

THE DYING OF EMBER

(A Parody of Amber, with Apologies to Roger Zelazny)

Kevin Knight

c 1988 I

I woke up slowly, the smell of beer meandering through my nasal passages. I seemed to me that I had been in this position -- lying flat on my back -- for quite some time: weeks perhaps. I opened my eyes slowly. White tiles of a bathroom wall were all that I saw.

I knew at that moment: someone was out to get me.

My skull was pounding as I tried to sit up. I was only partially successful in this endeavor, for my head crashed into a steel pipe, and I was sent flying back into the cold tile floor.

Whoever it was, they'd have to stop.

There were beer bottles all around me. The ceiling was spinning slowly. At last, I managed to stand.

"Corbin?" It was a woman's voice, and it penetrated to the very core of my brain. I held onto my temples and stumbled backwards. "Corbin?" The voice grew louder and more painful. I had to sit down on the tub. A strikingly beautiful woman entered the bathroom just then. She seemed to be unarmed, wearing only a thin robe. I continued to hold my head with one hand, making a "shhh" motion with the index finger of my other hand. She nodded, smiling.

"I tried to move you last night, Corbin, but you seem to be much heavier than you look. The bathroom floor must have been uncomfortable."

Corbin . . . Corbin. The name sounded familiar. But was it my name? I needed facts!

"What happened just before I . . . lost consciousness?" I asked.

"Well, you told everyone to have a good time, and you told me I had really great--"

"Wait! Everyone, you say?"

"Everyone at the party."

Now I was getting somewhere! Yes, there had been a party. Several people at the party had been out to get me, but I, being naturally suspicious, had

managed to eliminate them before they had a chance to do me harm. But why was I there in the first place? Why was I naturally suspicious? Where did I live? Who were my parents? How much money did I make a year? Answers, I had none.

"Let me get some ice for your head," she said.

"No!" I grabbed the woman by the collar of her robe. "Tell me how I got to the party last night."

She suddenly looked very afraid. "Your sister brought you," she said.

Sister?

"I know that. Which one?" I tried.

"Which what?"

"Which sister?"

"You only have one."

Somehow, I knew she was lying. I had six sisters, two of which were dead.

"You're lying. I have six sisters, two of which are dead."

"Yeah, OK. Anyway, it was Florida. Can I make you some breakfast?"

I wasn't getting much out of the woman, and besides, I was hungry. So I said, "Sure," and I let her go.

The woman's name was Jackie, I learned, and she made an excellent omelette. While she was doing so, I sneaked a look through her address book. There was an entry for Florida, and I memorized the address. During breakfast, Jackie said, "You seem to be naturally suspicious. Why is that?"

The first words out of my mouth were, "It runs in the family." It had a ring of truth to it.

After breakfast, I tied Jackie to a chair and took all of the money that was in her purse. I should have killed her, I know, but I had grown softer over the years.

My first stop was a barber shop on Ninth Street.

Afterwards, I bought a new shirt and changed, because I hate it when little bits of hair get down the back of my shirt, although I'm not sure why you would be interested.

I also bought a gun.

I didn't know much. Jackie had called me Corbin, but I was fairly sure this wasn't my real name. I must have been using an alias. But why? I looked at my gun. It felt light in my hand. I knew quite a bit about it. I had used one like it before, I knew. Walking through the park, I broke it down and reassembled it. What was my profession? Military? Antique dealer?

No! A spy, perhaps? It was starting to come back to me now. The name 'Jason' vaulted into my brain. That was it! I was Jason Bourne, master spy, sent to Europe as bait for Carlos the assassin . . . I was shot during a storm, on a boat off the coast of France. I was being used by the CIA, hunted by the KGB and Interpol. I kidnapped a girl at an economics conference, fell in love with her, found a Swiss bank account . . .

Then the thought came to assail me: Maybe not . It was familiar, almost too familiar. I checked my body for scars. I had none. I had never had microfilm sewn into my body. Someone else had, I felt, but that someone wasn't me.

I finally reached the house of my sister.

Her maid answered the door.

"Hello," I said, "I'm Florida's long lost brother, and I'd like to see her."

After a moment, a tall blonde approached. I recognized her vaguely.

"Corbin," she stuttered. "I'm . . . surprised to see you."

"And I you."

"But this is my house. Why should you be surprised?"

I was trying to fake it, but it wasn't easy.

"Mind if I come in?"

"No, please do."

I walked in. The place was well decorated, and I suddenly remembered that my sister had a flair for such things. We sat down around a heavy oak table.

"Why have you come . . . here?" she asked.

It seemed that she possessed the same natural suspiciousness which I had come to notice in

myself.

"I think you know," I said.

"I don't," she countered.

"You're lying," I said.

We sat in silence for a moment. I needed facts, I wasn't going to get them like this.

"I came because . . . I was hungry," I said. Which was true, actually. I noticed that, in addition to being naturally suspicious, I seemed to possess a voracious appetite.

"Oh!" she said, brightening up. "I'll have Carmel make us some lunch."

We sat in mutual suspiciousness until Carmel brought the meal. There was bread, fruit, wine, and steaks as thick as I had ever seen.

Florida suddenly looked at me very seriously and said, "Corbin, are you really going to try it?"

I looked at the steaks. They were pink and juicy. I was very hungry indeed. "Are you kidding? Of course I'm going to try it," I said. I reached out for the steaks with my fork and knife.

Suddenly she was kissing me. "Oh, I knew it! Good luck, Corbin, you're going to need it. You'll get all the help I can give you. Erik is strong, but maybe you can get at him through Boolean or Crane, and then Jerry would come over and help once he saw what was happening. Ember needs you, and I'll do everything I can . . ."

"Shut up for a minute, will you?" I told her. I needed to think. Ember! It meant something big. Yes, that was the key! There was something there, something incredibly important!

After lunch, Florida left on an errand. I strolled through the house, looking for clues that would allow me to establish my identity. I started in the library.

Florida books were mostly picture books. No voracious reader, she. But I was more interested in her desk than her books. There were some papers and bills and whatnot, but behind the drawer was a secret compartment. It was locked and had wires running out to three separate alarm systems, but I disabled it quickly. In the compartment was a deck of cards. I reached in and withdrew them.

The cards were cold to my touch. I took them to the kitchen and put them in the toaster oven for a while until they reached room temperature. Then I began to go through them.

On the first card was a portrait of a tall man dressed in brown. His name was Benedictus. I got the vague impression that he could beat the shit out of me. He was my brother.

From the second card, a man dressed in white armor looked up at me. He was my brother Boolean. I could beat the shit out of this one.

On the next card was Erik. He had dark hair and a wet beard. I thought very hard, but I could not remember why his beard was wet. I knew he could beat the shit out of me, because he had done it once or twice. I hated him.

