

ROGER ZELAZNY



*Sign
of the
Unicorn*

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by Roger Zelazny

Chapter 1

I ignored the questions in the eyes of the groom as I lowered the grisly parcel and turned the horse in for care and maintenance. My cloak could not really conceal the nature of its contents as I slung the guts over my shoulder and stamped off toward the rear entrance to the palace. Hell would soon be demanding its paycheck.

I skirted the exercise area and made my way to the trail that led toward the southern end of the palace gardens. Fewer eyes along that route. I would still be spotted, but it would be a lot less awkward than going in the front way, where things are always busy. Damn.

And again, damn. Of troubles I considered myself amply possessed. But those who have do seem to get. Some spiritual form of compound interest, I suppose.

There were a few idlers beside the fountain at the far end of the garden. Also, a couple of guards were passing among the bushes near the trail. The guards saw me coming, held a brief discussion, and looked the other way. Prudent.

Me, back less than a week. Most things, still unresolved. The court of Amber, full of suspicion and unrest. This, now: a death to further jeopardize the brief, unhappy prereign of Corwin 1: me.

Time now to do something I should have done right away. But there had been so many things to do, from the very first. It was not as if I had been nodding, as I saw it. I had assigned priorities and acted on them. Now, though...

I crossed the garden, out of the shade and into the slanting sunlight. I swung up the wide, curving stair. A guard snapped to attention as I entered the palace. I made for the rear stairway, then up to the second floor. Then the third.

From the right, my brother Random stepped out of his suite and into the hallway.

“Corwin!” he said, studying my face. “What’s the matter? I saw you from the balcony and-“

“Inside,” I said, gesturing with my eyes. “We are going to have a private conference. Now.”

He hesitated, regarding my burden.

“Let’s make it two rooms up,” he said. “Okay? Vialle’s in here.”

“All right.”

He led the way, opened the door. I entered the small sitting room, sought a likely spot, dropped the body.

Random stared at the bundle.

“What am I supposed to do?” he asked.

“Unwrap the goodies,” I said, “and take a look.”

He knelt and undid the cloak. He folded it back. “Dead all right,” he observed. “What’s the problem?”

“You did not look closely enough,” I said. “Peel back an eyelid. Open the mouth and look at the teeth. Feel the spurs on the backs of the hands. Count the joints in the fingers. Then you tell me about the problem.”

He began doing these things. As soon as he looked at the hands he stopped and nodded. “All right,” he said. “I remember.”

“Remember out loud.”

“It was back at Flora’s place. . .”

“That was where I first saw anyone like this,” I said. “They were after you, though. I never did find out why.”

“That’s right,” he said. “I never got a chance to tell you about it. We weren’t

together all that long. Strange . . . Where did this one come from?”

I hesitated, torn between pushing him from his story and telling him mine. Mine won out because it was mine and very immediate.

I sighed and sank into a chair.

“We’ve just lost us another brother,” I said. “Caine is dead. I got there a bit too late. That thing-person- did it. I wanted it alive, for obvious reasons. But it put up quite a fight. I didn’t have much of a choice.”

He whistled softly, seated himself in the chair opposite me.

“I see,” he said very softly.

I studied his face. Was that the faintest of smiles waiting in the wings to enter and meet my own? Quite possibly.

“No,” I said flatly. “If it were otherwise, I would have arranged for a lot less doubt as to my innocence. I’m telling you what really happened.”

“All right,” he said. “Where is Caine?”

“Under a layer of sod, near the Grove of the Unicorn.”

“That looks suspicious right there,” he said. “Or will. To the others.”

I nodded.

“I know. I had to hide the body and cover it in the meantime, though. I couldn’t just bring him back and start parrying questions. Not when there were important facts waiting for me, in your head.”

“Okay,” he said. “I don’t know how important they are, but they’re yours. But don’t leave me hanging, huh? How did this thing happen?”

“It was right after lunch,” I said. “I had eaten down at the harbor with Gerard. Afterward, Benedict brought me topside through his Trump. Back in my rooms, I found a note which apparently had been slipped in under the door. It

requested a private meeting, later in the afternoon, at the Grove of the Unicorn. It was signed 'Caine.' "

"Have you still got the note?"

"Yes." I dug it out of my pocket and passed it to him. "Here."

He studied it and shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "It could be his writing-if he were in a hurry-but I don't think it is."

I shrugged. I took the note back, folded it, put it away.

"Whatever, I tried to reach him with his Trump, to save myself the ride. But he wasn't receiving. I guessed it was to maintain secrecy as to his whereabouts, if it was all that important. So I got a horse and rode on down."

"Did you tell anyone where you were going?"

