

Upon Reflection

By Jess Lebow

"Herein lies the tale of the Hero Hitash Levat and his imprisonment in the Spiderweb Mirror. Let these words be a warning and a reminder to you. The maze of mirrors is not a place for careless adventuring. Of my party, I am the sole survivor, and it is only by the hand of the gods themselves that I live to tell this tale."

-Escape from the Spiderweb Mirror, Hitash Levat

Hitash and Brielle rounded another corner.

The maze of mirrors and shifting darkness were driving Hitash mad. For all he knew, he could be in the same place he started, going round and round in a circle and never knowing when he crossed over the same ground.

The maze tormented him. He did not know how long he had been there. The darkness gave him no point of reference. It could be day or night outside, and he would never know. His tortured imprisonment seemed to have already lasted an eternity. But what was an eternity in the dark, reflective corridors of the Spiderweb Mirror? A month? A year? A decade? If he counted days as simply the time between moments of sleep, then he had been inside the mirror for six hundred and seventy-two of them. Almost two years. But who knew how long he slept or if he even had?

All he knew for certain was that he was trapped, hungry, and moments before, he had nearly been burned to death by a creature made of living flame.

He looked to his final companion. Brielle was a true warrior. She had fought bravely at his side since they had entered the Spiderweb Mirror. The others too had been loyal and stalwart, but of the nine who had entered, only he and Brielle were left.

Brielle dropped into a crouch. "What was that?"

Hitash had learned to trust his companion's ears, and he spun a slow circle, prepared for something else to jump out from the darkness. As he turned, his own face played over the mirrors on all sides. His image reflected back and forth, doubling, and doubling, then doubling again. The result was an entire army of Hitash Levats, one standing slightly behind and beside the next, off into infinity. During his imprisonment, he'd learned to ignore the reflections of himself, relying more on sound than sight in tight situations.

A scuffling noise caught his attention, and he turned to face the shifting darkness to his right. The shadows parted, and out came a minotaur mage. The wretched creature was injured, dragging one of its legs behind it as it crawled toward the companions on its hands and knees. Long lines of reflected, injured minotaurs stretched off into the false distance.

Hitash wasted no time. Following the sound, he took two steps and was on the real minotaur, his sword tucked neatly under the monster's chin.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you right now?"

The minotaur looked up at the hero, surprise evident in its jaundiced, weeping eyes.

The mage shook its horned head. "I mean you no harm," its voice gurgled as it spoke, as if its throat were full of syrup.

Brielle stepped up beside Hitash. "That's not good enough."

The hero pulled his sword tighter against the creature's neck.

"Okay, okay," squealed the minotaur. "If you let me live, I will tell you the way out of the maze."

The companions looked at each other.

Hitash shrugged. "It's injured." He stood still for a moment, then with a heavy sigh, he released the mage and took a step back. "If you're lying," he said pointing the tip of his blade at the minotaur, "I'll cut you into little bits."

The minotaur held its throat where the hero's sword had been. It nodded. "Yes, I believe you will."

"Out with it then," demanded Brielle. "Tell us how to get out of here."

The minotaur shifted its weight, bringing its injured leg around in front of it and settling back into a seated position. "How did you get in?"

"If this is some sort of a game—" shouted Brielle.

The minotaur held up its hand. "Please, you must be more quiet. Your voice will attract attention." It pointed to its leg. "I don't need any extra attention at the moment."

Hitash looked at Brielle. She was ready to kill the injured monster right now. He too was frustrated, but the minotaur spoke the truth. No need to bring a gang of skeletons down on them if they didn't have to.

"We came in through a mirror," replied the hero.

"Then you must leave through a mirror."

"That much we knew," said Hitash, turning his blade over in his hand. "The question is: Which mirror?"

The minotaur nodded. "If you search, you will never find it. You need the riddle."

"The riddle?"

"Speak the riddle, and the mirror will appear." The mage held its finger in the air. "Speak the answer, and you can leave."

"Do you know this riddle?" asked Brielle anxiously.

"I do," replied the minotaur.

Brielle's eyes bulged. "Tell us."

"I will tell you the riddle, but I do not know the answer."

Hitash lowered his blade. "We'll take our chances."

The minotaur placed its hands together before its face and gave a shallow bow. "As you wish." Then it cleared its throat and spoke. "You can see nothing else/ When you stare into my face/ I will look you in the eye/ And I can never lie/ What am I?"