Then came Blaise, another brother of mine. Memories flooded into my head. Blaise was very much like myself, so I concluded that neither one of us could beat the shit out of each other, although we might enjoy trying.

Next I saw Randy, Band, and Crane. Randy played the drums and was a card player, I remembered. Band was into magic, and Crane had ambitions of his own, albeit long-term ones. Ambitions? Toward what end? I didn't know.

Then I saw myself. I was dressed in black and silver, with a clasp for my cloak in the shape of a silver rose. I looked strong, confident. I felt then that should be with my brothers, in Ember!

A heavy-set man was depicted on the next card. This was Jerry, slow but strong. I could spell words that Jerry couldn't, but that didn't change the fact that he could really beat the shit out of me.

The next four cards were of my sisters, Florida, Lou Ellen, Didi, and Felona. I could beat the shit out of all of them, but I wouldn't, because that would just be mean. Besides, Didi, I remembered, was my favorite sibling. Felona was some sort of sorceress. Lou Ellen had green hair that looked a bit like seaweed.

I realized that we were all one big family, an important family. I needed to get back to the center of things, to Ember. Ember was where we lived.

The phone rang.

I watched it ring. Then I picked it up suspiciously.

"Hello?" I tried.

"Hello. Is Florida there?"

"No," I said. "May I ask who is calling?"

"Yes."

"Who is calling?"

"It's Randy. Who's this?"

"Corbin."

There was silence.

Finally, "It's been a long time," he said.

"Yes," I replied.

"Well, I was just calling to ask Florida if I could come by tonight with a few of my friends. We need a poker table."

"You got an extra chair for me?" I asked.

"Sure thing, brother," he said.

"See you at eight."

"OK, bye."

"Bye."

Was Randy out to get me? Was he working for *them*? I didn't think so, but I felt for my gun just in case. Then I heard some noise from the front of the house. I hastily returned the cards to their secret compartment. I greeted Florida at the top of the stairs. She looked weary.

"The Road to Ember is . . . unpleasant," she said, avoiding my eyes.

"Of course it is. You seem to be missing some cards," I said.

She looked at me and her face turned red. "You took them, you thief!"

"No, sister, I put them back," I told her.

"Why?"

"I don't know." I wished I hadn't. "In any case, we're having company tonight."

"Who?"

"Randy. He's bringing some friends over for a poker game."

"No he isn't."

"Yes he is."

"No, he isn't," she said.

"Yes, he is," I said.

"Last time he was here, his buddies wrecked the place and left it smelling like cigar smoke for two months."

"That's not my problem."

She sneered and strode away.

"What's for dinner?" I called out after her. I heard her lock herself in her room, and that was the last I heard from her for quite some time.

I fixed myself dinner as I waited for Randy to arrive.

The knock eventually came, and I answered it. A young man, short, with shifty eyes, stood on the doorstep. He looked genuinely shocked to see me. I had to play it cool, had to be very general in my remarks.

"Nice jacket," I tried.

"Thanks," he said.

"Randy," I said, "tell your friends to go home. We're going to go for a little ride."

"Okay, brother. Beat it, guys. Where are we going?"

"Where else?"

"You want to go back?"

Maybe, I thought.

"Maybe," I said.

I grabbed some car keys from a hook on the kitchen door. "Florida? Mind if I borrow the car?" There was no answer, so I took that to mean yes. We hopped into Florida's Mercedes. I let Randy drive. I'd probably remember how to get to Ember once we got on the highway, but I wasn't sure whether to turn left or right out of the driveway.

"Are you with me?" I asked him.

"I am always able to detect the quarter of the wind. I'll not sail against it," he said.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It is a nautical analogy I learned from Crane. It means, 'yes', but it sounds a lot better."

I looked out the window. The sky was green and the trees were a pale shade of blue. I watched Randy's face. The more he concentrated, the more the environment changed.

We had to stop to fill the car with gas. When the tank was full, Randy pulled out a gun and shot the attendant, the manager, and two women at the Coke machine. I was puzzled, but said nothing. It seemed to be rash behavior under the circumstances, but then again, the years had softened me.

"Randy," I said. "I have a confession to make."

Suddenly his .44 magnum was in my face.

"If you are planning anything funny, I will blow your brains out."

He was my brother. It may seem strange to you that we go around threatening to blow each other's

brains out, but that is the way of our kind.

"I do not know who I am," I said flatly.

The car screeched to a halt.

"What?" he asked.

"I have lost my memory. I have been faking it. I do not know who I am."

"You're kidding."

"It is no joke. Where do we go from here?"

"Well, there is a way for you to regain your memory, but it may be dangerous, especially if you are not who you think you are."

"I will do it."

"You must walk the Design."

The Design! The word alone struck me with fear to the very essence of my being.

"In Ember?" I asked.

"No, Erik has the Design under guard there. We must go to Rebme, the undersea kingdom. Queen More will likely help you, although she would feed me to the fishes. I can accompany you to the shore, but no further."

"Let us go, then, brother," I said. Randy started the car.

"We are travelling through Shade," he said. "Do you remember what that is?"

"No clue," said I.

"Ember casts an infinity of Shades," he said.

"That sounds like an axiom," I replied.

"All roads lead to Ember," he said.

"Another axiom," I said.

"A penny saved is a penny earned," he said.

"I *have* heard that one."

"We are in the Forest of Garden now, very close to Ember," he said.

"Who's the guy on the horse?" I asked.

Outside the window of the Mercedes, a man dressed in white, with long black hair, rode a mammoth horse, keeping pace with us.

Randy looked out for a moment and said, "That is Boolean. You once shattered his almost legendary self-control."

"Stop the car," I said.

We slowed and came to a halt. Boolean

dismounted and we got out.

"Corbin?" he said. "Is that you?"

"Indeed, it is I. I have returned to, to . . ."

". . . to seize the throne of Ember!" finished Randy.

The throne of Ember? It sounded like a good plan, and besides, I didn't have anything better to do.

"Yeah!" I said.

Boolean squinted at me. He did not smile or frown.

I struck an aggressive pose.

I stuck my tongue out at him. I poked him on the shoulder. I teased him about his long hair. I called him names. But he did not move.

At length, he spoke.

"Corbin, I see you are bent on testing my almost legendary self- control. It is useless."

"Oh well, it is fun to try," I said. "Who is in charge around here?"

"I rule in the Forest of Garden," said Boolean.

"No, no, I mean in Ember."

Erik is in command at present."

"Where's Dad?"

"Disappeared."

"Well, you tell Erik that I'm coming to get him, you hear?"

"I'll do that." With that, Boolean mounted and rode off.

Randy said to me, "We had better get to Rebme before he tells Erik that you're coming to get him. We will have to walk from here on out."

"Why?"

"Gunpowder is inactive in Amber," he said.

"Oh. Is there a book where all these axioms are written down?" I asked.

