## Quests End

Roger Zelazny

I don’t really feel like quoting from The Masks of God, Hamlet’s Mill, The Golden Bough, and Beyond the Pleasure Principle in introducing a story slightly over a thousand words in length. If a book is a machine to think with, though, these are some of the machines I keep running in a back room in the factory of my intellect, and at some time or other everything gets passed through them. Some things get ground away to nothing, some get stuck among the gear teeth, others get turned into stories like this.

The deed is done. And done pretty well, I might add. The princess lies dead on the floor of my cave, amid the strewn bones of centuries’ worth of heroes, wizards, princes, princesses, dwarfs, and elves, and the fragments of nine broken swords committed to their task— another possible reign of sweetness and joy I’ve clipped before its bud might unfold.

I run the rasps of my tongue across my fangs, savoring the acrid taste.

The last hero is twisted at an impossible angle in the corner, his magic blade shattered. It was the tenth and final one of that brood of evil piercers forged an age ago by the minions of Light to account for my master and those such as myself who serve him. How delicious! The ring I guard remains in the jeweled cask within the niche at my back.

Pieces of their faithful dwarf companion are strewn along the passageway. I can see the small hand that still holds the ax. Had the little man actually thought he could reach me or do me harm with that pathetic weapon?

Only the old wizard still draws breath. But I have shattered his staff and scattered his power down ways of darkness. I have granted him a few moments more that I might mock him and see him die cursing the powers he had served.

“Do you hear me, Lortan?” I ask.

“Yes, Bactor,” he answers weakly from where he fell, his back against the wall to my left, legs thrust at crazy angles. Then “Why do I still live?” he asks.

“For a bit of terminal amusement, wearer of the Light. If you will curse all that is good and beautiful and true and noble, I will give you a quick death.”

“No thanks,” he answers.

“Why not? You have failed, as did the nine before you. You were the last. It is over. The good guys lose, ten to nothing.”

He does not respond, so I goad him further: “And your hero—Eric Broadthew, or whatever you call him— didn’t even touch me with that weapon. The last one at least caught me a good one across the shoulder before I dismembered him.”

“We were the worst of the lot you faced?” he inquires.

“Oh, I wouldn’t go that far,” I say. “But you were hardly the best.”

“Humor a defeated old man and tell me. Who was the best?”

I chuckle. “Easily done,” I answer. “Gloring, of the Second Kingdom. He came so close to killing me that it was beautiful. The arc of his blade, Dammer, came down like a bolt from the heavens. The muscles of his arms rippled like the tides of the sea. He glowed with the sweat of his exertions. He cursed me so wondrously, it was like a poem. I stood transfixed. Barely, only barely did I stop him, and it took all of my dark magic rather than the strength of my body. Verily, it was Gloring and Dammerung who were the greatest.”

“Alas, poor Eric could not beat an act like that.”

“No, nor any other I have encountered. And now my lord Glaum’s reign will never end, for the Darkness has vanquished the Light. There are no more to be raised up against us.”

“Of the broken weapons that I see on the floor,” he says, “tell me which is the blade Dammer and where the bones of Gloring lie, that I might see where our brightest hope fell.”

“You talk too much, old man. It is time to end this conversation.”

“But I see only nine hilts amid the ruin.”

I extend my claws and rear to strike him. But he holds me, by no magic but by a single statement:

“You have not yet won.”

“How can you say that, when you are the last?”

“You lied,” he continues, “when you said that your lord’s reign will never end, that the Darkness has vanquished the Light. You do not see your own weakness.”

“I have no weakness, wizard.”

Through the gloom I see his smile.

“Very well,” I say then. “You do not have to curse goodness, truth, beauty, and nobility as the price of a quick death. Just tell me of the weakness that you see.”

“I have always considered the benefits of a quick death to be somewhat marginal,” he replies.

“Tell me, that I may protect myself against its exploitation.”

The insolent old man has the audacity to laugh. I resolve to make his death a slow thing, regardless.

“I will tell you,” he says, “and you will still be unable to guard against it. I see now that you will die when you know love.”

I stamp my foot and roar.

“Love? Love? Your mind is as broken as the rest of you, to accuse me of such a foul failing! Love!”

My laughter rings about the cave as I decapitate him and roll his head back along the passageway, slinging it by the beard. My sides ache from the strain of laughing.

After a time I pick up someone’s leg and begin munching on it. Rather tough. Must have been the hero’s.

My lord Glaum, always and future ruler of the world, enters that evening wearing his defiled garment of Light, to admire my work, to congratulate me on ages well spent. He gives me a cunningly wrought timepiece of gold with my name engraved upon it, to reward my faithful service.

“Bactor, my lovely,” he asks after a time, “why is it that I behold the remains of only nine of the weapons of Light when all of the heroes have fallen?”

I chuckle. “There are only nine here.” I explain. “The other is up that side corridor. That hero made a different entrance than the others, and I stopped him there. He was a cunning one.”

“I wish to see it for myself.”

“Of course, my lord. Follow me.”

I lead him up the sideway. I hear him draw a breath as I halt before the niche.

“This one is whole!” he hisses. “The man stands intact, the blade unbroken!”

I laugh again. “But harmless, lord. Now and forever. This one I bound by magic, rather than rending him with the strength of my body. I come here to admire him on occasion. He is the best. He came very close to destroying me.”

“Fool!” he cries. “A spell can be broken! And I see that it is Gloring and Dammerung! We must finish them now to assure our triumph!”

He reaches for the death wand in its case upon his belt.

I turn again and regard the point of that blade I had halted but an inch from my breast when my spell froze all motion and left its grinning wielder a statue of judgment and execution forever delayed. Dammerung’s edge is finer than that of any leaf, its point the nearest approach that matter might make to infinity....

I hear my master: “Move away, Bactor.”

And I hear another voice—my own—shout the words that break the spell. The delicious thrust is completed, after millennia of delay.

Then it slides from me in a fountain of my body’s juices, and I fall backward.

As the beautiful thing, dripping my life, is turned against Glaum, I glance at its wielder, at the whiteness of his lovely face, teeth clenched within its grin ...