The air beside the mage began to bend and waver. Tiny motes of light shot out in all directions, copied and recopied by the maze of mirrors. Then those glowing blue-green bits began to coalesce, and the room was suddenly filled with a blinding flash.

Hitash had to cover his face. He had been in darkness for so long, the light felt like burning needles jabbing into his eyes. The flash blinded him, and he went down on one knee.

For several long moments, Hitash simply stayed where he was, his hands over his face, waiting for the colorful blotches floating across his vision to fade. When he finally managed to open his eyes again, the room was illuminated with a soft, blue glow coming from an oval mirror. An oak frame surrounded its shimmering surface, and it floated several inches above the ground, supported by nothing but thin air.

Brielle too was having a hard time seeing, and she shaded her eyes. "Can it be?"

Hitash looked at the minotaur mage. It hadn't moved.

"I don't know," he replied. "But the minotaur could have escaped while we were blinded. At the very least, it believes what it said is true."

"It is true," said the mage.

"So we just speak the answer, and we can step through the mirror?" asked Brielle.

"Yes," said the minotaur. "One at a time."

"Where will it take us?"

The monster shook its head. "I do not know." It lowered its eyes. "I was summoned here. I haven't been outside the mirror for a very long time."

Brielle stepped up and placed her hand on the mirror's frame. She ran her fingers over the smooth edge, then she looked back at Hitash and smiled. "I know the answer."

"You do?" A chill of excitement ran up Hitash's spine. "Tell me."

"Who always looks you in the eye and promises to never lie?" Brielle crossed her arms over her chest and smirked.

Hitash shrugged. "Who?"

"A lover," replied Brielle. She turned and pushed her hand against the plane of the mirror.

"Wait—" shouted Hitash.

It was too late. The moment she made contact with the glass, the mirror flashed, and Brielle screamed. Hitash covered his eyes against the blinding light, and he heard something fall to the ground with a thump.

A heavy pit grew inside his gut, and a rush of sorrow filled his chest. Opening his eyes, he found Brielle slumped on the floor.

The minotaur looked at her, lying on the ground. "She's dead."

Sorrow was replaced by hatred, and Hitash pointed the tip of his sword in the minotaur's face. "You tricked us."

The mage held up its hands. "N...n...no. N...n...no," it stuttered. "She spoke the wrong answer."

Hitash narrowed his eyes. He had no reason to trust this creature. But something inside told him that the mage was telling the truth.

"You said you didn't know the answer."

"I don't."

"Then how do you know what she said wasn't right?"

The minotaur sighed. "I have seen others try to escape the Spiderweb Mirror. I do not know the correct answer to the riddle, but I know some of the wrong answers."

Hitash looked at the mirror. It sat there, patiently waiting.

"What other answers are incorrect?"

The minotaur mage cleared its throat. "It's not a dog, nor a cat. It's not gold nor jewels. It's not water nor flame, nor the sun nor the moon. None of these things, nor a hundred others, are true." It grabbed its chin in its hand.

"Anything else?"

The mage shook its head. "No, nothing I remember." Then its eyes lit up. "Yes. There is one more. Medusa."

"No dog, cat, gold, jewels, water, flame, sun, moon, or medusa?"

"Or lover," reminded the minotaur.

The hero looked into the floating mirror. His own face stared back at him. Unlike the other mirrors in the maze, this one seemed to blur everything but his own image. All he saw

behind his own face was a soft blue glow. It was strange. Though he was surrounded by mirrors, he hadn't looked at himself for some time. His skin was dark and covered with soot. His chin and neck were concealed by a thick beard. His eyes looked sunken and red. He hardly recognized himself. Was this what he had become? It had to be. Mirrors never lie.

That was it. Hitash stepped back. If there was even a chance the minotaur was telling the truth, then it was worth the risk. Hitash shrugged. No matter what happened, he would be free—released through the mirror or through death.

Gripping his sword, Hitash took a deep breath. "My own reflection," he said. Looking one last time at the minotaur mage, the hero raised his free hand and placed his finger against the glass.

The world Hitash had known for nearly two years dissolved in the blink of an eye. Sunlight beat down on him from above. The burning needles in his eyes from the appearance of the mirror now seemed trivial compared to the pain of bright, natural light. His head felt as if it was going to explode, and even with his eyes tightly shut and his hands held over his face, he could see the shadowy images of the square-topped buildings clearly against the inside of his eyelids.