"It will come back to you," he said.

We hiked through the woods for a while, then came to a clearing. I could see the beach in front of us. Randy led the way. Off to the left, I saw soldiers in red approaching.

"Eric's men!" yelled Randy. "Follow me!"

I followed him to the shore, and down into the water. We were on some sort of stairway. I felt

heavy in the water.

"Br-br-br-ea-ea-th-th-e-e naturally," bubbled Randy.

I found that I could breathe easily in the water. It took fifteen minutes to reach the bottom of the stairs, which I remembered were called the Fellow-Bionics, for reasons which escaped me. We were greeted by two aquatic soldiers and taken to the throne room of Rebme. Randy bowed. I bowed too.

"You may rise," said the woman on the throne.

"Queen More," started Randy, "I know you hate me, but I must ask a favor. Corbin here has lost his memory, and he needs to walk the Design to get it back. What do you say?"

"How dare you come here!" she boomed.

Randy looked at me glumly.

"I said I was sorry," he mumbled.

More turned her attention to me. "Corbin, is this really you?"

"Yes, my lady."

"My highness."

"Your what?"

"My highness, not my lady," she said.

"What's she talking about?" I asked Randy.

"Call her her highness, not her lady," he suggested.

"Who's her lady?"

"Enough!" cried More. "Randy, I will consider your request, but do not think that you have escaped punishment. Corbin, I will see you in my chambers."

I bowed and followed her to her room.

"Corbin! At last, we are alone."

"Have we met?"

"Oh, yes. Last time we talked, you said you loved me, that you would never leave me, and that you wanted me to have your baby."

"Really? Wow."

"Yes, don't you remember? You were going to depose Erik and make me Queen of Amber."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. Come sit on the couch, and let me refresh your memory."

I knew she was lying. But I went to the couch

anyway. You're probably interested in the details, with us being submerged in water and all.

Forget it.

The next morning, I found myself in a large room, looking at a floor brightly etched and glowing. It was the Design. Random and More stood by my side. Next to my right foot, there were two words cut roughly into the stone. They read, "START HERE".

"Once you start walking the Design, you cannot turn back," said Randy.

"Why not?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know, maybe you can. I'm just trying to make it more scary. It's supposed to be scary."

I turned to More. "What is to become of Randy?"

She smiled and said, "He is sentenced to remain in Rebme for six months.

During that time, he will look after a member of my Court. Her name is Vial. She is a fish."

"A fish?" I asked. "What was Randy's crime, that he now be condemned to care for an aquatic vertebrate for half a year?"

"He made an awful mess," said More.

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. He and his stinking poker buddies."

I shook my head. Randy looked away.

Now I took a long look at the Design. "One small step for man," I said.

I set my foot upon it and began walking. There was little resistance at first, but it grew as I walked further. Soon, small blue sparks appeared around my shoes.

Memories! Ember! The Golden City atop the mountain Rivlok . . .

Memories! The Forest of Garden, the River Poisen, the histories, the stories, my life in Ember . . .

Memories! I saw myself putting a spike in Randy's sandwich, many years ago. Blaise and I had locked him in a closet . . .

Memories! I had walked the Design before, long ago. Dorky had given me a Deck and instructed me in its use.

Memories! I suddenly remembered that Randy and I had had the same mother, which was not true.

Memories! Erik and I had fought, and I had lost. He put me on Shade Earth, to die in the plague. Damn his eyes! I burned with hatred. All those years on Earth, not knowing . . . not knowing . . .

By the time I reached the center of the Design, I remembered who I was, and I remembered my purpose. I also remembered that by virtue of being at the center of the Design, I could transport myself to any place in the universe, simply by an act of will. I saw a fleeting shade but ignored it. I closed my eyes and willed myself to Ember.

II

I stood in the middle of the library of Ember, a stately room with many more books than Florida's library had. I immediately noticed several Decks in a glass case near the far wall. I broke the case and took one. On the wall above the case hung a longsword. I drew it out. It felt light in my hand. I swung it about in practice. Yes, I knew how to use the thing.

Suddenly I heard a voice behind me.

"How fare thee, brother?"

I wheeled about. It was Erik. He drew a thin blade from his belt.

"I have come to . . . to . . ." I started.

"To seize the throne?" he suggested.

"Yes, that is my plan."

"You'll have to kill me first!" he yelled as he lunged at me. I parried his lunge, and he parried my parry. I tried a riposte, but just then, he came in with a feint in quarte. After a sixte riposte and a repositioning, I held the edge. I lunged. He backed off, however, and I failed to make contact. Erik struck for my arm. I had to pull back, and I almost lost balance. It was too late to pursue the feint-lunge-riposte I had planned just seconds ago, so I held my ground.

"You seem to remember many technical terms of fencing," Erik said, sweating pouring down his face.

"You have indeed met your match, brother," I answered.

Our blades clicked again. I maneuvered him

around a table.

"Even now I press on," I muttered to Erik.

He was cornered. If I could get a small opening-- There was a pounding at the door!

"My guards," said Erik, as he parried my assaults.

I didn't have much time. They would have crossbows . . . I backed away. Erik did not pursue me. I fled through a back entrance. By the time I heard the door crash, I was safely away.

I reached for the Deck at my belt. I had to flee Ember at once. But who could I trust? I could not go to Rebme, for Erik's guards would be there. Boolean hated me. I hated Crane. Jerry? Band? Blaise? Yes, Blaise! He hated Erik as much as I did: he would get me out of this. I pulled out his card.

"Blaise?" I said.

A tall man with flaming red hair appeared to me. His eyes widened.

"Corbin? You are alive?"

"Yes, barely. Pull me through."

He did so. I stood with him on a cliff.

"Thanks. I just dueled with Erik in Ember. He still lives, however."

"A pity," said Blaise. "I would very much like to see that one dead."

He wiped the sweat from his brow and spoke again. "I have a proposition for you, brother. Let us join our armies and bring the battle to Rivlok. Ember will fall to our combined might!"

"But I don't have an army," I said, and I felt foolish saying it.

"No army?"

"No army."

Blaise sighed and turned away.

"But I can get one," I said.

"Right," he said quietly.

"I can!"

"Okay. You get an army and come back."

I turned. You may think that we treat each other cruelly, but I must tell you one thing: that is the way of our kind.

I knew that I needed an army in any case, so I left Blaise's camp to travel through Shade. I needed a large force, perhaps a whole world at my feet. Yes, that was it. I would seek out a shade in which I was

a Messiah, come to lead its inhabitants to a holy war against Evil. I set out at once.

I shifted shades, changing the environment as I walked, adding features, subtracting them . . . a green sky . . . a blue sun . . . no, that's ugly, how about a purple sun . . . no, not quite . . . a red sun, yes . . . trees grown higher, forming a canopy far above me . . . no, that red sun clashes with the green sky, so I change the sky to blue . . . better. I am there, at last.

