of a millennium? A thousand years? Several of them? Can you understand a man who, for almost every day of a lifetime like that, has spent some time dwelling with weapons, tactics, strategies? Because you see him in a tiny kingdom, commanding a small militia, with a well-pruned orchard in his backyard, do not be deceived. All that there is of military science thunders in his head. He has often journeyed from shadow to shadow, witnessing variation after variation on the same battle, with but slightly altered circumstances, in order to test his theories of warfare. He has commanded armies so vast that you could watch them march by day after day and see no end to the columns. Although he

cut short his stay in the field. He will probably be returning tomorrow."

"Damn!" I said, standing. "We will have to move soon, then. I hope Doyle has that stuff ready. We must go to him in the morning and expedite matters. I want to be away from here before Benedict gets back!"

"You have the pretties then?"

"Yes."

"May I see them?"

I undid the sack at my belt and passed it to him. He opened it and withdrew several stones, holding them in the palm of his left hand and turning them slowly with his fingertips.

"They do not look like much," he said, "from what I can see of them in this light. Wait! There's a glimmer! No..."

"They are in the rough, of course. You are holding a fortune in your hands."

"Amazing," he said, dropping them back in the sack and refastening it. "It was so easy for you."

"It was not all that easy."

"Still, to gather a fortune so quickly seems somehow unfair."

He passed it back.

"I will see that you are provided with a fortune when our labors are done," I said. "That should prove some compensation, should Benedict not offer you a position."

"Now that I know who he is, I am more determined than ever to work for him one day."

"We will see what can be done."

"Yes. Thank you, Corwin. How shall we work our departure?"

"I want you to go and get some rest, for I will roust you out of bed early. Star and Firedrake will take unkindly to the notion of draft duty, I fear, but we will then borrow one of Benedict's wagons and head into town. Before this, I will try to arrange a good smoke

ing."

Ganelon yawned, stretched, finished his drink. "Yes," he said then. "We'd best rest now, to be in condition for the hurrying. Now that you have told me more about Benedict, I am less surprised by the other thing I meant to tell you--though no less discomfited."

"That being...?"

He rose to his feet, picked up the decanter carefully, then pointed down the path.

"If you continue on in that direction," he said, "passing the hedge that marks the end of this bower and entering the woods that lie below--and then go on for another two hundred paces or so--you will come to a place where there is a little grove of saplings off to the left, standing in a sudden declivity perhaps four feet lower than the level of the trail itself. Down in it, stamped down and strewn over with leaves and twigs, there is a fresh grave. I found it while taking the air earlier, when I paused to relieve myself down there."

"How do you know it is a grave?" He chuckled.

"When holes have bodies in them that is how they are generally called. It was quite shallow, and I poked around a bit with a stick. There are four bodies in there--three men and a woman."

"How recently dead?"

"Very. A few days. I'd judge."

"You left it as you found it?"

"I'm not a fool, Corwin."

"Sorry. But this troubles me considerably, because I don't understand it at all."

"Obviously they gave Benedict some trouble and he returned the favor."

"Perhaps. What were they like? How did they die?"

"Nothing special about them. They were in their middle years, and

I watched him return along the path. He was right, of course, but I was not yet ready to surrender my consciousness. I went over my plans again, to be certain there was nothing I was overlooking, finished my drink and set the glass on the bench. I rose then and strolled, trailing wisps of tobacco smoke about me. There was a bit of moonlight from over my shoulder and dawn was still a few hours' distant, as I reckoned it. I was firm in my resolve to spend the rest of the night out of doors, and I thought to find me a good place to sack out.

Of course, I eventually wandered down the path and into the grove of saplings. A little poking around showed me that there had been some recent digging, but I was in no mood to exhume bodies by moonlight and was perfectly willing to take Ganelon's word as to what he had found there. I am not even certain why I went there. Morbid streak, I guess. I did decide against sleeping in the vicinity, though.

I made my way into the northwest corner of the garden, finding an area that was out of line of sight from the manor. There were high hedgerows and the grass was long, soft, and sweet-smelling. I spread my cloak, sat down upon it, and pulled off my boots. I put my feet down into the cool grass and sighed. Not too much longer, I decided. Shadows to diamonds to guns to Amber. I was on my way. A year ago I had been rotting in a cell, crossing and recrossing the line between sanity and madness so many times that I had all but rubbed it out. Now I was free, strong, sighted, and had a plan. Now I was a threat seeking fulfillment once again, a deadlier threat than I had been previously. This time I did not have my fortunes tied up with the plans of another. Now I was responsible for my own success or failure. The feeling was good, as was the grass, as was the alcohol which had now seeped through my system and warmed me with a pleasant flame. I cleaned my pipe, put it away, stretched, yawned, and

stopping when she stood before me.
She said, "I take it your quarters are not to your liking, Lord Corwin."

"Not at all," I said. "It is such a beautiful night that it appealed to the outdoorsman in me."

"Something must have appealed to you last night, also," she said, "despite the rain," and she seated herself beside me on my cloak.

"Did you sleep indoors or out?"

"I spent it out," I said. "But I did not sleep. In fact, I have not slept since I saw you last."

"Where have you been?"

"Down by the seaside, sifting sand."

"Sounds depressing."

"It was."

"I have been doing a lot of thinking, since we walked in Shadow."

"I would imagine."

"I have not done too much sleeping either. That was why I heard you come in, heard you talking with Ganelon, knew you were out here somewhere when he came back alone."

"You were right."

"I must get to Amber, you know. And walk the Pattern."

"I know. You will."

"Soon, Corwin. Soon!"

"You are young, Dara. There is plenty of time."

"Damn it! I have been waiting all my life--without even knowing about it! Is there no way I can go now?"

"No."

"Why not? You could take me on a quick journey through shadows, take me to Amber, let me walk the Pattern..."

"If we are not slain immediately, we might be fortunate enough to be given adjoining cells for a time--or racks--before we are executed."

"Whatever for? You are a Prince of the City. You have a right to do

"When did this occur?"
"Several years ago, as time is measured in Amber."
"Why would he want to kill you?"
"To keep me from killing him, of course."
"Would you?"
"Yes, and I will. Soon, too, I think."
She turned to face me then.
"Why?"

"So that I can occupy the throne myself. It is rightly mine, you see. Eric has usurped it. I am just recently escaped from torture and several years' imprisonment at his hands. He made the mistake, however, of allowing himself the luxury of keeping me alive so that he could contemplate my wretchedness. He never thought that I would get free and return to challenge him again. Neither did I, for that matter. But since I have been fortunate enough to obtain a second chance, I shall be careful not to make the same mistake he did."

"But he is your brother."
"Few are more aware of that fact than he and I, I assure you."
"How soon do you expect to accomplish--your objectives?"
"As I said the other day, if you can get hold of the Trumps, contact me in about three months. If you cannot, and things come about according to my plans, I will get in touch with you fairly early in my reign. You should have your chance to take the Pattern before another year passes."

"And if you fail?"
"Then you will have a longer wait ahead of you. Until Eric has assured the permanency of his own reign, and until Benedict has acknowledged him king. You see, Benedict is not willing to do this. He has remained away from Amber for a long while, and for all Eric knows, he is no longer among the living. Should he put in an appearance now, he is going to have to take a position either for or

"Then if you lose I might never get to Amber!"
"I am only describing the situation as I see it. There are doubtless many factors of which I am unaware. I have been out of circulation for a long while."
"You must win!" she said. Then, suddenly, "Would Grandpa support you?"

"I doubt it. But the situation would be quite different. I am aware of his existence, and of yours. I will not ask his support. So long as he does not oppose me, I will be satisfied. And if I am quick, efficient, and successful, he will not oppose me. He will not like my having found out about you, but when he sees that I mean you no harm all will be well on that count."

"Why would you not use me? It seems the logical thing to do."
"It is. But I've discovered I like you," I said, "so that's out of the question." She laughed.

"I've charmed you!" she said. I chuckled.
"In your own delicate way, at sword's point, yes." Abruptly, she sobered.

"Grandpa is coming back tomorrow," she said. "Did your man Ganelon tell you?"
"Yes."

"How does that affect whatever you are about?"
"I intend to be hell and gone out of here before he returns."
"What will he do?"

"The first thing that he will do will be to get very angry with you for being here. Then he will want to know how you managed your return and how much you have told me about yourself."

"What should I tell him?"
"Tell him the truth about how you got back. That will give him something to think about. As to your status, your woman's intuition cautioned you concerning my trustworthiness, and you took the same line with me as you did with Julian and Gerard. As to my

Amber?"

I shook my head. "No, dear Dara. All scheming princes must keep a few small secrets. That's one of mine."
"I am surprised to learn there is so much distrust and plotting in Amber."

"Why? The same conflicts exist everywhere, in various forms. They are all about you, always, for all places take their form from Amber."

"It is difficult to understand..."

"One day you will. Leave it at that for now."

"Then tell me another thing. Since I am able to negotiate shadows somewhat, even without having taken the Pattern, tell me more precisely how you go about it. I want to get better at it."

"No!" I said. "I will not have you fooling with Shadow until you are ready. It is dangerous even after you have taken the Pattern. To do it before is foolhardy. You were lucky, but do not try it again. I'll even help, by not telling you anything more about it."

"All right!" she said. "Sorry. I guess I can wait"

"I guess you can. No hard feelings?"

"No. Well--" She laughed. "They wouldn't do me any good, I guess. You must know what you are talking about. I am glad that you care what happens to me."

I grunted, and she reached out and touched my cheek. At this, I turned my head again and her face was moving slowly toward my own, smile gone and lips parting, eyes almost closed. As we kissed, I felt her arms slide about my neck and shoulders and mine found their way into a similar position around her. My surprise was lost in the sweetness, gave way to warmth and a certain excitement. If Benedict ever found out, he was going to be more than just irritated with me...

to do so now, as I was edging my way through shadows. I forced back the fatigue and the evening and found some clouds to shade me. We moved along a dry, deeply rutted, clay road. It was an ugly shade of yellow, and it cracked and crumbled as we went. Brown grasses hung limply on either side of the way, and the trees were short, twisted things, their barks thick and shaggy. We passed numerous outcrops of shale. I had paid Doyle well for his compounds, and had also purchased a handsome bracelet to be delivered to Dara the following day. My diamonds were at my belt, Grayswandir near to my hand. Star and Firedrake walked steadily, strongly. I was on my way to having it made.

