

Roger Zelazny. Coming to a Cord

Preface from Pirate Writings: This story takes up the second Amber series where "The Shroudling and the Guisel" (which appeared in the first issue of Realms of Fantasy) left off. It shows the continuing tale of Merlin's strangling cord, Frakir, while telling more about the leftover guisel and the sorcerer responsible for the affair behind the mirror. Flora and the visiting Luke are drawn into the action.

I have been using an occasional short story of late to tie up loose ends I'd left hanging in previous Amber books and stories, as well as to continue the overall narrative. The first of these stories was "The Salesman's Tale," featuring Luke and Vialle, which appeared in the February 1994 (#6) issue of Amberzine, and the second was "Blue Horse, Dancing Mountains," which will appear this Summer in the AvoNova collection of gambling stories, Wheel of Fortune, edited by myself. "The Shroudling and the Guisel" was the third Amber story, and "coming to a Cord" is the fourth.

So, if anyone has a burning Amber question, I suggest they send it to me c/o AvoNova and I may be able to straighten the matter out in one of these stories (I may not, also). And to all you Amber fans, thanks for hanging around for so long.

-Roger Zelazny

It is no fun being tied to a bedpost when you are feeling under the weather. I phased back and forth between visibility and invisibility uncontrollably. On the other wrist, I felt my ability to communicate beginning to return. My increased sentience had remained with me ever since my strange journey with Merlin in the place between shadows. But there was a shock on my return to this reality. Slowly now, I was recovering from it, though some of the symptoms were slower in going than others. Consequently, it took me much longer than it normally would have to unknot myself.

I am Frakir, strangling cord to Merlin--Lord of Amber and Prince of Chaos. Normally, too, he would never have abandoned me like this, in the blasted apartments of Brand, late Prince of Amber and would-be Lord of the Universe. But he was under a mild spell Brand had actually left about for his son Rinaldo. However, Merlin has such a strong affinity with Rinaldo--also known as Luke--by virtue of their long association, that the spell latched onto him. He must have shaken it by now, but that still left me in an awkward position, with him doubtless back in the Courts.

I did not feel like waiting around with all the rebuilding and redecorating going on. They could decide to chuck the bed, with me attached, and go for all new stuff.

I finished unknotting myself. At least Merlin had used no magic when he'd tied me there. On the other hand, it was a tight knot, and I squirmed for a long while to get myself unlooped. Finally, the thing was loosened and I was able to undo it. Once I had freed myself from its subtle geometries, I slithered down the bedpost to the ground. This left me in a position to slip away, should a gang of furniture movers suddenly appear. In fact, it suddenly seemed a good idea to get out of the fast traffic lane now.

I moved away from the bed--out of Brand's room and into Merlin's--wondering what had been the secret of that ring he'd found and put on--the spikard thing.

That it was extremely powerful and drew its energies from many sources was obvious to a being such as myself. That it seemed a thing of the same order as the sword Werewindle was also readily apparent, despite their varied forms to the eye of a human. Suddenly, it occurred to me that Merlin might not notice this, and I began to think that it

might be necessary he should.

I crossed his room. I can move like a snake when I would. I have no ability to transport myself magically like almost everyone else I know, so I figured it were best to find someone who did. My only problem was that, in keeping with the family's general policy of personal secrecy on everything from magic to souffle recipes, many of them did not even know I existed.

...And for that matter I didn't know the location of their apartments, save for Merlin's, Brand's, Random and Vialle's, and Martin's--which Merlin sometimes visited. Random and Vialle's would be hard to reach, with all the work that was going on. So I headed off in the direction of Martin's rooms and slithered under the door when I got there. He had rock posters on most of his walls, as well as the speakers for a magically powered CD player. He, alas, was absent, and I had no idea when he might return.

I went back out into the hall and slithered along it, listening for a familiar voice, checking under doors, into rooms. This went on for some time before I heard Flora say, "Oh, bother!" from behind a door up the hall. I headed in that direction. She was one of the ones privy to my existence.

Her door was closed, but I was able to make my way beneath it into a highly decorated sitting room. She seemed in the process of mending a broken fingernail with some sort of goo.

I crossed the room to her side, maintaining my invisibility, and wrapped myself about her right ankle.

Hello, I said. _This is Frakir, Merlin's friend and strangling cord. Can you help me?_

Following a moment of silence, she said, "Frakir! What's happened? What do you need?"