I saw a city off in the distance. I began walking for it.

"Hey, scumbag," someone said.

I whirled.

A tall, thin man regarded me. His hair was spiked in the center of his head, which was hairless on the sides. He wore a long glittery earring on his left ear. He wore leather armor, but seemed to be carrying no weapons.

"Why dost thou accost me so?" I asked.

He only glared at me.

"Look," I said, "isn't this a land which has been waiting hundreds of years for a Messiah to deliver them?"

"No, this is an anarcho-communist punk metropolis. You want the next shade over."

He pointed.

"Oh, thanks," I said. I started off in that direction.

"Hey," he called. "Are you an Emberite?"

"No," I yelled back. Ember's enemies in Shade are legion. Another axiom.

I concentrated on my destination as I walked. The shades passed me on my left and right. I stopped. There was a group of people in front of me. They were standing on a streetcorner, eight or nine of them.

I drew my sword and started to speak, "Greetings. I--"

They all pointed to the west and said in unison, "Next shade over!"

I smiled weakly.

"Thanks."

I put my sword back into its scabbard. I was close.

At last, I came to a world with deep green forests and wide green plains. I stood atop a hill, and all around me were huddled thousands of pathetic

shade beings. Each one looked up to me eagerly.

"I am Corbin!" I yelled.

The multitude burst into applause. They screamed. They burned their homes. They sacrificed virgins. I was their god.

For many months, I trained them for their mission. They were eager to leave, to fight the Evil One, but I had to organize them first. At last, I had a fighting force I was proud of. I felt a little bad about duping them like this, but I remembered the words of my father Obelisk, King of the Golden City: "Never provide a naive individual with information that would lead to his competition with you on an equal basis."

I decided to play a little joke on my brother Blaise. I took my forces to his shade and surrounded the valley where his army was camped. At dawn, I ordered my men down into the valley. I also advanced, but kept myself hidden.

As we got close, I saw a figure clad in red silk pajamas come out into the field. He held a lantern and a sword. He looked sleepy.

"Who goes there?" he called. It was Blaise.

My captains advanced, and Blaise was quickly surrounded by twenty soldiers. He dropped the lantern and took up a fighting stance. Blaise is foolish and rash. The joke could not continue. I stepped out into the open.

"It is I!" I exclaimed.

"Damn you, Corbin!"

We embraced and he slapped me on the back. "You made it," he said. We walked to his tent. There we made plans to attack Ember. This planning went on for several days. We opened an old bottle of wine to celebrate our upcoming victory.

"So which of us gets the throne after we win?" Blaise asked.

"We'll flip for it," I suggested.

He smiled. He was thinking the same thing I was, and that was this: if I actually watched the coin fly through the air and reach its peak, Blaise's dagger would find its way into my bowels before I would have time to call heads or tails. That is the way of our kind.

"It may not matter, for only one of us may survive," he said somberly.

"This is true, brother. But we are both valiant, exuberant, and rash, and this increases our chances

of success greatly."

"It is true that I am valiant, exuberant, and rash, but I would not characterize you as such," Blaise said. "I should rather say that you are a thoughtful man, but also a revengeful one. Also, you are undergoing a character transformation due in large part to the long years you spent on Shade Earth, years that have softened you somewhat."

"That is a fair characterization," I said. I jotted down a few notes based on Blaise's words, for I was planning to write a book about all this one day. But if we didn't make it to the top of the mountain Rivlok, that book would never be written.

Finally, the fateful day arrived. Columns of soldiers stretched back as far as the eye could see. Blaise's troops and mine seemed to get along very well. I found out later that all of my troops were male and all of Blaise's female.

We marched, Blaise and I leading the way through Shade. I wondered if Erik could sense our presence yet.

Apparently, he could.

Monsoons and lightning storms accosted us at every step. There were forces working against us. We slogged through hellish swamps and crawled through infested jungles as densely matted as the hair of a mongrel dog. The Road to Ember was tough indeed, and Erik wasn't making it any easier. We lost fifty thousand men in a sandstorm, and another fifty thousand died as they walked off a cliff that wasn't on the map.

Blaise and I maintained contact via the Deck, coordinating the march and tallying the deaths. We had but a quarter of our troops when we crossed the River Poisen. There we bivouacked for two days, in preparation for the final march to Rivlok. Blaise and I traded deep concerns which we dared not share with our officers.

In the night, the river flooded, and most of our camps were destroyed. I knew the river had never flooded before, so I suspected Erik. He had to have some control over the elements -- the lightning storms, hurricanes, floods. Where did he obtain this power?

Blaise and I gathered up the thousand men that remained, and we started toward the base of Rivlok. We had come too far to give up now. We would make a go of it. Boolean's patrols began to attack, but we beat them off with minor losses. At last, I could see the mountain and the golden-spired city. Ember!

Along the Eastern Face of Rivlok, from the base to the peak, lay the Escalator of Ember. Its base was our destination. From there, we would be borne magically up into Ember itself. We had to make it.

Lightning without rain assaulted the troops. Hundreds of men were transformed into to smoking shells of life. Damn Erik's eyes! By the time we reached the Escalator, Blaise and I were accompanied by only twelve of our fighters. We made them go first. Each one in turn stepped onto the moving stairway, and as they were carried upward, they drew their swords, for we could see Erik's men coming down toward us. We would meet halfway up the mountain.

I too loosened my blade, which I had named Graceland years before, when I had forged it out of Shade. Blaise lifted his own, finely inlaid, sword. I grasped the hand railing for safety.

At last, those of us going up the Up Escalator met those coming down the Down Escalator, and much blood was spilled. Our vanguard slashed at Erik's troopers, and Blaise and I finished them off as they came down to us. In three hours, we would be at the top. But things did not go well. Erik's men scored several hits, and our fighters were knocked off the Escalator. Soon, it was down to me and Blaise alone. But we worked with precision, my friend! They fell and fell, and I could see the fear in the eyes of those who had not yet reached us, for they knew that they too would die.

I looked down behind me, and I saw the dead bodies being carried away. At the bottom of Rivlok, the pile of Erik's soldiers was growing larger. Even as Blaise was beginning to tire, fresh soldiers began appearing on the Down Escalator. One of them managed to hit Blaise on the side of the head before I took him out with a thrown dagger. But Blaise was reeling backward now.

"Hold on to the hand rail!" I yelled, but it was too late. Blaise fell backward and over the edge. I saw his death coming, and I had to stop it. I hurled my Deck to him, and he grabbed for it. I don't know what happened next, because someone brought a sword crashing down on my left shoulder.