I wondered whether Benedict had returned home yet. I wondered how long he would remain deceived as to my whereabouts. I was by no means out of danger from him. He could follow a trail for a great distance through Shadow, and I was leaving him a good one. I had little choice in the matter, though. I needed the wagon, I was stuck with our present speed, and I was in no condition to manage another hellride. I handled the shifts slowly and carefully, very conscious of my dulled senses and growing weariness, counting on the gradual accumulation of change and distance to build up a barrier between Benedict and myself, hoping that it would soon become an impenetrable one.

I found my way from late afternoon back to noontide within the next two miles, but kept it a cloudy noon, for it was only its light that I desired, not its heat. Then I managed to locate a small breeze. It increased the probability of rain, but it was worth it. You can't have everything.

I was fighting back drowsiness by then, and the temptation was great to awaken Ganelon and simply add more miles to our distance by letting him drive while I slept. But I was afraid to try it this early in the journey. There were still too many things to do.

After a time, we mounted a long, easy slope that led down into mid-morning. By then, the sky was quite dark, and it took several miles and half a dozen twistings of the road to dissipate the cloud cover somewhat. A storm could turn our way into a river of mud quite quickly. I winced at the thought, let the sky alone and concentrated on the road once more. We came to a dilapidated bridge leading across a dry stream bed. On its other side, the road was smoother, less yellow. As we proceeded, it grew darker, flatter, harder, and the grass came green beside it. By then, though, it had begun raining. I fought with this for a time, determined not to surrender my grass and the dark, easy road. My head ached, but the shower ended within a quarter of a mile and the sun came out once more. The sun...oh yes, the sun. We rattled on, finally coming to a dip in the road that kept twisting its way down among brighter trees. We descended into a cool valley, where we eventually crossed another small bridge, this one with a narrow band of water drifting along the middle of the bed beneath it. I had wrapped the reins about my wrist by then, because I kept nodding. As from a great distance, I focused my concentration, straightening, sorting... Birds queried the day, tentatively, from within the woods to my right. Glistening droplets of dew clung to the grass, the leaves. A chill came into the air, and the rays of the morning sun slanted down through the trees... But my body was not fooled by the awakening within this shadow, and I was relieved finally to hear Ganelon stir and curse. If he had not come around before much longer I would have had to awaken him. Good enough. I tugged gently on the reins and the horses got the idea and halted. I put on the brake, as we were still on an incline, and located a water bottle.

and snap the reins lightly.
"Is it morning?" he called back to me.
"Yes."
"God! I've slept all day and all night!"
I chuckled.
"No. I did a little shadow-shifting," I said. "You only slept six or seven hours."
"I don't understand. But never mind, I believe you. Where are we now?"
"Still heading northeast," I said, "around twenty miles out of the city and maybe a dozen or so from Benedict's place. We have moved through Shadow, also."
"What am I to do now?"
"Just keep following the road. We need the distance."
"Could Benedict still reach us?"
"I think so. That's why we can't give the horses their rest yet."
"All right. Is there anything special I should be alert for?"
"No."
"When should I raise you?"
"Never."

He was silent then, and as I waited for my consciousness to be consumed, I thought of Dara, of course. I had been thinking of her on and off all day. The thing had been quite unpremeditated on my part. I had not even thought of her as a woman until she came into my arms and revised my thinking on the subject. A moment later, and my spinal nerves took over, reducing much of what passes for cerebration down to its basics, as Freud had once said to me. I could not blame it on the alcohol, as I had not had that much and it had not affected me especially. Why did I want to blame it on anything? Because I felt somewhat guilty, that was why. She was too distant a relation for me to really think of her as one. That was not it. I did not feel I

pected there was some truth to it, though, and it made me feel uncomfortable and more than a little ignoble. Why? I had done plenty of things in my time that many would consider much worse, and I was not especially troubled by these. I wrestled with it, not liking to admit it but already knowing the answer. I cared for the girl. It was as simple as that. It was different from the friendship I had felt for Lorraine, with its element of world-weary understanding between two veterans about it, or the air of casual sensuality that had existed briefly between Moire and myself back before I had taken the Pattern for the second time. It was quite different. I had known her so briefly that it was most illogical. I was a man with centuries behind me. Yet... I had not felt this way in centuries. I had forgotten the feeling, until now. I did not want to be in love with her. Not now. Later, perhaps. Better yet, not at all. She was all wrong for me. She was a child. Everything that she would want to do, everything that she would find new and fascinating, I had already done. No, it was all wrong. I had no business falling in love with her. I should not let myself...

Ganelon hummed some bawdy tune, badly. The wagon jounced and creaked, took a turn uphill. The sun fell upon my face, and I covered my eyes with my forearm. Somewhere thereabout, oblivion fixed its grip and squeezed.

When I awoke, it was past noon and I was feeling grimy. I took a long drink of water, poured some in the palm of my hand, and rubbed it in my eyes. I combed my hair with my fingers. I took a look at our surroundings. There was greenery about us, small stands of trees and open spaces where tall grasses grew. It was still a dirt road that we traveled, hard-packed and fairly smooth. The sky was clear, but for a few small clouds, and shade alternated with sunlight fairly regularly. There was a light breeze.

we came to a hill, and when we had mounted it there was another hill, leading even higher. "How much farther do you want to go?" I said. "Let's take this next hill," he replied. "We might be able to see it from up there." "All right."

The horses strained against the steepness of that second hill, and I got out and pushed from behind. When we finally reached the top, I felt even grimier from the mixture of sweat and dust, but I was fully awake once more. Ganelon reined in the horses and put on the brake. He climbed back in the wagon and up onto a crate then. He stood, facing to the left, and shaded his eyes. "Come up here, Corwin," he called. I climbed over the tailgate and he squatted and extended a hand. I took it, and he helped me up onto the crate, where I stood beside him. He pointed, and I followed the gesture. Perhaps three-quarters of a mile distant, running from left to right for as far as I could see, was a wide, black band. We were several hundred yards higher than the thing and had a decent view of, I would say, half a mile of its length. It was several hundred feet across, and though it curved and turned twice that I could see, its width appeared to remain constant. There were trees within it, and they were totally black. There seemed to be some movement. I could not say what it was. Perhaps it was only the wind rippling the black grasses near its edge. But there was also a definite sensation of flowing within it, like currents in a flat, dark river. "What is it?" I said. "I thought perhaps you could tell me," Ganelon replied. "I had thought it a part of your shadow-sorceries." I shook my head slowly. "I was quite drowsy, but I would remember if I had arranged for anything that strange to occur. How did you know it was there?"

"Another ill omen?"
"I am afraid so."
He cursed, then, "Will it cause us any immediate trouble?" he asked.

"I don't believe so, but I am not certain."
He climbed down from the crate and I followed.
"Let's find some forage for the horses then," he said, "and tend to our own bellies as well."
"Yes."

We moved forward and he took the reins. We found a good spot at the foot of the hill.
We tarried there for the better part of an hour, talking mainly of Avalon. We did not speak again of the black road, though I thought of it quite a bit. I had to get a closer look at the thing, of course. When we were ready to move on, I took the reins again. The horses, somewhat refreshed, moved out at a good pace. Ganelon sat beside me on the left, still in a talkative mood. I was only just then beginning to realize how much this strange homecoming had meant to him. He had revisited many of his old haunts from the days of his outlawry, as well as four battlefields where he had distinguished himself greatly after he had achieved respectability. I was in many ways moved by his reminiscences. An unusual mixture of gold and clay, this man. He should have been an Amberite.

The miles slid by quickly and we were drawing near to the black road again when I felt a familiar mental jab. I passed the reins to Ganelon.

"Take them!" I said. "Drive!"
"What is it?"
"Later! Just drive!"
"Should I hurry?"
"No. Keep it normal. Don't say anything for a while."

"Someone tried to reach me by a very special means. It was almost certainly Benedict. He must just now have found out any of a number of things that could make him want to stop us. I'll take the reins again now. I fear he will be on our trail soon." Ganelon handed them over. "What are our chances of escaping him?" "Pretty fair now. I'd say, that we've got more distance behind us. I am going to shuffle some more shadows as soon as my head stops spinning."

I guided us on, and our way twisted and wound, paralleling that black road for a time, then heading in closer to it. Finally, we were only a few hundred yards away from it. Ganelon studied it in silence for a long while, then said, "It reminds me too much of that other place. The little tongues of mist that lick about things, the feeling that something is always moving just at the corner of your eye..." I bit my lip. I began to perspire heavily. I was trying to shift away from the thing now and there was some sort of resistance. It was not the same feeling of monolithic immovability as occurs when you try to move through Shadow in Amber. It was altogether different. It was a feeling of--inescapability. We moved through Shadow all right. The sun drifted higher in the heavens, heading back toward noonday--for I did not relish the thought of nightfall beside that black strip--and the sky lost something of its blue and the trees shot higher about us and mountains appeared in the distance.

Was it that the road cut through Shadow itself? It must. Why else would Julian and Gerard have located it and been sufficiently intrigued to explore the thing? It was unfortunate, but I feared we had much in common, that road and I. Damn it! We moved beside it for a long while, gradually moving closer to-

hills. Bits of mist scudded among them and faint, vaporous clouds hovered in all the hollows. The sky, seen through the atmosphere that hung about the place, was several shades darker, with a smeared, sooty tone to it. A silence that was not the same as stillness lay upon it, almost as though some unseen entity were poised, holding its breath. Then we heard a scream. It was a girl's voice. The old lady in distress trick? It came from somewhere to the right, beyond those hills. It smelled fishy. But hell! It could be real. I tossed the reins to Ganelon and jumped to the ground, taking Grayswandir into my hand. "I'm going to investigate," I said, moving off to the right and leaping the gulley that ran beside the road. "Hurry back."

I plowed through some brush and scrambled up a rocky slope. I pushed my way through more shrubbery on its down side and mounted another, higher slope. The scream came again as I was climbing it, and this time I heard other sounds as well. Then I reached the top and was able to see for a good distance. The black area began about forty feet below me, and the scene I sought was laid about a hundred-fifty feet within it. It was a monochromatic sight, save for the flames. A woman, all in white, black hair hanging loose, down to her waist, was bound to one of those dark trees, smoldering branches heaped around her feet. Half a dozen hairy, albino men, almost completely naked and continuing the process of undressing as they moved, shuffled about, muttering and chuckling, poking at the woman and the fire with sticks that they carried and clutching at their loins repeatedly. The flames were high enough now to singe the woman's garments, causing them to smolder. Her long dress was sufficiently torn and disarrayed so that I could see she possessed a lovely, voluptuous

my arms, sobbing.
It was only then that I noticed her face--or, rather, her lack of one.
She wore a full, ivory mask, oval and curving, featureless, save for
two tiny rectangular grilles for her eyes.
I drew her away from the smoke and the gore. She clung to me,
breathing heavily, thrusting her entire body against me. After what
seemed an appropriate period of time, I attempted to disentangle
myself. But she would not release me, and she was surprisingly
strong.