I was inadvertently abandoned, I explained, _while Merlin was under the influence of a peculiar spell. I need to get in touch with him. I've realized something he may need to know. Also, I want to get back on his wrist._

"I'll give his Trump a try," she said, "though if he's in the Courts I'll probably not be able to reach him."

I heard her open a drawer, and moments later I listened to her fumbling with cards. I tried to tune in on her thoughts as she manipulated them, but I could not.

"Sorry," she said, after a time. "I can't seem to get through to him."

Thanks for trying, I told her.

"When did you get separated from Merlin?" she asked.

It was the day the Powers met in the back hall, I said.

"What sort of spell did Merlin get caught up in?"

One that was hanging fairly free in Brand's quarters. You see, Merlin's and Brand's rooms being next door to each other, he'd entered out of curiosity when the wall fell during the confrontation.

"Frakir, I don't think that was an accident," she said. "One Power or the other probably arranged for things to be so."

Seems likely when one thinks about it, Princess.

"What do you want to do now? I'll be glad to help," she said.

I'd like to find a way to get back to Merlin, I said. _He's had a general aura of danger about him for some time--to which I am particularly sensitive._

"I understand," she said, "and I'll find a way. It may take a few days, but I'll figure something."

All right. I'll wait, I said. _I've no real choice in the matter._

"You're welcome to stay with me till that happens."

I'll do that, I said. _Thanks._

I found a comfortable-looking table and wrapped myself about one of

its legs. I went into stasis then, if one needs a word for it. It is not sleep, as there is no loss of consciousness. But there is no thinking in the conventional sense either. I just sort of spread out my awareness and _am_, until I am needed.

How long I lay coiled in this position, I have no way of telling. I was alone in the sitting room, though I was aware of Flora's breathing next door.

Suddenly, she shrieked. This time, I just loosened myself and dropped to the floor.

As I began hurrying toward the room I heard another voice. "Sorry," it said. "I am pursued. I had no choice but to drop in without invitation."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Well, I'm a sorcerer," he said. "I was hiding in your mirror, as I have every _night_ for a long while. I have this crush on you and I like to watch you as you go about your business."

"Peeping Tom--a voyeur!" she said.

"No," he said. "I think you're a really nice-looking lady, and I like watching you. That's all."

"There are many legitimate ways by which you could have gained an introduction," she said.

"True, but that way might have led to horrible complications in my life."

"Oh, you're married."

"Worse than that," he said.

"What, then?"

"No time now. I can feel its approach," he said.

"What's approach?"

"The guisel," he said. "I sent one to slay another sorcerer, but he disposed of it and sent one of his own after me. Didn't know he was that good. I don't know how to dispose of the things, and it will be oozing through that mirror in a matter of minutes, to destroy us all most nastily. So, this place being Amber and all, is there some hero available who might be anxious to earn another merit badge?"

"I think not," she replied. "Sorry."

Just then the mirror began to darken.

"Oh, it's coming!" he cried.

I had felt the menace it exuded some time before. But then, that is my job.

Now I got a glimpse of the thing. It was big, and wormlike, eyeless, but possessed of a shark-like mouth, a multitude of short legs, and vestigial wings. It was twice again the length of a human, and black, having crisscrossing red and yellow stripes. It slithered across our reflected room, rearing as it came on.

"You imply," Flora said, "in your quest for a hero, that it will make it through that interface and attack us?"

"In a word," said the strange little man, "yes."

When it does, I said to Flora, _throw me at it. Wherever I hit I'll stick--and I'll go for the throat._

"All right," she said, "and there's one other thing."

What's that?, I asked.

"Help! Help!" she cried.

It began crawling out through the silver, flower-bordered mirror. Flora unwound me from her ankle and threw me at the thing. It had no real neck, but I wrapped myself about its upper extremity below the mouth and began tightening immediately.

Flora continued to call out, and from somewhere up the hall I heard the sound of heavy footfalls.

I tightened my grip, but the creature's neck was like rubber.

The sorcerer was moving to exit the room when the door burst open

and the tall and husky, red-haired form of Luke entered.

"Flora!" he said, and then he saw the guisel and drew his blade.

On my recent journey with Merlin in the space between shadows I had gained the ability to converse at complex levels. My perceptions--which seem quite different--also became more acute. They showed me nothing special about Luke, the sorcerer, or the guisel, but Werewindle now burned of an entirely different light. I realized then that it was not merely a blade.