I wheeled and lunged, killing two with a single thrust. I smashed the hilt of my sword into the next man's head, and left a dagger in the throat of the next. I kicked the next one over the side. My fist connected with the face of my next victim, who fell back onto the man behind him. I killed them both with a slice of my blade. I removed my boot and hurled it at the man behind them. The boot struck

the side of his head, disorienting him, giving me enough time to deliver a death blow. The next man I strangled with the shoelace from my remaining boot, and then another fell beneath the heavy belt buckle I swung at him.

They died and died like that, for at least two hours. I poisoned them, I hung them, I impaled them with each of the nine ballistic weapons I carried on my back. And still they came. Erik seemed to possess an unlimited supply of warriors. But I could see the top! Just then, I fell forward. The Escalator had stopped, and was now reversing itself! I scampered upwards, but could make no progress.

I was now convinced that Erik had powers far beyond the ordinary. The Escalator had never reversed direction before. But there is always a way. I jumped over the guard railing to the Down Escalator, which was now going Up. Erik's soldiers were also going up, but when they saw me jump, they started walking toward me.

After a few minutes, the Escalators switched directions again, and I jumped again. I would make it to the top no matter how often Erik tried to stop me. And make it to the top I did.

I almost wished I had not.

At least fifteen thousand of Ember's finest warriors stood to meet me at the Palace gate. I steeled my nerve and raised my sword. This wasn't going to be easy.

Let me be brief: I lost.

I sat in the darkness of my cell. The smell of dead animals wafted back and forth over the mildewing pools in which feet soaked. The place reminded me of the squalid shade where Erik had left me to die, all those years ago. Of course, I had grown to love that place, and so any reminder of it made me feel at home.

Why had I come to Ember anyway?

All the trip had gotten me was a few bumps on the head and a life sentence to the deep dark dungeons. I searched the room for implements of suicide, but found none. We Emberites would rather die than accept life in prison. This is primarily because we live for a very long, long time. I sighed. I knew I should have stayed home.

After three days, men came to get me. I wondered where they would take me. To the torture chambers? To be drawn and quartered? To have my eyes burned from my head with HOT COALS? No, my

friend, none of these. They dragged me instead to the famous Fashion District of Ember.

At first I was pleased, but then I grew suspicious. Why would Erik have me taken here? A change of heart, perhaps? Of had he been deposed already by a friendly power?

I showered, and then I was taken to the barber, where I was blindfolded and strapped into a chair. While my guardsmen taunted me, the barber went to work. After a quarter of an hour, he removed the blindfold.

"What the hell did you do to my hair?" I yelled.

The barber grinned, and then I noticed: he wore black and red, which were Erik's colors.

Under heavy guard, I was pushed around the District. We stopped to buy clothes several times. Again, I could do nothing. They purchased for me a pair of pre-Renaissance leggings, a Dracula cape, and boots like the ones my father had worn when he was young. They forced me to wear the things. I was at least four hundred years out of fashion. A voice inside my head kept reminding me that Erik was behind it all.

It was not until I saw a sign on the street that I finally understood. The sign said, "CORONATION WEDNESDAY. DRESS ACCORDINGLY."

I was to be present at Erik's coronation, I knew, dressed like a fool.

This thing came about.

The Great Hall was filled to capacity. I was chained to a chair several hundred feet down the table from Erik. Boolean was seated on my left. To my right was a pretty girl, whom I immediately engaged in conversation.

"Would you pass the salt?" I tried.

"Sure," she said. Then she took a long look at me. Stifling a giggle, she said, "Nice, uh, cape."

I blushed.

Boolean said, "Corbin, I think the lady finds you obnoxious and poorly dressed."

"Oh yeah?" I snarled, "what's she said to you all evening?"

"She said that my white reinforced porcelain armor was both stylish and functional, and that she always found men in uniform very attractive."

"Oh," I said. I stirred my peas.

Music rose up. It was the same music they always

play on those medieval documentaries on PBS.

Boolean stood up and boomed, "Long live Erik!"

"Long live Erik," said everyone but me. I was tired of this party already.

A guard brought something to Boolean. It was a green cushion that held up the crown of Ember. Boolean placed it before me and said, "Take this crown and give it to Erik."

"No," I said. He scowled.

"I said, take this crown and give it to Erik."

"No."

Boolean slapped my face with the back of his hand.

"OK," I said. I took the crown and quickly placed it on my own head.

"I crown myself, King Corbin!"

It was at that moment that I realized something very important, a thing that would haunt me throughout my future travels. As I stand here on the edge of the Courts of Chaos, abruptly but temporarily shifting my point-of-view in order to tell you, the only one present to hear, my story, I -- well, the thing is this: I suddenly realized that "King Corbin" sounds like the name of some breakfast cereal, and that for this reason, among others, I would never wear the crown of Ember.

Oddly enough, Boolean bowed before me.

An angry voice came from the other end of the table. "Stand up, you legalistic wretch! He's not the king! *I'm* the king! Take that God damned crown off his head and bring it to me!" Erik was screaming and his face was beet red.

"But," Boolean started, "I mean, I can't really, I mean, if he's wearing the . . ."

Erik stormed over to us. He snatched the headpiece from me and placed it on his own head. "I crown myself King Erik of Ember!"

There were shouts all around. 'King Erik' . . . now, that actually sounded regal, not like breakfast cereal. Boolean bowed to Erik. Erik called the guards on me. As they dragged me away, he commanded: "Take Corbin to the dungeon and have his eyes burned from his head!"

Eyes burned from my head?

Eyes burned form my head?

Oh, man.

I must have fainted, for I awoke in my cell. Darkness hung about me, not the darkness of the dungeon, but the darkness of my two eyeless sockets. I realized that my other senses were somehow heightened, however, for at that moment, I smelled Lord Reign, my old friend, approaching my cell from down the hallway. His characteristic footsteps grew louder and louder. He spoke.

"Lord Corbin?"

"Yes, Reign?"

"I brought you some pizza."

"What kind?" asked I.

"Sausage and bell pepper," respondeth he.

"I don't like bell peppers."

"You can pick them off."

And so I picked them off, tossing them onto the dank floor of the dark cubicle that was my home. Rats came intermittently to cart off the wretched peppers. Reign came to visit me several times, until I made him promise never to return, lest he be caught by Erik and tortured. Thus did I dispatch Lord Reign of the Bad Pizza Toppings, my last friend in the world.

I had nothing to do but wait.

"Wait," I muttered.

"Time passes," came an ominous voice, but there was no one there. I was hallucinating already. Three hundred and sixty-five sleepless nights came and went.

The guards brought me out for the first anniversary of Erik's coronation. A year's beard's growth and a year's foul stench, both swept away in a day.

"Wait," I muttered once again.

"Time passes," came the Voice.

"Open door," I tried.

"You can't do that," said the Voice.

"Why the hell not?"

"I don't know the word 'hell'," it said.

I thought for a moment. Then,

"Wait," I said.

"Time passes."

I was stuck.