"It is all right now," I said, or something equally trite and apt, but
she did not reply.
She kept shifting her grip upon my body, with rough caressing
movements and a rather disconcerting effect. Her desirability was
enhanced, from instant to instant. I found myself stroking her hair,
and the rest of her as well.
"It is all right now," I repeated. "Who are you? Why were they burn-
ing you? Who were they?"
But she did not reply. She had stopped sobbing, but her breathing
was still heavy, although in a different way.
"Why do you wear this mask?"
I reached for it and she jerked her head back.
This did not seem especially important, though. While some cold,
logical part of me knew that the passion was irrational, I was as
powerless as the gods of the Epicureans. I wanted her and I was
ready to have her.
Then I heard Ganelon cry out my name and I tried to turn in that
direction.

But she restrained me. I was amazed at her strength.
"Child of Amber," came her half-familiar voice. "We owe you this for
what you have given us, and we will have all of you now."
Ganelon's voice came to me again, a steady stream of profanities.
I exerted all my strength against that grip and it weakened. My

ankles and legs. Even as he hacked at them, others lashed about as though seeking to capture his sword arm. He had succeeded in partly freeing his right leg, and I leaned far forward and managed to finish the job.

I moved to a position behind him, out of reach of the grasses, and tossed away the mask, which I just then realized I was still clutching. It fell to earth beyond the edge of the black and immediately began to smolder.

Catching him under the arms, I strove to drag Ganelon back. The stuff resisted fiercely, but at last I tore him free. I carried him then, leaping over the remaining dark grasses that separated us from the more docile, green variety beyond the road. He regained his footing and continued to lean heavily against me, bending forward and slapping at his leggings. "They're numb," he said. "My legs are asleep." I helped him back to the wagon. He transferred his grip to its side and began stamping his feet.

"They're tingling," he announced. "It's starting to come back.... Oow!"

Finally, he limped to the front of the wagon. I helped him climb onto the seat and followed him up. He sighed. "That's better," he said. "They're coming along now. That stuff just sucked the strength out of them. Out of the rest of me, too. What happened?"

"Our bad omen made good on its promise."

"What now?" I picked up the reins and released the brake.

"We go across," I said. "I have to find out more about this thing. Keep your blade handy."

He granted and laid the weapon across his knees. The horses did not like the idea of going on, but I flicked their flanks lightly with the whip and they began to move. We entered the black area, and it was like riding into a World War II

I grew angry then. I drew the Pattern from memory and held it blazing before my mind's eye. I essayed the shift once more. Immediately, my head began to ache. A pain shot from my forehead to the back of my skull and hung there like a hot wire. But this only fanned my anger and caused me to try even harder to shift the black road into nothingness. Things wavered. The mists thickened, rolled across the road in billows. Outlines grew indistinct. I shook the reins. The horses moved faster. My head began to throb, felt as if it were about to come apart. Instead, momentarily, everything else did.... The ground shook, cracking in places, but it was more than just that. Everything seemed to undergo a spasmodic shudder, and the cracking was more than mere fracture lines in the ground. It was as though someone had suddenly kicked the leg of a table on which a loosely assembled jigsaw puzzle lay. Gaps appeared in the entire prospect: here, a green bough; there, a sparkle of water, a glimpse of blue sky, absolute blackness, white nothingness, the front of a brick building, faces behind a window, fire, a piece of star-filled sky...

The horses were galloping by then, and I had all I could do to keep from screaming for the pain. A babble of mixed noises--animal, human, mechanical--washed over us. It seemed that I could hear Ganelon cursing, but I could not be certain. I thought that I would pass out from the pain, but I determined, out of sheer stubbornness and anger, to persist until I did. I concentrated on the Pattern as a dying man might cry out to his God, and I threw my entire will against the existence of the black road. Then the pressure was off and the horses were plunging wildly, dragging us into a green field. Ganelon snatched at the reins, but I drew on them myself and shouted to the horses until they halted. We had crossed the black road.

We seemed to be at a higher altitude than we had been before the crossing. It pleased me that we had indeed shifted--and in the direction I had desired. Our way curved, ran back a bit, straightened. Every now and then we caught a glimpse of the black road. It was not too far off to our right. We were still running roughly parallel to it. The thing definitely cut through Shadow. From what we saw of it, it appeared to have settled back down to being its normal, sinister self once more. My headache faded and my heart grew somewhat lighter. We achieved higher ground and a pleasant view over a large area of hills and forest, reminding me of parts of Pennsylvania I had enjoyed driving through years earlier. I stretched; then, "How are your legs now?" I asked. "All right," Ganelon said, looking back along our trail. "I can see for a great distance, Corwin..."

"Yes?"

"I see a horseman, coming very fast." I stood and turned. I think I might have groaned as I dropped back into the seat and shook the reins. He was still too far off to tell for certain--on the other side of the black road. But who else could it be, pushing along at that speed on our trail? I cursed then. We were nearing the crest of the rise. I turned to Ganelon and said, "Get ready for another hellride." "It's Benedict?"

"I think so. We lost too much time back there. He can move awfully fast--especially through Shadow--all alone like that." "Do you think you can still lose him?" "We'll find out," I said. "Real soon now." I clucked to the horses and shook the reins again. We reached the top and a blast of icy air struck us. We leveled off and the shadow of a boulder to our left darkened the sky. When we had passed it, the

We rounded a bend and emerged from the storm. The world was still a glazed-over thing and an occasional flake flitted by, but the sun pulled free of the clouds, pouring light upon the land, and we headed downward once more....
...Passing through a fog and emerging in a barren, though snowless waste of rock and pitted land....
...We bore to the right, regained the sun, followed a twisted course on a level plain, winding among tall, featureless stands of blue-gray stone....

...Where far off to our right the black road paced as. Waves of heat washed over us and the land steamed. Bubbles popped in boiling stews that filled the craters, adding their fumes to the dank air. Shallow puddles lay like a handful of old, bronze coins.

The horses raced, half-maddened now, as geysers began to erupt along the trail. Scalding waters spewed across the roadway, narrowly missing us, running in steaming, slick sheets. The sky was brass and the sun was a mushy apple. The wind was a panting dog with bad breath.
The ground trembled, and far off to our left a mountain blew its top toward the heavens and buried fires after it. An ear-splitting crash temporarily deafened us and concussion waves kept beating against our bodies. The wagon swayed and shimmied.

The ground continued to shake and the winds slammed us with near-hurricane force as we rushed toward a row of black-topped hills. We left what there was of a roadway when it turned in the wrong direction and headed, bumping and shuddering, across the plain itself. The hills continued to grow, dancing in the troubled air. I turned when I felt Ganelon's hand on my arm. He was shouting something, but I could not hear him. Then he pointed back and I followed his gesture. I saw nothing that I had not expected to see. The air was turbulent, filled with dust, debris, ashes. I shrugged

wide, high grotto. Light leaked down from holes high above, dappling stalactites and falling upon quivering green pools. The ground continued to shake, and my hearing took a turn for the better as I saw a massive stalagmite crumble and heard the faint tinkle of its fall.

We crossed a black-bottomed chasm on a bridge that might have been limestone, which shattered behind us and vanished. Bits of rock rained down from overhead and sometimes large stones fell. Patches of green and red fungus glowed in corners and cracks, streaks of minerals sparkled and bent, large crystals and flat flowers of pale stone added to the moist, eerie beauty of the place. We wheeled through caverns like chains of bubbles and coursed a white-chested torrent until it vanished into a black hole. A long, corkscrew gallery took us upward once more, and I heard Ganelon's voice, faint and echoing, "I thought that I glimpsed movement--that might be a rider--at the crest of the mountain--just for an instant--back there." We moved into a slightly brighter chamber.

"If it was Benedict, he's got a hard act to follow," I shouted, and there came the tremors and muffled crashings as more things collapsed behind us.

We proceeded onward and upward, until finally openings began to occur overhead, giving upon patches of clear blue sky. The hoof clicks and the sounds of the wagon gradually assumed a normal volume and their echoes came to us also. The tremors ceased, small birds darted above us, and the light increased in intensity. Then another twisting of the way, and our exit lay before us, a wide, low opening onto day. We had to duck our heads as we passed beneath the jagged lintel. We bounced up and over a jutting lip of moss-covered stone, then looked upon a bed of gravel that lay like a scythed track upon the hillside, passing among gigantic trees, vanishing within them, be-

I shook my head slowly.
"I hope not," I said.
We proceeded downward, beneath a blue sky and a golden sun
westering in a normal way.
"I was almost afraid to come out of that cave," Ganelon said after a
time. "No telling what would be on this side."
"The horses couldn't take much more. I had to let up. If that was
Benedict we saw, his horse had better be in very good condition. He
was pushing it hard. Then to have it face all that.... I think he
would fall back."
"Maybe it's used to it," Ganelon said, as we crunched around a
bend to the right, losing sight of the cave mouth.
"There is always that possibility," I said, and I thought of Dara
again, wondering what she was doing at that moment.
We wove our way steadily downward, shifting slowly and impercep-
tibly. Our trail kept drifting to the right, and I cursed when I real-
ized we were nearing the black road.
"Damn! It's as persistent as an insurance salesman!" I said, feeling
my anger turn to something like hatred. "When the time is right, I
am going to destroy that thing!"
Ganelon did not reply. He was taking a long drink of water. He
passed me the bottle and I did, too.
At length, we achieved level terrain, and the trail continued to twist
and curve at the least excuse. It allowed the horses to take it easy
and it would slow a mounted pursuer.
About an hour later, I began to feel comfortable and we stopped to
eat. We had just about finished our meal when Ganelon--who had
not removed his gaze from the hillside--stood and shaded his eyes.
"No," I said, leaping to my feet. "I don't believe it."
A lone rider had emerged from the mouth of the cave. I watched as
he halted for a moment, then continued on down the trail.
"What do we do now?" Ganelon asked.

him.

