

HUGO AND NEBULA AWARD WINNER

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THE COURTS OF CHAOS

Corwin journeys
beyond shadow... to
confront the ultimate
destructive force



The Courts Of Chaos

by Roger Zelazny

Chapter 1

Amber: high and bright atop Kolvir in the middle of the day. A black road: low and sinister through Gamath from Chaos to the south. Me: cursing, pacing and occasionally reading in the library of the palace in Amber. The door to that library: closed and barred.

The mad prince of Amber seated himself at the desk, returned his attention to the opened volume. There was a knock on the door. “Go away!” I said.

“Corwin. It’s me-Random. Open up, huh? I even brought lunch.”

“Just a minute.”

I got to my feet again, rounded the desk, crossed the room. Random nodded when I opened the door. He carried a tray, which he took to a small table near the desk.

“Plenty of food there,” I said.

“I’m hungry, too.”

“So do something about it.”

He did. He carved. He passed me some meat on a slab of bread. He poured wine. We seated ourselves and ate.

“I know you are still mad . . .” he said, after a time. “Aren’t you?”

“Well, maybe I am more used to it. I don’t know. Still . . . Yes. It was sort of abrupt, wasn’t it?”

“Abrupt?”

I took a large swallow of wine.

“It is just like the old days. Worse even. I had actually come to like him when he was playing at being Ganelon. Now that he is back in control he is just as peremptory as ever, he has given us a set of orders he has not bothered to explain and he has disappeared again.”

“He said he would be in touch soon.”

“I imagine he intended that last time, too.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“And he explained nothing about his other absence. In fact, he has not really explained anything.”

“He must have his reasons.”

“I am beginning to wonder, Random. Do you think his mind might finally be going?”

“He was still sharp enough to fool you.”

“That was a combination of low animal cunning and shapeshifting ability.”

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“Yes. It worked.”

“Corwin, could it be that you do not want him to have a plan that might be effective, that you do not want him to be right?”

“That is ridiculous. I want this mess cleared up as much as any of us.”

“Yes, but wouldn’t you rather the answer came from another quarter?”

“What are you getting at?”

“You do not want to trust him.”

“I will admit that. I have not seen him-as himself-in a hell of a long time, and

...

He shook his head.

“That is not what I mean. You are angry that he is back, aren’t you? You hoped that we had seen the last of him.”

I looked away.

“There is that,” I finally said. “But not for a vacant throne, or not just for it. It is him, Random. Him. That’s all.”

“I know,” he said. “But you have to admit he suckered Brand, which is not an easy thing to do. He pulled a stunt I still do not understand, getting you to bring that arm back from Tir-na Nog’th, somehow getting me to pass it along to Benedict, seeing to it that Benedict was in the right place at the proper moment, so that everything worked and he got the Jewel back. He is also still better than we are at Shadow play. He managed it right on Kolvir when he took us to the primal Pattern. I cannot do that. Neither can you. And he was able to whip Gerard. I do not believe that he is slowing down. I think he knows exactly what he is doing, and whether we like it or not, I think he is the only one who can deal with the present situation.”

“You are trying to say that I should trust him?”

“I am trying to say that you have no choice.”

I sighed.

“I guess you’ve put your finger on it,” I said. “No sense in my being bitter. Still . . .”

“The attack order bothers you, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, among other things. If we could wait longer, Benedict could field a greater force. Three days is not much time to get ready for something like this. Not when we are so uncertain about the enemy.”

“But we may not be. He spoke in private with Benedict for a long while.”

“And that is the other thing. These separate orders. This secrecy . . . He is not trusting us any more than he has to.”

Random chuckled. So did I.

“All right,” I said. “Maybe I would not either. But three days to launch a war.” I shook my head. “He had better know something we don’t.”

“I get the impression that it is more a peremptory strike than a war.”

“Only he did not bother to tell us what we are preempting.”

Random shrugged, poured more wine.

“Perhaps he will say when he gets back. You did not get any special orders, did you?”

“Just to stand and wait. What about you?”

He shook his head.

“He said that when the time comes, I will know. At least with Julian, he told him to have his troops ready to move on a moment’s notice.”

“Oh? Aren’t they staying in Arden?”

He nodded.

“When did he say this?”

“After you left. He trumped Julian up here to give him the message, and they rode off together. I heard Dad say that he would ride partway back with him.”

“Did they take the eastern trail over Kolvir?”

“Yes. I saw them off.”

“Interesting. What else did I miss?”

He shifted in his seat.

“The part that bothers me,” he said. “After Dad had mounted and waved a good-bye, he looked back at me and said, ‘And keep an eye on Martin.’ “

“That is all?”