They brought me out after another year, then after another, then another. Four anniversaries came and

went, and this was my only way of keeping track of the time.

"Get key," I tried.

"I don't see it here," said the Voice.

"Inspect room."

"You are in a dank, dark cell in the dungeons of Ember. On the wall you see--"

"I'm blind," I suggested.

"Oh, well, we can fix that," said the Voice. This time it came from right behind me.

I wheeled around. I heard the snap of a finger, and suddenly my sight returned. In front of me stood Dorky, Master of the Line, Delineator of the Deck, Keeper of the Kingdom, Guru of Garneth, Swami of Shade.

"How the hell did I get here?" he asked.

"I don't know the word 'hell'," I tried.

"Very funny. Got a smoke?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Well, been nice knowing you. Gotta go," he said.

"Wait!" I cried. "Take me with you!"

"OK," he said simply. "Come on."

I followed him through the cell wall, out into the open air. We stood on a wooden pier. Rivlok rose up miles behind me. I had escaped! Dorky stepped into a boat and beckoned me to follow.

"I'm headed for the Isles of the Sun. I hear they got cheap VCR's there. You wanna come?"

"No, thanks. But would you mind dropping me off at the Lighthouse of Carba?"

"No problem."

Dorky revved up the engine.

"I thought gunpowder didn't work in Ember!" I shouted to him, over the din of the outboard.

He shouted back, "This is a special kind of gunpowder! It's a Plot Device! You can get it in the Shade known as Revlon!"

The rest of our journey was uneventful. Dorky left me on the rocks of Carba. From there, I could walk to any Shade I so desired.

I would have my revenge on Erik, and that revenge would start in Revlon, where I would gather enough of this Plot Device to make me King of Ember. I felt strong again. I summoned a yellow bird of my desire, and it sat upon my head. I wrote

out a note and attached it to the bird's leg. The note read, "Erik -- Fuck You, Asshole. Signed, Lord Corbin the Terminator". The bird flapped its way to Rivlok.

I began to shift Shade.

III

My destination: Ember. My goal: the crown and the throne. My mode of transportation: walking in Shade. My name: Lord Corbin.

First stop, Revlon.

Ah, fair Revlon. A Shade world I once knew so well. I had ruled there for many years in the Old Times. Revlon was my home away from Ember, and through my presence there, I had built it into a mighty power. Rolling hills, deep forests, men of honor, fair maidens . . .

Fair maidens with heavy makeup. Strange as it may sound, the makeup of Revlon would enable me to launch a massive attack on Ember and win back what was rightfully mine. Years before, you see, I had brought a case of Revlon rouge to Ember, as a gift for my sister Didi. She didn't like the stuff, and in my anger I threw it into the fireplace. It exploded, very prettily and very noisily. My first thought was: I was lucky that Didi had spurned the gift, for she sometimes smokes. My second thought was: wait a minute, nothing explodes in Ember! And so I formulated a plan to build weapons based on this chemical, weapons which would one day make me the most powerful man in Ember.

Unfortunately, this plan had slipped my mind last time around. Blaise fell off a cliff and I got four years in the slammer because of it. Not this time, brother.

I shifted Shade for Revlon.

I came upon seven men, six dead and one slouched against a thick oak. I hated to see so many dead men, so using my power as Prince of the Blood, I walked to a nearby Shade where there were also seven men, but only one was dead. The other six stood laughing. They noticed me as I approached.

"Wot's this then?" said one.

Their shirts were thin and ragged, probably from the battle that had resulted in the death of the one who lay plastered on the ground.

"Warriors," I said. "Does any of your number

know the way to Revlon?"

They looked at each other quizzically.

"For whom do you fight?" I asked.

"?" they tried.

"Who . . . is . . . your . . . leader?"

"Tha' would be me, bloke," said one of the tall ones. "You innerested in joinin' us? Headin' for Revlon, we are."

"Fine, fine!" I said.

"What instrument do you play?" he asked.

"I play some guitar, but why do you ask?"

"We're a Heavy Metal Band, boy! And Lord knows we need another guitarist!"

"We only got three," piped one of the short ones.

"You're in!" said the leader, and he slapped me on the back. I wasn't really interested in hanging around with a burned out metal band, but I had to admit I was out of practice, and a few jam sessions would be just the thing to get me back into top form. I would travel with these men to Revlon.

"I've been in the slammer," I explained.

They murmured to each other in their heavy foreign accents. I could only pick out the words "pigs" and "drugs".

I slept, and in the morning I found that my sword Graceland had transmuted itself into a silver Stratocaster. I picked it up and played a C chord. Then a G. The guitar was in tune. I cradled the neck and pulled up on the distortion bar. Yes, I knew how to use the thing.

Outside, the men in the band were tuning their instruments. The two drummers were dueling. The bassist/vocalist was running through some scales. I stepped out and roared into a Stones riff. The other guitarists were taken aback. They jumped in with some rhythm, and one of them contested me for the lead. I was able to squeeze in more notes per second, however, and he quickly conceded. I switched to some of the heavier stuff. After an hour, two of the guitarists put down their weapons and had a smoke. The other one played with me for another hour, but he too grew tired. I was just starting to feel back in shape, though, and I wanted to push myself. I played a few songs with the drummers, then engaged the bassist/vocalist in an extended version of Stairway to Heaven. That night, I ate a huge meal and slept for ten hours.

I repeated the same routine for the next few days,

as we drew closer to Revlon.

On the fourth night I met Lauren. I would like to tell you that we met at a patio overlooking a lake, with the full moon highlighting her hair and her silvery dress. But that would be crap. I had seen her several times before, first with the bassist/vocalist, then with one of the guitarists, and later with the two drummers. The first time I ever spoke with her, though, was after a gig. She came by my dressing room and asked me if I wanted to do it. I said, yeah, sure. She said she loved me. I said, crap. But she started hanging around me anyway. We spent several nights together, and she told me many things.

"I've seen you play. You're good," she said.

"I've seen better," I replied.

"The guys in the band respect you. They also fear you."

"Why? Because I can squeeze a few more notes out of my Strat?"

"They think there is something supernatural involved. They're Devil Worshipers, you know."

I had not known this, but as I reflected upon the human skeletons, the pyrotechnics, and the hell-inspired lyrics that made up our show, pieces of the puzzle began to fall together. Perhaps it was no accident that I, a man who had been called a demon more than once, should fall in with such a crowd. I laughed aloud to hide my thoughts.

"I'm no demon," I said. "I'm just the second best guitarist around, that's all."

"Who's the best?"

"Benedictus of Ember, if he is still alive," I replied. Benedictus had once upstaged the Moonpeople of Ghinesh by doing four encores in a single night. We are a very musical family.

"Wanna do it?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure," I replied.

"I love you."

"Crap."