I shifted as we took another turning. Moments later, a faint smell of smoke came to my nostrils. I shifted slightly again. "He's coming fast!" Ganelon announced. "I just saw-- There's smoke! Flames! The woods are on fire!" I laughed and looked back. Half the hillside swam under smoke and an orange thing raced through the green, its crackling just then reaching my ears. Of their own accord, the horses increased their pace.

"Corwin! Did you--?"

"Yes! If it were steeper and there were no trees, I'd have tried an avalanche."

The air was momentarily filled with birds. We drew nearer the black way. Firedrake tossed his head and whinnied. There were flecks of foam on his muzzle. He tried to bolt, then reared and pawed the air. Star made a frightened noise and pulled to the right. I fought a moment, regained control, decided to let them run a bit.

"He's still coming!" cried Ganelon.

I cursed and we ran. Eventually, our path brought us alongside the black road. We were on a long straightaway, and a glance back showed me that the whole hillside was ablaze, the trail running like a nasty scar down its middle. It was then that I saw the rider. He was almost halfway down and moving like something in the Kentucky Derby. God! What a horse that had to be! I wondered what shadow had borne him.

I drew on the reins, gently at first, then harder, until finally we began to slow. We were only a few hundred feet from the black road by then, and I had seen to it that there was a place not too far ahead where the gap narrowed to thirty or forty. I managed to rein in the horses when we reached it, and they stood there quivering. I handed the reins to Ganelon, drew Grayswandir, and stepped down to the road.

wait there with it. If things are resolved to my satisfaction, we will be continuing on. If they are not, surrender immediately to Benedict. It is me that he wants, and he will be the only one left who can take you back to Avalon. He will do it, too. You will at least retire to your homeland that way." He hesitated. "Go on," I told him. "Do as I said." He looked down at the ground. He unwound the reins. He looked at me.

"Good luck," he said, and he shook the horses forward. I backed off the trail, moved to a position before a small stand of saplings, and waited. I kept Grayswandir in my hand, glanced once at the black road, then fixed my eyes on the trail. Before long, he appeared up near the flame line, smoke and fire all about him, burning branches falling. It was Benedict all right, his face partly muffled, the stump of his right arm upraised to shield his eyes, coming like some ghastly escapee from hell. Bursting through a shower of sparks and cinders, he came into the clear and plunged on down the trail. Soon, I could hear the hoofbeats. A gentlemanly thing to do would be to sheathe my blade while I waited. If I did that, though, I might not have a chance to draw it again. I found myself wondering how Benedict would be wearing his blade and what sort it would be. Straight? Curved? Long? Short? He could use them all with equal facility. He had taught me how to fence.... It might be smart as well as gentlemanly to sheathe Grayswandir. He might be willing to talk first-and this way I was asking for trouble. As the hoofbeats grew louder, though, I realized I was afraid to put it away. I wiped my palm only once before he came into view. He had slowed for the turn, and he must have seen me at the same instant I saw him. He rode straight toward me, slowing. But halting did not ap-

parted the road, bearing slightly toward my left, jerked the reins once and released them, keeping control of the horse with his knees. His left hand went up in a salute-like movement that passed above his head and seized the hilt of his weapon. It came free without a sound, describing a beautiful arc above him and coming to rest in a lethal position out from his left shoulder and slanting back, like a single wing of dull steel with a minuscule line of edge that gleamed like a filament of mirror. The picture he presented was burned into my mind with a kind of magnificence, a certain splendor that was strangely moving. The blade was a long, scythe like affair that I had seen him use before. Only then we had stood as allies against a mutual foe I had begun to believe unbeatable. Benedict had proved otherwise that night. Now that I saw it raised against me I was overwhelmed with a sense of my own mortality, which I had never experienced before in this fashion. It was as though a layer had been stripped from the world and I had a sudden, full understanding of death itself. The moment was gone. I backed into the grove. I had stood there so that I could take advantage of the trees. I dropped back about twelve feet among them and took two steps to my left. The horse reared at the last possible moment and snorted and whinnied, moist nostrils flaring. It turned aside, tearing up turf. Benedict's arm moved with near-invisible speed, like the tongue of a toad, and his blade passed through a sapling I'd guess at three inches in diameter. The tree continued to stand upright for a moment, then slowly toppled.

His boots struck the earth and he strode toward me. I had wanted the grove for this reason, also, to make him come to me in a place where a long blade would be hampered by branches and boles. But as he advanced, he swung the weapon, almost casually, back and forth, and the trees fell about him as he passed. If only he were not so infernally competent. If only he were not Benedict....

beaten aside. I parried the ensuing thrust and he brushed my riposte aside and was at me again. This time I did not even bother to riposte. I simply parried, retreated, and stepped behind a tree. "I don't understand," I said, beating down his blade as it slid by the trunk and nearly skewered me. "I have not murdered anyone recently. Certainly not in Avalon." Another *thukk!* and the tree was falling toward me. I got out of its way and retreated, parrying. "Murderer," he said again. "I don't know what you are talking about, Benedict." "Liar!"

I stood my ground then and held it. Damn it! It was senseless to die for the wrong reason! I riposted as fast as I could, seeking openings everywhere. There were none. "At least tell me!" I shouted. "Please!" But he seemed to be finished with talking. He pressed forward and I had to fall back once more. It was like trying to fence with a glacier. I became convinced then that he was out of his mind, not that that helped me any. With anybody else, an insane madness would cause the loss of some control in a fight. But Benedict had hammered out his reflexes over the centuries, and I seriously believed that the removal of his cerebral cortex would not have altered his movements from their state of perfection. He drove me steadily back, and I dodged among trees and he cut them down and kept coming. I made the mistake of attacking and barely stopped his counterthrusts inches from my breast. I fought down the first wave of panic that came to me when I saw that he was driving me back toward the edge of the grove. Soon he would have me in the open, with no trees to slow him. My attention was focused on him so completely that I did not realize what was then to occur until it did.

glance and see that Ganelon had landed in a heap some ten paces to my rear. I parried and resumed my retreat. I only had one trick remaining, and it saddened me that if it failed Amber would be deprived of its rightful liege. It is somewhat more difficult to fence with a good left-hander than a good right-hander, and this worked against me also. But I had to experiment a bit. There was something I had to learn, even if it meant taking a chance. I took a long step back, moving momentarily out of range, then leaned forward and attacked. It was a very calculated thing, and very fast. One unexpected result, which I am certain was at least partly luck, was that I got through, even though I missed my target. For an instant, Grayswandir rode high off one of his parries and nicked his left ear. This slowed him slightly for a few moments, but not enough to matter. If anything, it served to strengthen his defense. I continued to press my attack, but there was simply no getting through then. It was only a small cut, but the blood ran down to his ear lobe and spattered off, a few drops at a time. It could even be distracting, if I permitted myself to do more than take note of it. Then I did what I feared, but had to try. I left him a small opening, just for a moment, knowing that he would come right through it toward my heart. He did, and I parried it at the last instant. I do not like to think about how close he came that time. Then I began to yield once more, giving ground, backing out of the grove. Parrying and retreating, I moved past the spot where Ganelon lay. I fell back another fifteen feet or so, fighting defensively, conservatively. Then I gave Benedict another opening. He drove in, as he had before, and I managed to stop him again. He pressed the attack even harder after that, pushing me back to the

discourage a balaestra.
Then he did what I had hoped. He beat at my blade and advanced normally when I dropped it into quarte...
...causing him to step into the patch of black grasses over which I had leaped.

I dared not look down at first. I simply stood my ground and gave the flora a chance.
It only took a few moments. Benedict became aware of it the next time that he tried to move. I saw the puzzled expression flash across his face, then the strain. It had him, I knew.
I doubted, though, that it could hold him very long, so I moved immediately.

I danced to the right, out of range of his blade, rushed forward and sprang across the grasses, off the black road once again. He tried to turn, but they had twined themselves about his legs all the way up to his knees. He swayed for a moment, but retained his balance. I passed behind him and to his right. One easy thrust and he was a dead man, but of course there was no reason to do it now. He swung his arm back behind his neck and turned his head, pointing the blade at me. He began pulling his left leg free. But I feinted toward his right, and when he moved to parry it I slapped him across the back of the neck with the flat of Grayswandir.

It stunned him, and I was able to move in and punch him in the kidney with my left hand. He bent slightly and I blocked his sword arm and struck him in the back of the neck again, this time with my fist, hard. He fell, unconscious, and I removed his blade from his hand and cast it aside. The blood from his left ear lobe trailed down his neck like some exotic earring.
I put Grayswandir aside, seized Benedict under the armpits, and dragged him back from the black road. The grasses resisted mightily, but I strained against them and finally had him free.

near the wagon.
I resheathed our blades when Ganelon came up, and set him to stripping ropes from several of the cases. While he did this, I searched Benedict and found what I was looking for. I bound him to the tree then, while Ganelon fetched his horse. We tethered it to a nearby bush, upon which I also hung his blade. Then I mounted to the driver's seat of the wagon and Ganelon came up alongside.

"Are you just going to leave him there?" he asked.
"For now," I said.
We moved on up the road. I did not look back, but Ganelon did. "He hasn't moved yet," he reported. Then, "Nobody ever just took me and threw me like that. With one hand yet."
"That's why I told you to wait with the wagon, and not to fight with him if I lost."
"What is to become of him now?"
"I will see that he is taken care of, soon."
"He will be all right, though?"
I nodded.

"Good."

We continued on for perhaps two miles and I halted the horses. I climbed down.

"Don't be upset by anything that happens," I said. "I am going to make arrangements for Benedict now." I moved off the road and stood in the shade, taking out the deck of Trumps Benedict had been carrying. I riffled through them, located Gerard, and removed him from the pack. The rest I returned to the silk-lined, wooden case, inlaid with bone, in which Benedict had carried them. I held Gerard's Trump before me and regarded it. After a time, it grew warm, real, seemed to stir. I felt Gerard's actual presence. He was in Amber. He was walking down a street that I recognized. He looks a lot like me, only larger, heavier. I saw that he

him."
"Benedict? He is in trouble?"
"Yes."
"Then why does he not summon me himself?"
"He is unable to. He is restrained."
"Why? How?"
"It is too long and involved to go into now. Believe me, he needs your help, right away."
He raked his beard with his upper teeth. "And you cannot handle it yourself?"
"Absolutely not."
"And you think I can?"
"I know you can."
He loosened his blade in its scabbard.
"I would not like to think this is some sort of trick, Corwin."
"I assure you it is not. With all the time I have had to think, I would have come up with something a little more subtle."
He sighed. Then he nodded. "All right. I'm coming to you."
"Come ahead."
He stood for a moment, then took a step forward.
He stood beside me. He reached out and clasped my shoulder. He smiled.
"Corwin," he said. "I'm glad you've your eyes back."
I looked away.
"So am I. So am I."
"Who is that in the wagon?"
"A friend. His name is Ganelon."
"Where is Benedict? What is the problem?" I gestured.
"Back there," I said. "About two miles down the road. He is bound to a tree. His horse is tethered near by."
"Then why are you here?"
"I am fleeing."