As Luke moved to position himself between Flora and the guisel, I heard the sorcerer say, "What is that blade?"

"'Tis called Werewindle," Luke replied.

"And you are...?"

"Rinaldo, King of Kashfa," Luke said.

"Your father--who was he?"

"Brand--Prince of Amber."

"Of course," the sorcerer said, moving again toward the door. "You can destroy that thing with it. Command it to draw energy while you're using it. It has a virtually limitless supply to draw upon."

"Why?" Luke asked.

"Because it isn't really a sword."

"What is it then?"

"Sorry," the sorcerer said, regarding the guisel, which was now moving toward us. "Out of time. Got to find another mirror."

I could tell that he was, unaware of my presence, really teasing Luke, because I had figured it out for myself and knew it would take only a moment to tell him, if one could speak.

Then I was disengaging and dropping as fast as I could, for Luke was swinging Werewindle, and I'd no desire to be severed. I really did not know what would happen if this were to occur--if both segments would wind up as wise, witty, and conscious as myself; or, perhaps, whether I would be destroyed in the process. And having no desire to learn this information firsthand, flight seemed most prudent.

I hit the floor before the blow fell. A section of the guisel's head also dropped, still writhing. I squirmed toward Luke's nearest ankle. Flora picked up a heavy chair and brought it down on the thing's back with considerable force, despite her broken fingernail. And she swung it a couple of more times, with some effect, while Luke was in the process of cutting it in half.

I found my way to where I was headed, crawled up, and caught hold.

Can you hear me, Luke? I tried then.

"Yes," he replied. "What are you?"

Merlin's strangling cord, Frakir.

Luke swung at the hind section then as it whipped toward him, tiny legs clawing. Then he whirled and halved the attacking forepart. Flora struck its rear end again with the chair.

I know what the sorcerer knew, I said.

"Oh, what's that?" he asked, slicing off another section and slipping on its gooey exudation as he retreated.

You might well be able to draw enough energy through Werewindle to destroy a world.

"Really?" he said, struggling to regain his feet as a section of the creature thrust itself upon him. "All right."

He touched it with the point of his blade and it withdrew from him as if shocked. Then he rose to his feet.

"You're right," he said. "There's something to it." He touched the attacking segment again and it vanished in a burst of blue fire.

"Flora! Get back!" he cried.

She did, and he proceeded to incinerate the section that had been about to attack her. Then another that came at him.

"I'm getting the hang of it," he said, turning to get another segment. "But I'm not quite sure why it works this way."

It's not just a sword, I said.

"What is it, then?"

Long before there was Werewindle, it was the spikard Rawg.

"Spikard? Like that strange ring Merlin picked up?"

Exactly.

With rapid moves then, Luke disposed of the rest of the guisel.

"Thanks, Frakir," he said, "for telling me how the thing worked.

I'd better try a quick search for that sorcerer now, though I've a hunch he disappeared into the nearest mirror."

I'd guess that, too.

"What was his name?"

He didn't say.

"It figures."

"Flora," he continued, "I'm going to look for that sorcerer. I'll be back in a bit. Good show."

She gave him a smile and he departed. Needless to say, the sorcerer did not turn up.

"Wonder where he came from, beyond the mirror," Luke asked.

I've no idea, I replied. _I think I might be more interested in the person who sent that thing after him._

Luke nodded.

"What now?" he asked.

I guess we tell Flora that her Peeping Tom has hit the road, I said. _You're a sorcerer. Any way of fixing her mirrors so he can't pull that routine again?_

"I think so," Luke said, moving to the nearest window and looking out. "I'll fix them in just a bit. What about you?"

I'd like to get back to Merlin.

"I can't send you through by Trumps if he's in the Courts--and I suspect he is."

What about Werewindle?

"I still don't know exactly how it works. I'm going to have to practice some with it."

Uh--why are you here? I asked.

"Had to talk to Vialle about a number of things," he said, "and she told me that Corwin might be by soon--and she offered me room and board if I wanted to wait for him for a few days."

Well, if you can wear me till he gets here maybe I can persuade him to take me with him. I've a feeling he'll be seeing Merlin again soon.

"I might, too, but it's hard to say at this point."

Okay. We can work it out when the time comes.

"What do you think is going on, anyway?"

Some horrible Wagnerian thing, I told him, _full of blood, thunder, and death for us all._

"Oh, the usual," Luke said.

Exactly, I replied.