There was something sad about Lauren, though I enjoyed my time with her, and vice-versa. One night she told me that she was going to die. I asked her why. She said that soon the band would break up, and without us, she was nothing. I was silent, for I knew that the band would indeed break up. I would be the first to leave once we reached Revlon. I had no choice. My destiny was to become King of

Ember, not Bandleader of Devil-people.

With a few gigs under my belt, I felt better than ever. I no longer felt the physical and psychological strains of my four years in the Big House.

Lauren lay next to me, sleeping. Suddenly, her eyes grew wide.

"You are in trouble," she said flatly.

Before I could formulate an answer, the door to my hotel room flew open. On the threshold stood an inhuman beast, six feet tall, gray and unclothed. It wore a fake arrow through its head, in a low grade imitation of the Comedians of Ember. In its right hand was a long silver blade that I liked not at all.

"My name is Strygalldwinnirdrillbinir. Conjure with it, and I shall eat your spleen."

"Conjure with it? I can't even say it," I lied.

"Who are you?" it demanded.

"Misli, gammi gra'dil, Strygalldwinnirdrinbillir," I said.

"No, it's 'Strygalldwinnirdrillbinir'," it said.

"Sorry. Misli, gammi gra'dil, Strygalldwinnirdribblinir."

"No, not '--dribblinir'. It's '--drillbinir'."

I never was very good at foreign names. One more try:

"Misli, gammi gra'dil, Strygalldwinnirdrillbinir."

"You seek to drive me away with such a simple spell? I am not one of the wimpier ones. I must ask you again, who are you?"

"This isn't fair. My name is much easier to pronounce."

"Three times I must ask you--"

Those were its last words, for just then, a man slid up behind the beast and put a dagger through its throat. The thing died silently. The man entered the room.

"Lose the bitch," he said. Lauren pulled the sheet around herself and left quickly.

"My thanks, sir," I said. "What is your name?"

He hesitated.

"Look, I won't conjure with it, I promise," I promised.

"The name is Galenon, and if I may offer you some paternal advice, I would transmute that guitar back into a sword. The times they are a-changin'."

I chuckled and snorted and did this thing, and we stayed up most of the night talked of our respective travels. Galenon was also on the road to Revlon, as it turned out, and I decided to split the band and join him. I packed my things and left in the night.

I was forthright with Galenon, for I trusted him. I told him of Ember and of my plans to take the throne. He had heard of Ember and asked to be my lieutenant in the upcoming battle. I accepted his offer.

We reached Revlon at last. I wondered if its inhabitants would still remember me, their ruler of five hundred years past. At the border, a guard stopped us.

"You look familiar," he told me. "You look just like that guy on the old coins."

"George Washington?" I tried.

"No, no, that other guy."

"Lincoln?"

"No."

"Kennedy? He's on the half-dollar," I suggested.

"Forget it. You may pass."

"Was it Jefferson? Thomas Jefferson?"

Galenon nudged me. "I don't mean to sound like your father," he said,

"but don't you think we ought to be getting the explosive rouge?"

"Right," I said.

We made it to the city, where we were approached by the local cops.

They insisted that we see a man known as the Defender, in City Hall. We travelled to this place. Inside, I was surprised to see that the man behind the desk was my own brother, Benedictus of Ember. My eyes widened, and so did his.

"Brother!" said he.

"Brother!" replied I.

"How fare thee?" he asked.

I dared not tell him of my plans.

"Fine, and you?" I said.

"I am tired, and as you can see, I have no arms."

This was true, he had no arms.

"This is true, you have no arms. How did this thing come about?"

"It is a long story. But at last I have re-united Revlon and driven the demon creatures out."

"Demon creatures? DEMONS OF EMBER?"

"No, demons of Revlon. A particularly nasty race of beings known as Housemaids. Cold, icy, stubborn beasts, they refuse to do windows, and worse, they always put stuff back in the wrong drawers. Their attacks began three years ago. As you can imagine, they caused great confusion in the land. In an effort to resolve the conflict, I met with their leader, a woman called Linda. Unfortunately, I was forced to kill her after she lopped off my arms. Much later, I made love to her and then began counterattacking her troops. Only in the past month have we driven them from the city. I will continue the patrols for the next two hundred years, however, for we may have missed one or two of them."

"Prudent," said I.

"But enough about me. I hear you escaped Erik's dungeons. I would like to know more about this."

"Tunnels," I said.

He raised his eyebrows. He knew I was lying, but he dared not accuse me. Had he accused me, though, I would have been forced to challenge him to a duel of the blades, and this was a thing I did not want to do.

For even without arms, he could still outface any of us. I feared him, properly.

"You are free to stay in my house, Corbin, of course. But if you are planning to use Revlon as a staging area for an attack on Ember, then you have come at the wrong time. I will not permit such a thing."

"No problem," I said. "I appreciate your hospitality, Benedictus. Live long and prosper." I wanted to ask him more about Revlon, and about the Housemaids and their leader Linda, whom he slew and later loved. But there was no time.

I sent Galenon to search for the explosive rouge. For my own part, I began to mentally organize the weaponry and personnel I would require. As I walked through the forest, I decided where and how I would gather the necessary materiel for my war against Erik.

Suddenly, a woman appeared. She was thin and freckled, and she held a thin and freckled blade in her right hand.

"Wanna do it?" she asked.

Not again, I thought.

"Let's fence first," I said. Her blade rose.

She was good. Very good. I came on strong and aggressive at first, but she deflected my advances with ease. I decided to be more formal. We went through a series of standard exercises, after which I felt I knew her style. I closed with her. Our blades met at eye level, our faces nearly touching. I grazed her cheek with my sword. She pulled away, but I advanced. I forced her back into a thicket. She gasped. I lunged. She did not parry. I lunged again. Again. Again. She screamed, and so did I. We both fell to the ground.

"So you wanna do it?" she asked again.

"Give me a little break here."

She gave me a break, and then we did it. I asked her name. It was Darla. I told her everything about Ember. Why? I do not know, for I am not a trusting person by nature. What was the reason for my loose tongue of late? Perhaps it was that annoying character change of mine . . .

"Will you take me to Ember?" she asked.

"No."

"Please, please, please?" she pleaded.

"I don't think you understand the danger involved. Awaiting my coming are the DEMONS OF EMBER."

"What DEMONS OF EMBER?" she asked, but I did not answer. I did not know myself. I bade her farewell, and promised to look her up.

I found Galenon in a department store, haggling with the woman behind the perfume counter. He held a knife to her throat.

"Hello, sonny," he said to me. "The bitch says she doesn't know anything about any exploding makeup. Should I kill her?"

I saw the fear in the woman's eyes, and I called my partner off.

"It doesn't explode *here*, Galenon, it explodes in Ember. Look, I see some of it over there."

We bought two hundred and twelve compacts of the stuff.