There was a popping sound, and something slumped to the ground behind Hitash. He tried to look at what it was, but all he saw when he opened his eyes was a wash of white light.

"Come on," said a familiar voice. "We must get off the street."

The minotaur mage grabbed Hitash by the arm and pulled lightly. The hero had little choice, so he followed the insistent tugging. He walked several steps, fully blinded and trusting of his guide before darkness descended again. At first Hitash thought the minotaur had brought him back into the Spiderweb Mirror, but seeing no reflections he knew he was still free.

Here, inside a small chamber, Hitash's eyes could handle the light, and he looked around. The ground was packed dirt, and the walls looked to be made of brick and mud. Pillars formed a circle around the room. Spaced wide enough for two men to stand side-by-side between them, the round columns were adorned with pictures of dragonlike creatures, each in the middle of some ritual or religious activity.

Hitash stretched his back, trying to adjust to his new freedom. Something slipped out of his belt and hit the floor at his feet. Bending down, Hitash picked up a folded bit of parchment. It was a scroll—one the hero had found within the Mirror but had never the time—nor the light—to inspect it. He grabbed hold of it and straightened up.

"What is this place?"

"Shhh," said the minotaur in a whisper. It was standing beside the door, looking out into the street. "I don't know. But you must be quiet. We do not know who inhabits this place." It looked back at Hitash. "We may not be welcome here."

Hitash looked the minotaur over. The mage stood comfortably balanced on both legs.

"I thought you said you were injured."

The minotaur shrugged. "I said no such thing."

"So you're not hurt?"

The creature shook his head. "Leg works fine."

Hitash's skin tingled with fury as realization dawned. "You used us as guinea pigs. Let us test the mirror before you stepped through."

"I showed you the mirror. That is all," replied the mage.

"You manipulated us."

"You're out aren't you?"

Hitash narrowed his eyes. "But Brielle isn't." He took a step forward, lifting his sword to split the mage in two.

"Shhh! Something's coming."

Hitash stepped up behind the minotaur. "Let me return the favor," he said.

Grabbing the mage by the scruff of its neck, Hitash burst out of the door into the bright light. The sun's rays still hurt, but his eyes had adjusted some, and he could see about a half-dozen winged beasts descending on him and the minotaur. As they flapped, their powerful beats stirred up dirt, and their outstretched arms blotted out the sun, casting a shadow on the entire road.

"You'll never outrun them," shouted the minotaur.

Hitash grit his teeth. "I don't have to," he said. Slashing down on the minotaur's leg with his blade, the hero cut a deep wound where the mage had been faking one. "I only have to run faster than you."

Hitash ran.

He'd long since dropped his battle armor and helm. They would not protect him if he were caught. Better to leave them behind and flee with his life. He carried nothing now except the strange bit of parchment he'd found in the mirror, a small leather sack, and his sword. Why he hadn't abandoned his blade with the rest of his heavy metal belongings he did not know. Some habits die hard, he guessed.

His ears pounded with the sound of his heart, and his chest burned. With every step, he wished it was his last. Still he kept on, forcing himself forward again and again when there was nothing left inside. A day's hard run outside of Dragon's Gate, but he was not safe.

The sun was setting over the edge of the valley to the East, and darkness settled over The Land like a woolen blanket. Looking back over his shoulder, Hitash could no longer see his pursuers. They were still there, he knew, but the night would provide him with the illusion of safety.

To Hitash Levat, even illusions were a luxury.

By the last of the dying light, he could just make out the edge of a thick jungle off to his left. Veering off of the trail he had been following, Hitash made for the cover of the trees.

What little light was left of the day disappeared immediately, and Hitash instinctively put his hands out before him, not slowing his pace. His imprisonment had taught him a thing or two about darkness. He could see with his palms nearly as well as with his eyes.

After a few moments, he slowed and came to a stop. His frantic passage into cover had left him disoriented—a familiar feeling for the hero. Squinting his eyes, he looked through the dark forest for a good spot to hole up for the night.

Hitash stood, glaring into the night and trying to catch his breath. Great, gnarled trees took shape as his eyes adjusted. The ground beneath his feet was almost completely devoid of vegetation. The dirt was flat and oddly sparse, as if someone had swept it clean like the floor of a cabin. Above, he could just make out the tiny pinpricks of moonlight coming through the canopy between the wide, overlapping leaves.