“That is all. But he was laughing as he said it.”

“Just natural suspicion at a newcomer, I guess.”

“Then why the laugh?”

“I give up.”

I cut a piece of cheese and ate it.

“Might not be a bad idea, though. It might not be suspicion. Maybe he feels Martin needs to be protected from something. Or both. Or neither. You know how he sometimes is.”

Random stood.

“I had not thought through to the alternative. Come with me now, huh?” he said. “You have been up here all morning.”

“All right.”

I got to my feet, buckled on Grayswandir.

“Where is Martin, anyway?”

“I left him down on the first floor. He was talking with Gerard”

“He is in good hands, then. Is Gerard going to be staying here, or will he be returning to the fleet?”

“I do not know. He would not discuss his orders.”

We left the room. We headed for the stairway.

On the way down, I heard some small commotion from below and I quickened my pace.

I looked over the railing and saw a throng of guards at the entrance to the throne room, along with the massive figure of Gerard. All of them had their backs to us. I leaped down the final stairs. Random was not far behind me.

I pushed my way through.

“Gerard, what is happening?” I asked.

“Damned if I know,” he said. “Look for yourself. But there is no getting in.”

He moved aside and I took a step forward. Then another. And that was it. It was as if I were pushing against a slightly resilient, totally invisible wall. Beyond was a sight that tied my memory and feelings into a knot. I stiffened, as fear took hold of me by the neck, clasped my hands. No mean trick, that.

Martin, smiling, still held a Trump in his left hand, and Benedict—apparently recently summoned—stood before him. A girl was nearby, on the dais, beside the throne, facing away. Both men appeared to be speaking, but I could not hear the words.

Finally, Benedict turned and seemed to address the girl. After a time, she appeared to be answering him. Martin moved off to her left. Benedict mounted the dais as she spoke. I could see her face then. The exchange continued.

“That girl looks somewhat familiar,” said Gerard, who had moved forward and now stood at my side.

“You might have gotten a glimpse of her as she rode past us,” I told him, “the day Eric died. It’s Dara.”

I heard his sudden intake of breath.

“Dara!” he said. “Then you . . .” His voice faded.

“I was not lying,” I said. “She is real.”

“Martin!” cried Random, who had moved up on my right. “Martin! What’s going on!”

There was no response.

“I don’t think he can hear you,” Gerard said. “This barrier seems to have cut us off completely.”

Random strained forward, his hands pushing against something unseen.

“Let’s all of us give it a shove,” he said.

So I tried again. Gerard also threw his weight against the invisible wall.

After half a minute without success, I eased back.

“No good,” I said. “We can’t move it.”

“What is the damned thing?” Random asked. “What is holding-“

I’d had a hunch-only that, though-as to what might be going on. And only because of the deja vu character of the entire piece. Now, though . . . Now I clasped my hand to my scabbard, to assure myself that Grayswandir still bung at my side. It did.

Then how could I explain the presence of my distinctive blade, its elaborate tracery gleaming for all to see, hanging where it had suddenly appeared, without support, in the air before the throne, its point barely touching Dara’s throat? I could not.

But it was too similar to what had happened that night in the dream city in the sky, Tir-na Nog’th, to be a coincidence. Here were none of the trappings-the darkness, the confusion, the heavy shadows, the tumultuous emotions I had known-and yet the piece was set much as it had been that night. It was very similar. But not precisely so. Benedict’s stance seemed somewhat off-farther back, his body angled differently. While I could not read her lips, I wondered whether Dara was asking the same strange questions, I doubted it. The

tableau-like, yet unlike, that which I had experienced-had probably been colored at the other end-that is, if there were any connection at all-by the effects of Tir-na Nog'th's powers upon my mind at that time.

"Corwin," Random said, "that looks like Grayswandir hanging in front of her."

"It does, doesn't it?" I said. "But as you can see, I am wearing my blade."

"There can't be another just like it . . . can there? Do you know what is happening?"

"I am beginning to feel as if I may," I said. "Whatever, I am powerless to stop it."

Benedict's blade suddenly came free and engaged the other, so like my own. In a moment, he was fighting an invisible opponent.

"Give him hell, Benedict!" Random shouted.

"It is no use," I said. "He is about to be disarmed."

"How can you know?" Gerard asked.

"Somehow, that is me in there, fighting with him," I said. "This is the other end of my dream in Tir-na Nog'th. I do not know how he managed it, but this is the price for Dad's recovering the Jewel."

"I do not follow you," he said.

I shook my head.

"I do not pretend to understand how it is being done," I told him. "But we will not be able to enter until two things have vanished from that room."

"What two things?"

"Just watch."