

The Hand of Oberon



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by Roger Zelazny

Chapter 1

A bright flash of insight, to match that peculiar sun . . .

There it was. . . . Displayed within that light, a thing I had only seen self-illuminated in darkness up until then: the Pattern, the great Pattern of Amber cast upon an oval shelf beneath/above a strange sky-sea.

. . . And I knew, perhaps by that within me which bound us, that this had to be the real one. Which meant that the Pattern in Amber was but its first shadow. Which meant-

Which meant that Amber itself was not carried over into places beyond the realm of Amber, Rebma, and Tir-na Nog'th. Meaning, then, that this place to which we had come was, by the law of precedence and configuration, the real Amber.

I turned to a smiling Ganelon, his beard and wild hair molten in the merciless light.

“How did you know?” I asked him.

“You know I am a very good guesser, Corwin,” he replied, “and I recall everything you ever told me about how things work in Amber: how its shadow and those of your struggles are cast across the worlds. I often wondered, in thinking of the black road, whether anything could have cast such a shadow into Amber itself. And I imagined that such a something would have to be extremely basic, powerful, and secret.” He gestured at the scene before us. “Like that.”

“Continue,” I said.

His expression changed and he shrugged.

“So there had to be a layer of reality deeper than your Amber,” he explained, “where the dirty work was done. Your patron beast led us to what seems to

be such a place, and that blot on the Pattern looks to be the dirty work. You agreed.”

I nodded.

“It was your perceptiveness rather than the conclusion itself which stunned me so,” I said.

“You beat me to it,” admitted Random, off to my right, “but the feeling has found its way into my intestines-to put it delicately. I do believe that somehow that is the basis of our world down there.”

“An outsider can sometimes see things better than one who is part of them,” Ganelon offered.

Random glanced at me and returned his attention to the spectacle.

“Do you think things will change any more,” he asked, “if we go down for a closer look?”

“Only one way to find out,” I said.

“Single file, then,” Random agreed. “I’ll lead.”

“All right.”

Random guided his mount to the right, the left, the right, in a long series of switchbacks which zigged us and zagged us across most of the face of the wall. Continuing in the order we had maintained all day, I followed him and Ganelon came last.

“Seems stable enough now,” Random called back.

“So far,” I said.

“Some sort of opening in the rocks below.”

I leaned forward. There was a cave mouth back to the right, on level with the oval plain. Its situation was such that it had been hidden from sight when we

had occupied our higher position.

“We pass fairly near it,” I said.

“-quickly, cautiously, and silently,” Random added, drawing his blade.

I unsheathed Grayswandir, and one turn back above me Ganelon drew his own weapon.

We did not pass the opening, but turned leftward once more before we came to it. We moved within ten or fifteen feet of it, however, and I detected an unpleasant odor which I could not identify. The horses must have done a better job of it, though, or been pessimists by nature, because they flattened their ears, widened their nostrils, and made alarmed noises while turning against the reins. They calmed, however, as soon as we had made the turn and begun moving away once again. They did not suffer a relapse until we reached the end of our descent and moved to approach the damaged Pattern. They refused to go near it.

Random dismounted. He advanced to the edge of the design, paused and stared. After a time, he spoke without looking back.

“It follows that the damage was deliberate,” he said, “from everything else that we know.”

“It seems to follow,” I said.

“It is also obvious that we were brought here for a reason.”

“I’d say so.”

“Then it does not take too much imagination to conclude that our purpose for being here is to determine how the Pattern was damaged and what might be done to repair it.”

“Possibly. What is your diagnosis?”

“Nothing yet.”

He moved along the perimeter of the figure, off to the right where the smear-effect began. I resheathed my blade and prepared to dismount. Ganelon reached over and took hold of my shoulder.

“I can make it myself-“ I began.

But, “Corwin,” he said, ignoring my words, “there does appear to be a small irregularity out toward the middle of the Pattern. It does not look like something that belongs . . .”

“Where?”

He pointed and I followed the gesture.

There was some foreign object near the center. A stick? A stone? A stray bit of paper . . . ? It was impossible to tell from this distance.

“I see it,” I said.

We dismounted and headed toward Random, who by then was crouched at the extreme right of the figure, examining the discoloration.

“Ganelon’s spotted something out toward the center,” I said.

Random nodded.

“I’ve noticed it,” he replied. “I was just trying to decide on the best way to head out for a better look. I do not relish the notion of walking a broken Pattern. On the other hand, I was wondering what I would be laying myself open to if I tried heading in across the blackened area. What do you think?”

“Walking what there is of the Pattern would take some time,” I said, “if the resistance is on par with what it is at home. Also, we have been taught that it is death to stray from it-and this setup would force me to leave it when I reach the blot. On the other hand, as you say, I might be alerting our enemies by treading on the black. So-“

“So neither of you is going to do it,” Ganelon interrupted. “I am.”

Then, without waiting for a reply, he took a running leap into the black sector, raced along it toward the center, paused long enough to pick up some small object, turned and headed back. Moments later, he stood before us.

“That was a risky thing to do,” Random said. He nodded.

“But you two would still be debating it if I hadn’t.”

He raised his hand and extended it.

“Now, what do you make of this?”

He was holding a dagger. Impaled on it was a rectangle of stained pasteboard. I took them from him.

“Looks like a Trump,” Random said.

“Yes.”