"Getting the hell out of here, losing myself in Shadow. You will be doing both of us a favor to keep him from trying to follow me again. I do not want to have to fight him a second time."
"I see. Now will you tell me what happened?"
"I am not certain. He called me a murderer. I give you my word I slew no one the whole time I was in Avalon. Please tell him I said that. I have no reason to lie to you, and I swear that it is true. There is another matter which may have disturbed him somewhat. If he mentions it, tell him that he will have to rely on Dara's explanation."
"And what is it?"
I shrugged.
"You will know if he mentions it. If he does not, forget it."
"Dara, you say?"
"Yes."
"Very well, I shall do as you have asked.... Now, will you tell me how you managed your escape from Amber?"
I smiled.
"Academic interest? Or do you feel you might have need of the route yourself one day?"
He chuckled.
"It strikes me as a handy piece of information to have."
"I regret, dear brother, that the world is not yet ready for this knowledge. If I had to tell anyone, I would tell you--but there is no way it could benefit you, whereas its secrecy may serve me in the future."
"In other words, you have a private way into and out of Amber. What are you planning, Corwin?"
"What do you think?"
"The answer is obvious. But my feelings on the matter are mixed."
"Care to tell me about them?"
He gestured toward a section of the black road that was visible from where we stood.

"And?"

"I was unable to go the entire distance. You know how the shadows grow wilder and stranger the farther you get from Amber?"

"Yes."

"...Until the mind itself is twisted and turned toward madness?"

"Yes."

"...And somewhere beyond this lie the Courts of Chaos. The road goes on, Corwin. I am convinced that it runs the entire distance."

"Then it is as I feared," I said.

"That is why, whether I sympathize with you or not, I do not recommend the present time for your efforts. The security of Amber must come before all else."

"I see. Then there is nothing more to be said just now."

"And your plans?"

"Since you do not know what they are, it is meaningless to tell you that they are unchanged. But they are unchanged."

"I do not know whether to wish you luck, but I wish you well. I am glad that you have your sight back." He clasped my hand. "I had best get on to Benedict now. I take it he is not badly hurt?"

"Not by me. I only hit him a few times. Do not forget to give him my message."

"I won't."

"And take him back to Avalon."

"I will try."

"Then good-by for now, Gerard."

"Good-by, Corwin."

He turned then and walked on down the road. I watched until he was out of sight before I returned to the wagon. Then I replaced his Trump in the deck and continued on my way to Antwerp.

cigarette. There were no other houses for quite a distance. I had gotten close to seven hundred thousand dollars for the diamonds. It had taken me a week and a half to make the deal. From Antwerp we had traveled to Brussels, spending several evenings at a club on the Rue de Char et Pain before the man I wanted found me. Arthur was quite puzzled by the arrangement. A slight, white-haired man with a neat mustache, ex-RAF officer, Oxonian, he had begun shaking his head after the first two minutes and kept interrupting me with questions about delivery. While he was no Sir Basil Zaharoff, he became genuinely concerned when a client's ideas sounded too half-baked. It troubled him if something went sour too soon after delivery. He seemed to think it reflected back on him in some way. For this reason, he was often more helpful than the others when it came to shipment. He was concerned about my plans for transportation because I did not seem to have any. What one generally requires in an arrangement of this sort is an end-use certificate. What it is, basically, is a document affirming that country X has ordered the weapons in question. You need the thing in order to get an export permit from the manufacturer's country. This keeps them looking honest, even if the shipment should be reconsigned to country Y once it has crossed their border. The customary thing to do is to buy the assistance of an ambassadorial representative of country X--preferably one with relatives or friends connected with the Defense Department back home--in order to get the papers. They come high, and I believe Arthur had a list of all the going rates in his head. "But how are you going to ship them?" he had kept asking. "How will you get them where you want them?" "That," I said, "will be my problem. Let me worry about it." But he kept shaking his head. "It is no good trying to cut corners that way, Colonel," he said. (I had been a colonel to him since we had first met, some dozen years

Sheer perversity. Poor old Arthur was a good linguist and he wanted to know the destination of the pieces. I could feel him straining to identify the language each time that we spoke. Finally, he began nodding as though he had. After some more discussion, he stuck his neck out and said, "I read the newspapers. I am certain his crowd can afford the insurance." That was almost worth the price of admission to me. But, "No," I said. "Believe me, when I take possession of those automatic rifles, they are going to vanish off the face of the Earth." "Neat trick, that," he said, "considering I don't even know where we will be picking them up yet." "It does not matter." "Confidence is a fine thing. Then there is foolhardiness...." He shrugged. "Have it as you say then--your problem." Then I told him about the ammo and he must have been convinced as to my mental deterioration. He just stared at me for a long while, not even shaking his head this time. It was a good ten minutes before I could even get him to look at the specifications. It was then that he began shaking his head and mumbling about silver bullets and inert primers. The ultimate arbiter, cash, convinced him we would do it my way, however. There was no trouble on the rifles or the trucks, but persuading an arms factory to produce my ammo was going to be expensive, he told me. He was not even certain he could find one that would be willing. When I told him that the cost was no object, it seemed to upset him even more. If I could afford to indulge in weird, experimental ammo, an end-use certificate would not come to that much--

No. I told him no. My way, I reminded him. He sighed and tugged at the fringe of his mustache. Then he nodded. Very well, we would do it my way. He overcharged me, of course. Since I was rational in all other

on German as the best language for Ganelon to learn, since he had to learn one and German tourists have always seemed to be all over the place. He picked it up quite rapidly. I had told him to tell any real Germans and any Swiss who asked that he had been raised in Finland.

We spent three weeks in Switzerland before I was satisfied with the quality controls on my ammo. As I had suspected, the stuff was totally inert in this shadow. I had worked out the formula, though, which was all that really mattered at that point. The silver came high, of course. Perhaps I was being over-cautious. Still, there are some things about Amber that are best dispatched with that metal, and I could afford it. For that matter, what better bullet--short of gold--for a king? Should I wind up shooting Eric, there would be no *lese-majeste* involved. Indulge me, brothers. Then I left Ganelon to shift for himself for a time, since he had thrown himself into his tourist role in a true Stanislavskian fashion. I saw him off to Italy, camera about his neck and a faraway look in his eyes, and I flew back to the States. Back? Yes. That run-down place on the hillside below me had been my home for the better part of a decade. I had been heading toward it when I was forced off the road and into the accident which led to everything which has since occurred.

I drew on my cigarette and regarded the place. It had not been run-down then. I had always kept it in good shape. The place had been completely paid for. Six rooms and an attached two-car garage. Around seven acres. The whole hillside, actually. I had lived there alone most of the time. I had liked it. I had spent much of my time in the den and in my workshop. I wondered whether the Mori woodcut still hung in my study. *Face to Face* it was called, and it depicted two warriors in mortal combat. It would be nice to have it back. It would be gone, though, I felt. Probably everything that had not been stolen had been sold for back taxes. I imagined that was

"Right. What happened with Benedict?"
"I found him as you said he would be and I released him. He was set to pursue you once again, but I was able to persuade him that a considerable time had passed since I had seen you. Since you said you had left him unconscious, I figured that was the best line to take. Also, his horse was very tired. We went back to Avalon together. I remained with him through the funerals, then borrowed a horse. I am on my way back to Amber now."
"Funerals? What funerals?"

Again, that calculating look.
"You really do not know?" he said.
"If I knew, damn it, I would not ask!"
"His servants. They were murdered. He says you did it."
"No," I said. "No. That is ridiculous. Why should I want to murder his servants? I do not understand..."
"It was not long after his return that he went looking for them, as they were not on hand to welcome him. He found them murdered and you and your companion gone."
"Now I see how it looked," I said. "Where were the bodies?"
"Buried, but not too deeply, in the little wood behind the garden to the rear of the house."
Just so, just so.... Better not to mention I had known about the grave.

"But what possible reason does he think I could have for doing such a thing?" I protested.
"He is puzzled, Corwin. Very puzzled, now. He could not understand why you did not kill him when you had the chance, and why you sent for me when you could have just left him there."
"I see now why he kept calling me a murderer as we fought, but-- Did you tell him what I said about not having slain anyone?"
"Yes. At first he shrugged it off as a self-serving statement. I told him you sounded sincere, and very puzzled yourself. I believe it

"You must be joking," I said.
"No, I want an answer."
"Very well. You are the only other one I trust."
"Is that all?"
"No. Benedict does not want his whereabouts known back in Amber. You and Julian are the only two I know for certain to be aware of his location. I don't like Julian, I don't trust him. So I called you."
"How did you know that Julian and I knew about him?"
"He helped you both out when you ran into trouble on the black road awhile back, and he put you up while you recuperated. Dara told me about it."
"Dara? Who is this Dara anyway?"
"The orphaned daughter of a couple who once worked for Benedict," I said. "She was around when you and Julian were there."
"And you sent her a bracelet. You also mentioned her to me by the road, back when you summoned me."
"Correct. What is the matter?"
"Nothing. I do not really remember her, though. Tell me, why did you leave so suddenly? You have to admit, it seemed the act of a guilty man."
"Yes," I said, "I was guilty--but not of murder. I went to Avalon to obtain something that I wanted, I got it, and I cleared out. You saw that wagon, and you saw that I had a cargo in it. I got out before he returned to keep from answering questions Benedict might ask me about it. Hell! If I just wanted to run, I wouldn't go dragging a wagon along behind me! I'd have traveled on horseback, fast and light."
"What was in the wagon?"
"No," I said. "I did not want to tell Benedict and I do not want to tell you. Oh, he can find out, I suppose. But let him do it the hard way, if he must. It is immaterial, though. The fact I went there for something and really obtained it should be sufficient. It is not especially

"How did you cut the black road? You destroyed a section of it at the place you crossed over. How did you do it?"
"The Pattern," I said. "If you ever get in trouble with that thing, hit it with the Pattern. You know how you have to sometimes hold it in your mind if shadows begin to run away from you and things start going wild?"