"Not a soul. I did decide to give the horse a workout, though, so I rode along at a pretty good clip. I didn't see it happen, but I saw him lying there as I came into the wood. His throat had been cut, and there was a disturbance off in the bushes some distance away. I rode the guy down, jumped him, fought with him, had to kill him. We didn't engage in any conversation while this was going on."

"You're sure you got the right guy?"

"As sure as you can be under such circumstances. His trail went back to Caine. He had fresh blood on his garments."

"Might have been his own."

"Look again. No wounds. I broke his neck. Of course I remembered where I had seen his like before, so I brought him right to you. Before you tell me about it, though, there was one more thing-just for a clincher."

I withdrew the second note, passed it over.

“The creature had this on its person. I presume it had removed it from Caine.”

Random read it, nodded, and handed it back.

“From you, to Caine, asking to be met there. Yes, I see. Needless to say. . .”

“Needless to say,” I finished. “And it does look a bit like my writing-at first glance, anyway.”

“I wonder what would have happened if you had gotten there first?”

“Probably nothing,” I said. “Alive and looking bad-that seems how they wanted me. The trick was to get us there in the proper order, and I didn’t hurry quite enough to miss what was bound to follow.”

He nodded.

“Granting the tight scheduling,” he said, “it had to be someone on the scene, here in the palace. Any ideas?”

I chuckled and reached for a cigarette. I lit it and chuckled again.

“I’m just back. You have been here all along,” I said. “Which one hates me the most these days?”

“That is an embarrassing question, Corwin,” he stated. “Everyone’s down on you for something. Ordinarily, I would nominate Julian. Only it doesn’t seem to hold up here.”

“Why not?”

“He and Caine got along very well. For years now. They had been looking out for each other, hanging around together. Pretty thick. Julian is cold and petty and just as nasty as you remember. But if he liked anybody, he liked Caine. I don’t think he’d do it to him, not even to get at you. After all, he probably could have found plenty of other ways if that was all he wanted.”

I sighed.

“Who’s next?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

“Okay. How do you read the reactions to this?”

“You’re screwed, Corwin. Everyone is going to think you did it, no matter what you say.”

I nodded at the corpse. Random shook his head.

“That could easily be some poor clod you dug up out of Shadow to take the blame.”

“I know,” I said. “Funny, coming back to Amber as I did, I arrived at an ideal time for positioning myself advantageously.”

“A perfect time,” Random agreed. “You didn’t even have to kill Eric to get what you wanted. That was a stroke of luck.”

“Yes. Still, it is no secret that that is what I came to do, and it is only a matter of time before my troops-foreign, specially armed, and quartered here-are going to start provoking some very bad feelings. Only the presence of an external threat has saved me from that so far. And then there are the things I am suspected of having done before my return-like murdering Benedict’s retainers. Now this. . .”

“Yes,” Random said, “I saw it coming as soon as you told me. When you and Bleys attacked years ago, Gerard deployed part of the fleet so that it was out of your way. Caine, on the other hand, engaged you with his vessels and scuttled you. Now that he is gone, I imagine you will put Gerard in command of the entire fleet.”

“Who else? He is the only man for the job.”

“Nevertheless...”

“Nevertheless. Admitted. If I were going to kill anyone person to strengthen my position, Caine would be the logical choice. That’s the real, damning

truth.”

“How do you propose handling this?”

“Tell everyone what happened and try to discover who was behind it. Have you any better suggestions?”

“I’ve been trying to think how I could alibi you. But it does not look promising.”

I shook my head.

“You are too close to me. No matter how good we made it sound, it would probably have the opposite effect.”

“Have you considered admitting to it?”

“Yes. But self-defense is out. With a cut throat, it had to be a matter of surprise. And I have no stomach for starting off with the alternative: hoke up some evidence that he was up to something rotten and say I did it for the good of Amber. I flatly refuse to take on fake guilt under those terms. I’d wind up with a bad odor that way, too.”

“But with a real tough reputation.”

“It’s the wrong kind of tough for the sort of show I want to run. No, that’s out.”

“That covers everything, then-just about.”

“What do you mean ‘just about’?”

He studied his left thumbnail through slitted eyes.

“Well, it occurs to me that if there is anyone else you are anxious to get out of the picture, now is the time to consider that a frame can often be shifted.”

I thought about it and finished my cigarette.

“Not bad,” I said, “but I can’t spare any more brothers at the moment. Not even Julian. Anyhow, he’s the least frameable.”

“It need not be family,” he said. “Plenty of noble Amberites around with possible motives. Take Sir Reginald-“

“Forget it. Random The reframing is out, too.”

“Okay. I’ve exhausted my little gray cells, then.”

“Not the ones in charge of memory, I hope.”

“All right.”

He sighed. He stretched. He got to his feet, stepped over the room’s other occupant, and made his way to the window. Drawing back the drapes, he stared out for a time.

“All right,” he repeated. “There’s a lot to tell. . . .”

Then he remembered out loud.