I worked the card loose, smoothed down the torn sections. The man I regarded upon it was half familiar-meaning of course that he was also half strange. Light, straight hair, a trifle sharp-featured, a small smile, somewhat slight of build.

I shook my head.

“I do not know him,” I said.

“Let me see.” Random took the card from me, frowned at it.

“No,” he said after a time. “I don’t either. It almost seems as though I should, but. . . No.”

At that moment, the horses renewed their complaints much more forcefully. And we needed but turn part way to learn the cause of their discomfort, in that it had chosen that moment to emerge from the cave.

“Damn,” said Random. I agreed with him.

Ganelon cleared his throat, took forth his blade.

“Anyone know what it is?” he asked quietly.

My first impression of the beast was that it was snakelike, both from its movements and because of the fact that its long thick tail seemed more a continuation of its long thin body than a mere appendage. It moved on four double-jointed legs, however, large-footed and wickedly clawed. Its narrow head was beaked, and it swung from side to side as it advanced, showing us one pale blue eye and then the other. Large wings were folded against its sides, purple and leathery. It possessed neither hair nor feathers, though there were scaled areas across its breast, shoulders, back, and along the length of its tail. From beak-bayonet to twisting tail-tip it seemed a little over three meters. There was a small tinkling sound as it moved, and I caught a flash of something bright at its throat.

“Closest thing I know,” said Random, “is a heraldic beast-the griffin. Only this one is bald and purple.”

“Definitely not our national bird,” I added, drawing Grayswandir and swinging its point into line with the creature’s head.

The beast darted a red, forked tongue. It raised its wings a few inches, then let them fall. When its head swung to the right its tail moved to the left, then left and right, right and left-producing a near-hypnotic, flowing effect as it advanced.

It seemed more concerned with the horses than with us, however, for its course was directed well past us toward the spot where our mounts stood quivering and stamping. I moved to interpose myself. At that point, it reared.

Its wings went up and out, spreading like a pair of slack sails suddenly caught by a gust of wind. It was back on its hind legs and towering above us, seeming to occupy at least four times the space it had previously. And then it shrieked, a god-awful, hunting scream or challenge that left my ears ringing. With that, it snapped those wings downward and sprang, becoming temporarily airborne.

The horses bolted and ran. The beast was beyond our reach. It was only then that I realized what the bright flash and the tinkling had represented. The thing was tethered, by means of a long chain running back into the cave. The exact length of its leash was immediately a question of more than academic interest.

I turned as it passed, hissing, flapping, and falling, beyond us. It had not possessed sufficient momentum to obtain true flight in that brief rush upward. I saw that Star and Firedrake were retreating toward the far end of the oval. Random's mount Iago, on the other hand, had bolted in the direction of the Pattern.

The beast touched ground again, turned, as if to pursue Iago, appeared to study us once more, and froze. It was much nearer this time—under four meters—and it cocked its head, showing us its right eye, then opened its beak and made a soft cawing noise.

“What say we rush it now?” said Random.

“No. Wait. There is something peculiar about its behavior.”

It had dropped its head while I was speaking, spreading its wings downward. It struck the ground three times with its beak and looked up again. Then it drew its wings part way back toward its body. Its tail twitched once, then swung more vigorously from side to side. It opened its beak and repeated the cawing sound.

At that moment we were distracted.

Iago had entered the Pattern, well to the side of the darkened area. Five or six meters into it, standing obliquely across the lines of power, he was caught near one of the Veil points like an insect on a piece of flypaper. He cried loudly as the sparks came up about him and his mane rose and stood erect.

Immediately, the sky began to darken directly overhead. But it was no cloud of water vapor which had begun to coalesce. Rather, it was a perfectly circular formation which had appeared, red at the center, yellow nearer the edges, turning in a clockwise direction. A sound like a single bell chime

followed by the growl of a bull-roarer suddenly came to our ears.

Iago continued his struggles, first freeing his right front foot, then entangling it again as he freed the left, neighing wildly the while. The sparks were up to his shoulders by then, and he shook them like raindrops from his body and neck, his entire form taking on a soft, buttery glow.

The roaring increased in volume and small lightnings began to play at the heart of the red thing above us. A rattling noise caught my attention at that moment, and I glanced downward to discover that the purple griffin had slithered past and moved to interpose itself between us and the loud red phenomenon. It crouched like a gargoyle, facing away from us, watching the spectacle.

Just then, Iago freed both front feet and reared. There was something insubstantial about him by then, what with his brightness and the spark-shot indistinctness of his outline. He might have neighed at that moment, but all other sounds were submerged by the incessant roar from above.

A funnel descended from the noisy formation-bright, flashing, wailing now, and tremendously fast. It touched the rearing horse, and for a moment his outline expanded enormously, becoming increasingly tenuous in direct proportion to this effect. And then he was gone. For a brief interval, the funnel remained stationary, like a perfectly balanced top. Then the sound began to diminish.

The trunk raised itself, slowly, to a point but a small distance-perhaps the height of a man-above the Pattern. Then it snapped upward as quickly as it had descended.

The wailing ceased. The roaring began to subside. The miniature lightnings faded within the circle. The entire formation began to pale and slow. A moment later, it was but a bit of darkness; another moment and it was gone.

No trace of Iago remained anywhere that I could see.

“Don’t ask me,” I said when Random turned toward me. “I don’t know either.”