"Yes. I tried that and it didn't work. All I got was a headache. It is not of Shadow."

"Yes and no," I said. "I know what it is. You did not try hard enough. I used the Pattern until my head felt as if it were being torn apart, until I was half blind from the pain and about ready to pass out. Then the road came apart about me instead. It was no fun, but it did work."

"I will remember," he said. "Are you going to talk to Benedict now?"

"No," I said. "He already has everything we've gone over. Now that he is cooling off, he will begin pushing the facts around some more. I would just as soon he do it on his own--and I do not want to risk another fight. When I close this time I will be silent for a long while. I will resist all efforts to communicate with me, also."

"What of Amber, Corwin? What of Amber?"
I dropped my eyes.

"Don't get in my way when I come back, Gerard. Believe me, it will be no contest."

"Corwin... Wait. I'd like to ask you to reconsider. Do not hit Amber now. She is weak in all the wrong ways."

"I am sorry, Gerard. But I am certain I have given the matter more thought during the past five years than all the rest of you put together."

"I am sorry, too, then."

"I guess I had better be going now."

He nodded.

"Good-by, Corwin."

being rewarded in Amber the last time I had seen her. To have been so near for as long as I had without even realizing her presence was a thing I found somewhat galling. I had debated contacting Random, decided against it. The only way he could possibly benefit me would be with information as to current affairs in Amber. While this would be nice to have, it was not absolutely essential. I was fairly certain that I could trust him. After all, he had been of some assistance to me in the past. Admitted, it was hardly altruism--but still, he had gone a bit further than he had had to. It was five years ago, though, and a lot had happened since. He was being tolerated around Amber again, and he had a wife now. He might be eager to gain a little standing. I just did not know. But weighing the possible benefits against the possible losses, I thought it better to wait and see him personally the next time I was in town. I had kept my word and resisted all attempts to make contact with me. They had come almost daily during my first two weeks back on the shadow Earth. Several weeks had passed, though, and I had not been troubled since. Why should I give anyone a free shot at my thinking machinery? No thanks, brothers. I advanced upon the rear of the house, sidled up to a window, wiped it with my elbow. I had been watching the place for three days, and it struck me as very unlikely that anyone was inside. Still... I peered in. It was a mess, of course, and a lot of my stuff was missing. But some of it was still there. I moved to my right and tried the door. Locked. I chuckled. I walked around to the patio. Ninth brick in, fourth brick up. The key was still beneath it. I wiped it on my jacket as I walked back. I let myself in. There was dust on everything, but it had been disturbed in some places. There were coffee containers, sandwich wrappers, and the

still unmade, and two expensive chairs all intact in my bedroom. My study was a more pleasant surprise. The big desk was covered with the litter and muss, but then it always had been. Lighting a cigarette, I went and sat behind it. I guess it was just too heavy and bulky for anyone to make off with. My books were all on their shelves. Nobody steals books but your friends. And there-- I could not believe it. I got to my feet again and crossed the room to stare at close range. Yoshitoshi Mori's beautiful woodcut hung right where it had always been, clean, stark, elegant, violent. To think that no one had made off with one of my most prized possessions.... Clean?

I scrutinized it. I ran my finger along the frame. Too clean. It bore none of the dust and grit which covered everything else in the house. I checked it for trip wires, found none, removed it from its hook, lowered it. No, the wall was no lighter behind it. It matched the rest of the wall perfectly.

I put Mori's work on the window seat and returned to my desk. I was troubled, as someone doubtless intended me to be. Someone had obviously removed it and taken good care of it--a thing for which I was not ungrateful--and then only just recently restored it. It was as if my return had been anticipated. Which should be adequate reason for immediate flight, I suppose. But that was silly. If it was part of some trap, it had already been sprung. I jerked the automatic from my jacket pocket and tucked it behind my belt. I had not even known that I would be coming back myself. It was just something I had decided to do since I had had some time on my hands. I was not even certain as to why I had wanted to see the place again. So this was some sort of contingency arrangement. If I should come

There had been nothing of any great value inside--a few hundred dollars in cash, some bonds, receipts, correspondence. An envelope. A fresh, white envelope lay in plain sight. I did not remember it. My name upon it, written in an elegant hand. Not with ballpoint either.

It contained a letter and a card. *Brother Corwin*, the letter said, *If you are reading this, then we still think enough alike for me to be able to anticipate you somewhat. I thank you for the loan of the woodcut--one of two possible reasons, as I see it, for your returning to this squalid shadow. I am loathe to relinquish it, as our tastes are also somewhat akin and it has graced my chambers for several years now. There is something to the subject that strikes a familiar chord. Its return is to be taken as evidence of my good will and a bid for your attention. In that I must be honest with you if I am to stand a chance of convincing you of anything, I will not apologize for what has been done. My only regret, actually, is that I did not kill you when I should have. Vanity it was, that played me for a fool. While time may have healed your eyes, I doubt it will ever significantly alter our feelings for one another. Your letter--"I'll be back"--lies upon my writing table at this moment. Had I written it, I know that I would be back. Some things being equal between us, I anticipate your return, and not without somewhat of apprehension. Knowing you for no fool, I contemplate your arriving in force. And here is where past vanity is paid of present pride. I would have peace between us, Corwin, for the sake of the realm, not my own. Strong forces out of Shadow have come to beset Amber regularly, and I do not fully understand their nature. Against these forces, the most formidable in my memory ever to assail Amber, the family has united behind me. I would like to have your support in this struggle. Failing that, I request that you forbear invading me for a time. If you elect to assist, I will require no homage of you, simply acknowledgment of my*

ule, not yours. As for Amber, I am not unmindful of her needs, and I will deal with them in my own time and fashion. You make the mistake, Eric, of considering yourself necessary. The graveyards are filled with men who thought they could not be replaced. I will wait though, to tell you this, face to face. I tucked his letter and the Trump in my jacket pocket. I killed my cigarette in the dirty ashtray on my desk. Then I fetched some linen from the bedroom to wrap my combatants. They would wait for me in a safer place, this time. As I passed through the house once again, I wondered why I had come back, really. I thought of some of the people I had known when I had lived there, and wondered whether they ever thought of me, whether they wondered what had become of me. I would never know, of course. Night had begun and the sky was clear and its first stars bright as I stepped outside and locked the door behind me. I went around to the side and returned the key to its place beneath the patio. Then I mounted the hill. When I looked back from the top, the house seemed to have shrunk there in the darkness, to have become a piece of the desolation, like an empty beer can tossed beside the road. I crossed over and down, heading across a field toward the place where I had parked, wishing I had not looked back.

bright lemon, the beasts of burden were striped and feathered. We drove for hours, finally encountering the black road, paralleling it for a time, then heading off in another direction. The skies went through a dozen shiftings, and the contours of the land melted and merged from hill to plain and back again. We crept along poor roads and skidded on flats as smooth and hard as glass. We edged our way across a mountain's face and skirted a wine-dark sea. We passed through storms and fogs. It took me half a day to find them once again, or a shadow so close that it made no difference. Yes, those whom I had exploited once before. They were short fellows, very hairy, very dark, with long incisors and retractable claws. But they had trigger fingers, and they worshiped me. They were overjoyed at my return. It little mattered that five years earlier I had sent the cream of their manhood off to die in a strange land. The gods are not to be questioned, but loved, honored, and obeyed. They were quite disappointed that I only wanted a few hundred. I had to turn away thousands of volunteers. The morality of it did not especially trouble me this time. One way of looking at it might be that by employing this group I was seeing to it that the others had not died in vain. Of course I did not look at it that way, but I enjoy exercises in sophistry. I suppose I might also consider them mercenaries being paid in spiritual coin. What difference did it make whether they fought for money or for a belief? I was capable of supplying either one when I needed troops. Actually, though, these would be pretty safe, being the only ones in the place with fire power. My ammo was still inert in their homeland, however, and it took several days of marching through Shadow to reach a land sufficiently like Amber for it to become functional. The only catch was that shadows follow a law of congruency of correspondences, so that the place actually was close to Amber. This kept me somewhat on edge throughout their training. It was unlikely that a brother would blunder through that shadow.

We halted for lunch, ate well, and continued on, the shadows slowly slipping away about us. The sky became a dark but brilliant blue, the sky of Amber. The earth was black among rocks and the bright green of the grass. The trees and the shrubs had a moist lucency to their foliage. The air was sweet and clean. By nightfall, we were passing among the massive trees at the fringes of Arden. We bivouacked there, posting a very heavy guard. Ganelon, now wearing khakis and a beret, sat with me long into the night, going over the maps I had drawn. We still had about forty miles to go before we hit the mountains. The trucks gave out the following afternoon. They went through several transformations, stalled repeatedly, and finally refused to start at all. We pushed them into a ravine and cut branches to cover them over. We distributed the ammo and the rest of the rations and continued on. We departed the hard, dirt roadway after that and worked our way through the woods themselves. As I still knew them well, it was less of a problem than it might have been. It slowed us, naturally, but lessened chances of surprise by one of Julian's patrols. The trees were quite large, as we were well into Arden proper, and the topography sprang back into mind as we moved. We encountered nothing more menacing than foxes, deer, rabbits, and squirrels that day. The smells of the place and its green, gold, and brown brought back thoughts of happier times. Near sunset, I scaled a forest giant and was able to make out the range that held Kolvir. A storm was playing about its peaks just then and its clouds hid their highest portions. The following noon we ran into one of Julian's patrols. I do not really know who surprised whom, or who was more surprised. The firing broke out almost immediately. I shouted myself hoarse stopping it, as everyone seemed anxious to try out his weapon on a live target. It was a small group--a dozen and a half men--and we got all

patrols. I pushed us on and up well after nightfall, to reach a place of cover I had had in mind. We bedded down at an altitude perhaps half a mile higher than we had the previous night. We were under the cloud cover, but there was no rainfall, despite a constant atmospheric tension of the sort that precedes a storm. I did not sleep well that night. I dreamed of the burning cat head, and of Lorraine. In the morning, we moved out under gray skies, and I pushed the troops remorselessly, heading steadily upward. We heard the sounds of distant thunder, and the air was alive and electric. About mid-morning, as I led our file up a twisted, rocky route, I heard a shout from behind me, followed by several bursts of gunfire. I headed back immediately.