Galenon and I departed into Shade that day. I found a Shade close to the Earth I had inhabited for so many years, but one which was subtly different from my old home. To wit, the ground was littered with automatic weapons. We collected these weapons and took them to a more familiar Shade, the place where I had collected my army so many

years before. You might think that the inhabitants would be angry with me, for I *had* taken their youth from them and caused them to die uselessly in a foreign war. But these people revered me as a god, and thousands of them would volunteer again. I had only to ask.

Galenon and I arrived. A multitude waited below us. An old man with a crown came to greet us.

"I have returned!" I boomed.

The man look displeased. His eyes went back to the multitude.

"Don't take it wrong," quoth he, "but, uh, you *did* take our youth from us and cause them to die uselessly in a foreign war. What do you, uh, want this time?"

"Soldiers!" I boomed again.

"Soldiers," muttered the man. "Are we going to, uh, win this time?"]

"Of course! But it won't be easy, for awaiting my coming are the DEMONS OF EMBER!"

"DEMONS OF EMBER?"

"Indeed! But I have brought new weapons!" I took an automatic rifle laced the crowd with bullets. Many fell, my friend, but the rest cheered and cheered. Their god was back.

Recruitment went smoothly. I only needed twenty men this time. I picked the best and trained them well. Before we left, I inspected the troops.

"Who is Erik?" I asked one of the men.

"Beats me," he replied.

I ran him through with my sword. There was much blood.

"Who is Erik?" I asked the next one, who began to sweat.

"Erik is the Lord of . . . Lord of . . ."

"Yes? Yes?" I provoked.

"Lord of . . . Ember?" he tried.

"NO! NO! LORD OF EVIL! LORD OF EVIL!" I ran him through. "Who is Erik?" I screamed.

"THE LORD OF EVIL!" they all exclaimed, elated that I hadn't run them through.

Galenon and I made some final arrangements, and then we set off for Ember. By now, I had mastered the Axioms of Ember. I knew that All Roads Lead to Ember, for instance, so I picked a road and followed it, and my men followed me. Erik did not

notice us this time. I figured this was due to the small size of our force.

"Corbin?" Galenon said.

"Yes?" I answered.

"Often you have mentioned the DEMONS OF EMBER which await your coming, but I myself know nothing of such beings. How do you *know* they await us?"

"It's on the cover of the paperback," I replied.

"What paperback?"

"THE GUNS OF REVLON. The one with the goofy picture on the front."

"But book covers are notoriously unrelated to the text that lay between the pages. I would wager that there *are* no DEMONS OF EMBER," he wagered.

"Hmm, you may have a point. But if you are right, then it is quite possible that THE GUNS OF REVLON is neither a HUGO nor a NEBULA AWARD WINNER. Good God, Galenon! I might not be a ROGER ZELAZNY hero -- I might be living in a MICHAEL MOORCOCK book!"

"Get hold of yourself, son!" said Galenon. "Maybe there *are* DEMONS OF EMBER after all. And maybe, just maybe, there is also A MYSTERIOUS FEMALE IN THE PERFECT KINGDOM who PORTENDS TREASON, TREACHERY -- AND OBLIVION!"

"What does that mean, 'TREASON, TREACHERY -- AND OBLIVION'? Never mind. I agree with you. I feel we must trust The Man Who Writes Book Cover Blurbs, for even though he probably hasn't read this book, his is the only information we have to go on. I only hope that bullets will be enough to stop the DEMONS OF EMBER. Come, let us hie."

And hie we did, until Ember was within sight.

"Ember is within sight," I announced.

"I know, I can see it," said Galenon.

"You act as though you have been here before," I accused.

"So do you, kid," he replied.

"I *have* been here. You've never been here. Got that? And why do you keep calling me 'kid' and 'sonny'? I'm starting to get perturbed with you."

"Sorry," he said. Then, "Look!"

I looked. There was a battle already in progress.

Erik's men were fighting hand to hand with a large force of Shade creatures. The creatures were pouring in across a huge expanse of darkness, some kind of black road that led from deep inside Shade right up to the foot of Rivlok. I had planned to take Ember by killing Erik, but now . . .

In one of those split-second decisions you usually wind up regretting, I ordered my men to attack the Shade beasts rather than Erik's men. Confused, they carried out their orders. O, how they died that day! The creatures burned and died and heaved, and I chuckled. I diverted my attention from the battle in order to find my brother Erik. At last, I spotted him on the far mountainside. I left Galenon in charge of the battle.

After negotiating the crags and crevices, I reached Erik. He was lying on his back, bleeding. Around his neck was the Jewel of the Judge, a magical pendant often worn by our father.

"I . . . am . . . dying," he announced.

"Oh yeah?" I stuttered. "That's, uh, too bad, Erik. Listen, about your Death Curse, I mean, you're not going to, I mean, well . . . you don't even *have* to have a Death Curse. Not if you don't want to. It's not like a law or anything. Even if it was, what could they do to you? I mean, you're dead, and if you didn't use your Death Curse, too bad--"

"Enough!" he sputtered, spitting blood all over me.

"Jesus Christ, that's disgusting," I observed.

"I reserve my Death Curse for the creatures from the Black Freeway. And I give you this Jewel. With it, you can control the weather. You must attune yourself to it by wearing it and walking the Design. You're in command now." He coughed up a lung. "You'll find that things are not what you expected. Ember is in deep trouble. Deep . . ." He gasped for air.

"Can I get you some water or something?" I asked.

He mumbled his Death Curse, a horrible thing to hear. It had an immediate effect on the battle. The creatures began retreating. Erik heaved his last breath then.

I took the Jewel from about his neck. It pulsed curiously in my hands. He had said to take it to the Design. I signalled Galenon to pursue the creatures. I headed for the castle myself. Just inside, I ran into Randy.

"Corbin!" he said. "Downstairs! Something's

happening!"

We both ran down to the Design room. Someone was walking the Design already! Who was it? I squinted, but could not make out the face.

"Some chick," said Randy. "Never seen her."

I looked again. It was Darla.

"What do you think it means?" Randy asked.

"It portends TREASON, TREACHERY -- AND OBLIVION!" I said.

"What does that mean, 'TREASON, TREACHERY -- AND OBLIVION!'?"

"Shut up for a second." I turned to the girl and yelled, "Darla! What the hell are you doing?"

She looked up at me and continued walking. She was almost finished. Randy said, "So she must be of

the Blood of Ember. I thought there were only thirteen of us."

"There must be countless others. You're not counting Delwyn and Sandy, for instance. That makes fifteen right there."

"Oh yeah. How come we never talk about them?" he asked.

"We're supposed to pretend like they don't exist."

"For how long?" he asked.

"Until the sixth book or so," I said. I raised my hand. "Wait!"

Darla had reached the center of the Design. She raised her hands into the air and said:

"Ember will be destroyed!"

Shit, I thought.