"Probably this dark in here during the day," he mumbled. He shrugged and headed deeper into the jungle.

Two steps, and Hitash was falling. The ground just seemed to disappear, and he smashed down onto his shoulder, on top of a small pile of dirt.

Rolling over and sitting up, Hitash held his injured arm against his body. It throbbed a bit, but it didn't feel broken or seriously hurt. He moved his shoulder around in a circle, trying to work off the pain.

Everything around him was dark. All he could see was a small circle of weak light about ten feet above his head.

"Sinkhole," Hitash mused. "Perfect."

Reaching into the sack on his belt, Hitash pulled out a smooth, round stone.

"Lume."

The stone began to glow a pale blue. Cupping his hand over the magic light, Hitash scanned his surroundings.

Just as he had expected, he had fallen into a sinkhole. Roots of several different trees had converged on this place, tearing out and using up the soil beneath the jungle floor. He must have stepped on a soft spot, and the dirt had collapsed, unable to support his weight.

By accident—or the favor of the gods—Hitash had found the perfect place to hide.

Tucking himself into the farthest corner of the cave, Hitash made himself comfortable. He placed his mage-lit stone behind a root and piled dirt up around it.

No need to draw any attention, he thought.

Then he unrolled the scroll he'd found in the Spiderweb Mirror. The edges of the parchment were adorned with golden sigils and lavish illuminations. Most of the symbols he couldn't read. Pictures of dragon-headed men fighting against elvish warriors with bows ran down one side. Along the other were clusters of archaic-looking runes. Parts were very clearly understandable. Others, not so much.

The parts he could understand looked to be a retelling of history. It spoke of the Drakona and their various wars. It continued on for some time about the battles that raged. To Hitash, it looked as if one of these wars lasted for nearly a hundred years. There was much death and destruction, finally ending with something the writer of the scroll called the "Great Sleep."

Whatever that was, it must be over now. No one in Dragon's Gate was sleeping when Hitash had arrived. The city itself bustled and moved like the biggest metropolis the hero had ever seen. Buildings made of stone and packed mud rose high into the air. Unlike the great domes of Rokos or the spires of Luxor, all the structures in Dragon's Gate were flat on top. Where in other cities people would walk from building to building, conducting their business, here, huge winged creatures flew from one place to another, going about their daily routine in the sky rather than on the ground.

The roads were unfinished, and from what Hitash remembered, most of the structures didn't even have doors on the ground level. A man without wings in Dragon's Gate would be like a fish without gills in the sea.

Hitash rubbed his eyes. He'd need to have this whole scroll translated as soon as he could. He chuckled. The only people he knew of who could possibly do that were the Oracles of Rokos. It had been the bastard Matteo, an Oracle himself, who had trapped Hitash inside the Spiderweb Mirror in the first place. Wouldn't he be surprised when Hitash showed up with this?

On the back side, the parchment was blank. That gave the hero an idea. Fishing around once again inside his sack, Hitash pulled out another bit of blank parchment and a small bit of charcoal. Inside the Spiderweb Mirror he would rub the burnt wood on his face and exposed flesh. It reduced his reflections, making him harder to spot by others—and easier for him to ignore himself if he was looking at his own image in a mirror.

Now, though, he would use it to write his tale.

Gripping the nubby bit of burnt wood between his fingers, he placed it against the blank parchment and began.

The walls move and shift. Shadows cover every corner, concealing that which is real, revealing that which is not there. In the depths of the Spiderweb Mirror, an ordinary stone may appear to be a demon of the Abyss. Or worse, a manticore could be hiding within arm's reach, leaving you blissfully unaware, until its foul breath caresses the fine hairs on the back of your neck.

Hitash lifted the charcoal from the parchment. He was rambling. There were so many images flooding through his head, and he didn't really know where to start. The zombies, skeletons, Mage Spawn... He shuttered.

Lifting his piece of charcoal from the parchment, Hitash placed it back inside his pouch. He was tired, and he could barely keep his eyes open. He would have to do this at a later time—if there would be a later time.

Extinguishing his magical light, the hero rested his head against the soft dirt wall of the sinkhole. His first night of freedom would be spent in hiding.

Jess Lebow has been writing fantasy fiction for about five years, and has plans to continue until his ninety-fifth birthday, if he lives that long. His third book, *The Darksteel Eye*, will be out in stores this coming January. And his previous book, *The Wind of War*, is up for an Origins Award this year.