A small knot of men, Ganelon among them, stood staring down at something, talking in low voices. I pushed my way through. I could not believe it. Never in my memory had one been seen this near to Amber. Perhaps twelve feet in length, bearing that terrible parody of a human face on the shoulders of a lion, eagle-like wings folded above its now bloody sides, a still-twitching tail like that of a scorpion, I had glimpsed the manticora once in isles far to the south, a frightful beast that had always held a spot near the top on my unclean list. "It tore Rall in half, it tore Rall in half," one of the men kept repeating.

About twenty paces away, I saw what was left of Rall. We covered him over with a tarp and weighted it down with rocks. That was really about all that we could do. If nothing else, it served to restore a quality of wariness that had seemed to vanish after the previous day's easy victory. The men were silent and cautious as we continued on our way. "Quite a thing, that," Ganelon said. "Has it the intelligence of a man?"

"I do not really know."

outlined against them. We encountered another manticora later, but we dispatched it with no damage to ourselves. About an hour later, we were attacked by a flock of large, razor-beaked birds, the like of which I had never seen before. We succeeded in driving them off, but this, too, disturbed me.

We kept climbing, wondering when the storm was going to begin. The winds increased in velocity. It grew quite dark, though I knew the sun had not yet set. The air took on a misty, hazy quality as we neared the cloud clusters. A feeling of dampness worked its way into everything. The rocks were more slippery. I was tempted to call a halt, but we were still a good distance from Kolvir and I did not want to strain the rations situation, which I had calculated quite carefully. We achieved perhaps another four miles and several thousand feet in elevation before we were forced to stop. It was pitch black by then, the only illumination at all coming from the intermittent flashes of lightning. We camped in a large circle on a hard, bare slope, sentries all about the perimeter. The thunder came like long flourishes of martial music. The temperature plummeted. Even had I permitted fires, there was nothing burnable about. We settled down for a cold, clammy, dark time. The manticoras attacked several hours later, sudden and silent. Seven men died and we killed sixteen of the beasts. I have no idea how many others fled. I cursed Eric as I bound my wounds and wondered from what shadow he had drawn the things. During what passed for morning, we advanced perhaps five miles toward Kolvir before bearing off to the west. It was one of three possible routes we could follow, and I had always considered it the best for a possible attack. The birds came to plague us again, several times, with greater numbers and persistency. Shooting a few of them, though, was all it took to route the entire flock.

dark birds swept about them like ashes on the wind. The dampness lay like a cold blanket. The echoes of the thunder bounced about the peaks. I stared, puzzling, at the conflict far below.

The distance was too great for me to determine the combatants. At first it occurred to me that someone else might be about the same thing I was--that perhaps Bleys had survived and returned with a new army.

But no. These were coming in from the west, along the black road. And I saw now that the birds accompanied them, and bounding forms that were neither horses nor men. The manticoras, perhaps. The lightnings fell upon them as they came, scattering, burning, blasting. As I realized that they never struck near the defenders, I recalled that Eric had apparently gained some measure of control over that device known as the Jewel of Judgment, with which Dad had exercised his will upon the weather about Amber. Eric had employed it against us with considerable effect five years earlier. So the forces from Shadow about which I had been hearing reports, were even stronger than I had thought. I had envisioned harassment, but not a pitched battle at the foot of Kolvir. I looked down at the movements within the blackness. The road seemed almost to writhe from the activity about it.

Ganelon came and stood beside me. He was silent for a long while. I did not want him to ask me, but I felt powerless to say it except as answer to a question.

"What now, Corwin?"

"We must increase the pace," I said. "I want to be in Amber tonight."

We moved again. The going was better for a time, and that helped. The storm without rain continued, its lightnings and thunders increasing in brilliance and volume. We moved through a constant twilight.

When we came to a safe-seeming place later that afternoon--a place

inasmuch as we had seen no signs of recent passage. The engagement explained our own good fortune in not encountering defensive patrols on the way up. I moved nearer. While the attackers could have come up by one of the two other routes, I saw additional evidence that this need not have been the case. They were still arriving, and it was a most fearsome sight, for they were airborne. They swept in from the west like great gusts of windblown leaves. The aerial movement I had witnessed from the distance had been of greater variety than the belligerent bird life. The attackers came in on winged, two-legged, dragon-like creatures, the closest parallel with which I was familiar being a heraldic beast, the wyvern. I had never seen a non-decorative wyvern before, but then I had never felt any great desire to go looking for one. Among the defenders were numerous archers, who took a deadly toll of these in flight. Sheets of pure hell erupted among them also, as the lightnings flashed and flared, sending them like cinders toward the ground. But still they came on, landing, so that both man and beast could attack those entrenched. I looked for and located the pulsating glow given off by the Jewel of Judgment when it has been tuned to operate. It came from the midst of the largest body of defenders, dug in near the base of a high cliff. I stared and studied, focusing on the wearer of the gem. Yes, there could be no doubt. It was Eric. On my belly now, I crawled even farther. I saw the leader of the nearest party of defenders behead a landing wyvern with a single sword stroke. With his left hand, he seized the harness of its rider and hurled him over thirty feet, out beyond the lip-like brink of the place. As he turned then to shout an order, I saw that it was Gerard. He appeared to be leading a flanking assault on a mass of the attackers who were assailing the forces at the foot of the cliff. On its far side, a similar body of troops was doing likewise. Another

defense of Amber herself. Waiting to pick up the pieces afterward might be wisest. However, I could already feel the rat teeth of doubt at work on that idea. Even without reinforcements for the attackers, the outcome of the encounter was by no means clear-cut. The invaders were strong, numerous. I had no idea as to what Eric might have in reserve. At that moment, it was impossible for me to gauge whether war bonds for Amber would be a good investment. If Eric lost, it would then be necessary for me to take on the invaders myself, after much of Amber's manpower had been wasted. If I were to move in now with automatic weapons, there was little doubt in my mind that we would crush the wyvern-riders quickly. For that matter, one or more of my brothers had to be down in the valley. A gateway for some of my troops could be set up by means of the Trumps. It would surprise whatever was down there for Amber suddenly to come up with riflemen. I returned my attention to the conflict nearer at hand. No, it was not going well. I speculated as to the results of my intervening. Eric would certainly be in no position to turn on me. Besides any sympathy that might be mine for what he had put me through, I would be responsible for pulling his nuts out of the fire. While he would be grateful for the relief, he would not be too happy over the general sentiment this would arouse. No, indeed. I would be back in Amber with a very deadly personal bodyguard and a lot of goodwill going for me. An intriguing thought. It would provide a far smoother route to my objective than the brutal frontal assault culminating in regicide that I had had in mind. Yes.

I felt myself smiling. I was about to become a hero. I must grant myself a small measure of grace, however. Given the choice only between Amber with Eric on the throne and Amber fallen, there is no question but that my decision would have been

shook his head and followed.
The rider was Dara. As soon as she was within earshot, I shouted at her.

"What the hell are you doing here?"
She dismounted, smiling, and stood before me.
"I wanted to come to Amber," she said. "So I did."
"How did you get here?"
"I followed Grandpa," she said. "It is easier to follow someone through Shadow, I discovered, than to do it yourself."
"Benedict is here?" She nodded.
"Down below. He is directing the forces in the valley. Julian is there, too."

Ganelon came up and stood near.
"She said that she followed us up here," he shouted. "She has been behind us for a couple days."
"Is that true?" I asked.
She nodded again, still smiling. "It was not hard to do."
"But why did you do it?"
"To get into Amber, of course? I want to walk the Pattern! That is where you are going, isn't it?"
"Of course it is. But there happens to be a war in the way!"
"What are you going to do about it?"
"Win it, of course!"
"Good. I'll wait."

I cursed for a few moments to give myself time to think, then,
"Where were you when Benedict returned?" I asked.
The smile went away.
"I do not know," she said. "I was out riding after you left, and I stayed away the entire day. I wanted to be alone to think. When I returned in the evening, he was not there. I rode again the following day. I traveled quite a distance, and when it grew dark I decided to camp out. I do that often. The next afternoon, as I was returning

now to approach, because I wanted you to be too near to Amber to send me back when I did." "I don't believe you are telling me the whole truth," I said, "but I haven't the time to care. We are going ahead now, and there will be fighting. The safest thing for you will be to remain here. I will assign you a couple of bodyguards." "I do not want them!" "I don't care what you want. You are going to have them. When the fighting is over I will send for you." I turned then and selected two men at random, ordering them to remain behind and guard her. They did not seem overjoyed at the prospect. "What are those weapons your men bear?" Dara asked. "Later," I said. "I'm busy." I relayed a sketchy briefing and ordered my squads. "You seem to have a very small number of men," she said. "They are sufficient," I replied. "I will see you later." I left her there with her guards. We moved back along the route I had taken. The thunder ceased as we advanced, and the silence became less a thing of relief than of suspense to me. The twilight resettled about us, and I perspired within the damp blanket of the air. I called a halt before we reached the first point from which I had observed the action. I returned to it then, accompanied by Ganelon. The wyvern-riders were all over the place and their beasts fought along with them. They were pressing the defenders back against the cliff face. I sought for but could not locate Eric or the glow of his jewel. "Which ones are the enemy?" Ganelon asked me. "The beast-riders." They were all of them landing now that heaven's artillery had let up. As soon as they struck the solid surface, they charged forward. I searched among the defenders, but Gerard was no longer in sight.

I managed to stop them and was reloading again when the first rifle squad arrived. We put down a heavier fire, and began to advance as the others came up. It was all over within ten minutes. Within the first five they had apparently realized that they hadn't a chance, and they began to flee back toward the ledge, launching themselves into space, becoming airborne again. We shot them down as they ran, and burning flesh and smoldering bones lay everywhere about us. The moist rock rose sheer to our left, its summit lost in the clouds, so that it seemed as if it might tower endlessly above us. The winds still whipped the smoke and the mists, and the rocks were smeared and splotched with blood. As we had advanced, firing, the forces of Amber quickly realized that we represented assistance and began to push forward from their position at the base of the cliff. I saw that they were being led by my brother Caine. For a moment our eyes locked together across the distance, then he plunged ahead into the fray.

Scattered groups of Amberites united into a second force as the attackers fell back. Actually, they limited our field of fire when they attacked the far flank of the wizened beast-men and their wyverns, but I had no way of getting word of this to them. We drew closer, and our firing was accurate. A small knot of men remained at the base of the cliff. I had a feeling they were guarding Eric, and that he had possibly been wounded, since the storm effects had ceased abruptly. I worked my own way off in that direction. The firing was already beginning to die down as I drew near the group, and I was hardly aware of what happened next until it was too late.

Something big came rushing up from behind and was by me in an instant. I hit the ground and rolled, bringing my rifle to bear automatically. My finger did not tighten on the trigger, however. It was

He had been kneeling in their midst, and he rose to his feet and waited. His face was expressionless. As I drew nearer, I saw that it was as I had suspected. He had been kneeling to tend an injured man who rested upon the ground. It was Eric.

I nodded to Gerard as I came up beside him, and I looked down at Eric. My feelings were quite mixed. The blood from his several chest wounds was very bright and there was a lot of it. The Jewel of Judgment, which still hung on a chain about his neck, was covered with it. Eerily, it continued its faint, glowing pulsation, heart-like beneath the gore. Eric's eyes were closed, his head resting upon a rolled-up cloak. His breathing was labored. I knelt, unable to take my eyes off that ashen face. I tried to push my hate aside just a little, since he was obviously dying, so that I might have a better chance to understand this man who was my brother for the moments that remained to him. I found that I could muster up something of sympathy by considering all that he was losing along with his life and wondering whether it would have been me lying there if I had come out on top five years earlier. I tried to think of something in his favor, and all I could come up with were the epitaph-like words, *He died fighting for Amber*. That was something, though. The phrase kept running through my mind. His eyes tightened, flickered, opened. His face remained without expression as his eyes focused on mine. I wondered whether he even recognized me.

But he said my name, and then, "I knew that it would be you." He paused for a couple of breaths and went on, "They saved you some trouble, didn't they?" I did not reply. He already knew the answer. "Your turn will come one day," he continued. "Then we will be peers." He chuckled and realized too late that he should not have. He went into an unpleasant spasm of moist coughing. When it passed, he glared at me.

there is--experience... Afterward, you know how to use it...."
"How--?" I began, but stopped. He had already told me how to at-
tune to it. Why ask him to waste his breath on how he had figured
it out?

But he caught it and managed, "Dworkin's notes...under fire-
place...my--"

Then he was taken with another coughing spell and the blood came
out of his nose and his mouth. He sucked in a deep breath and
heaved himself into a sitting position, eyes rolling wildly.
"Acquit yourself as well as I have--bastard!" he said, then fell into
my arms and heaved out his final, bloody breath.
I held him for several moments, then lowered him into his former
position. His eyes were still open, and I reached out and closed
them. Almost automatically, I put his hands together atop the now
lifeless gem. I had no stomach to take it from him at that moment. I
stood then, removed my cloak, and covered him with it.
Turning, I saw that all of them were staring at me. Familiar faces,
many of them. Some strange ones mixed in. So many who had been
there that night when I had come to dinner in chains....
No. It was not the time to think of that. I pushed it from my mind.
The shooting had stopped, and Ganelon was calling the troops back
and ordering some sort of formation.
I walked forward.

I passed among the Amberites. I passed among the dead. I walked
by my own troops and moved to the edge of the cliff.
In the valley below me, the fighting continued, the cavalry flowing
like turbulent waters, merging, eddying, receding, the infantry still
swarming like insects.

I drew forth the cards I had taken from Benedict. I removed his own
from the deck. It shimmered before me, and after a time there was
contact.

He was mounted on the same red and black horse on which he had

"Yes, I am on the heights," I told him. "We have won. Eric died in the battle."

He continued to stare, waiting for me to go on. His face betrayed no emotion.

"We won because I brought riflemen," I said. "I finally found an explosive agent that functions here." His eyes narrowed and he nodded. I felt that he realized immediately what the stuff was and where it had come from.

"While there are many things I want to discuss with you," I continued, "I want to take care of the enemy first. If you will hold the contact, I will send you several hundred riflemen." He smiled. "Hurry," he said.

I shouted for Ganelon, and he answered me from only a few paces away. I told him to line the troops up, single file. He nodded and went off, shouting orders.

As we waited, I said, "Benedict, Dara is here. She was able to follow you through Shadow when you rode in from Avalon. I want--" He bared his teeth and shouted: "Who the hell is this Dara you keep talking about? I never heard of her till you came along! Please tell me! I would really like to know!"

I smiled faintly.

"It's no good," I said, shaking my head. "I know all about her, though I have told no one else that you've a great granddaughter."

His lips parted involuntarily and his eyes were suddenly wide.

"Corwin," he said, "you are either mad or deceived. I've no such descendant that I know of. As for anyone following me here through Shadow, I came in on Julian's Trump."

Of course. My only excuse for not tripping her up immediately was my preoccupation with the conflict Benedict would have been notified of the battle by means of the Trumps. Why should he waste time traveling when an instant means of transport was at hand?

"Damn!" I said. "She is in Amber by now! Listen, Benedict! I am go-

"Yes."
"Free or confined?"
"Free--more or less. There will be some guards about. Eric still doesn't--didn't trust him." I turned.
"Ganelon," I called out. "Do what Gerard here tells you. He is going to send you to Benedict--down there." I gestured. "See that the men follow Benedict's orders. I have to get into Amber now."
"All right," he called back.
Gerard headed in his direction, and I fanned the Trumps once more. I located Random's and began to concentrate. At that moment, it finally began to rain. I made contact almost immediately.
"Hello, Random," I said, as soon as his image came to life. "Remember me?"
"Where are you?" he asked.
"In the mountains," I told him. "We just won this part of the battle, and I am sending Benedict the help he needs to clean up in the valley. Now, though, I need your help. Bring me across."
"I don't know, Corwin. Eric--"
"Eric is dead."
"Then who is in charge?"
"Who do you think? Bring me across!"
He nodded quickly and extended his hand. I reached out and clasped it. I stepped forward. I stood beside him on a balcony overlooking one of the courtyards. The railing was of white marble, and not much was blooming down below. We were two stories up. I swayed and he seized my arm. "You're hurt!" he said. I shook my head, only just then realizing how tired I was. I had not slept very much the past few nights. That, and everything else. ..
"No," I said, glancing down at the gory mess that was my shirt front.
"Just tired. The blood is Eric's."
He ran a hand through his straw-colored hair and pursed his lips.
"So you did finally nail him..." he said softly. I shook my head again.

"Yes. I am."
When we reached the ground floor, we hurried to the right. There had been another pair of guards at the foot of the stair, but they did not move to stop us.
"Yes," he repeated, as we headed toward the center of the palace.
"You are surprised, aren't you?"
"Yes. I thought you were going to get the year over with and be done with it."
"So did I," he said. "But I fell in love with her. I really did."
"Stranger things have happened."
We crossed the marble dining hall and entered the long, narrow corridor that led far back through shadows and dust. I suppressed a shudder as I thought of my condition the last time I had come this way.
"She really cares for me," he said. "Like nobody else ever has before."
"I'm glad for you," I said.
We reached the door that opened onto the platform hiding the long, spiral stairway down. It was open. We passed through and began the descent.
"I'm not," he said, as we hurried around and around. "I didn't want to fall in love. Not then. We've been prisoners the whole time, you know. How can she be proud of that?"
"That is over now," I said. "You became a prisoner because you followed me and tried to kill Eric, didn't you?"
"Yes. Then she joined me here."
"I will not forget," I said.
We rushed on. It was a great distance down, and there were only lanterns every forty feet or so. It was a huge, natural cavern. I wondered whether anyone knew how many tunnels and corridors it contained. I suddenly felt myself overwhelmed with pity for any poor wretches rotting in its dungeons, for whatever reasons. I resolved to

be there now?"
"If she is not, then I feel she will be along soon."
We finally reached the floor, and I began to race through the shadows toward the proper tunnel.
"Wait!" Random cried.
I halted and turned. It took me a moment to locate him, as he was back behind the stairs. I returned.
My question did not reach my lips. I saw that he knelt beside a large, bearded man.
"Dead," he said. "A very thin blade. Good thrust. Just recently."
"Come on!"

We both ran to the tunnel and turned up it. Its seventh side passage was the one we wanted. I drew Grayswandir as we neared it, for that great, dark, metal-bound door was standing ajar. I sprang through. Random was right behind me. The floor of that enormous room is black and looks to be smooth as glass, although it is not slippery. The Pattern burns upon it, within it, an intricate, shimmering maze of curved lines, perhaps a hundred and fifty yards long. We halted at its edge, staring.
Something was out there, walking it. I felt that old, tingling chill the thing always gives me as I watched. Was it Dara? It was difficult for me to make out the figure within the fountains of sparks that spewed constantly about it. Whoever it was had to be of the blood royal, for it was common knowledge that anyone else would be destroyed by the Pattern, and this individual had already made it past the Grand Curve and was negotiating the complicated series of arcs that led toward the Final Veil.
The firefly form seemed to change shape as it moved. For a time, my senses kept rejecting the tiny subliminal glimpses that I knew must be coming through to me. I heard Random gasp beside me, and it seemed to breach my subconscious dam. A horde of impressions flooded my mind.

struggled now with the Final Veil. My muscles strained forward in unwilling sympathy with the effort. Finally, it burst through. Yes, it was Dara! Tall and magnificent now. Both beautiful and somehow horrible at the same time. The sight of her tore at the fabric of my mind. Her arms were upraised in exultation and an inhuman laughter flowed from her lips. I wanted to look away, yet I could not move. Had I truly held, caressed, made love to--*that*? I was mightily repelled and simultaneously attracted as I had never been before. I could not understand this overwhelming ambivalence.

Then she looked at me. The laughter ceased. Her altered voice rang out. "Lord Corwin, are you liege of Amber now?" From somewhere, I managed a reply. "For all practical purposes," I said.

"Good! Then behold your nemesis!"

"Who are you? *What* are you?"

"You will never know," she said. "It is just exactly too late now."

"I do not understand. What do you mean?"

"Amber," she said, "will be destroyed."

And she vanished.

"What the hell," said Random then, "was that?"

I shook my head.

"I do not know. I really do not know. And I feel that it is the most important thing in the world that we find out."

He gripped my arm.

"Corwin," he said. "She--it--meant it. And it may be possible, you know."

I nodded.

"I know."

"What are we going to do now?"

