

Roger Zelazny. The Shroudling and the Guisel

Preface from _Realms of Fantasy_: This story takes up the affairs of Merlin, son of Corwin, from where I left him at the end of _Prince of Chaos_, the 10th and most recent book in my Amber series. As a Prince of Amber on his father's side and a Prince of Chaos on his mother's, Merlin has some problems--not the least of these being that he finds himself in the line of succession for the recently vacated Throne of Chaos, a position he is not anxious to assume. He had felt himself well-protected from it by the number of claimants ahead of him. Unfortunately, they have been dying off most rapidly, generally by means other than the natural. He suspects his mother, Dara, and his half-brother, Mandor, of having a hand in this. But he recently faced both of them down in a magical duel, and they seem to have had second thoughts about his tractability, should one of them manage to seat him on the Throne. Time will tell. In the meantime, he went off to one of Mandor's guest houses, hoping for a good night's sleep.

I awoke in a dark room, making love to a lady I did not recall having gone to bed with. Life can be strange. Also oddly sweet at times. I hadn't the will to destroy our congress, and I went on and on with what I was doing and so did she until we came to that point of sudden giving and taking, that moment of balance and rest.

I made a gesture with my left hand and a small light appeared and glowed above our heads. She had long black hair and green eyes, and her cheekbones were high and her brow wide. She laughed when the light came on, revealing the teeth of a vampire. Her mouth held not a trace of blood, making it seem somehow impolite for me to touch my throat seeking after any trace of soreness. "It's been a long time, Merlin," she said softly.

"Madam, you have the advantage of me," I said.

She laughed again. "Hardly," she answered, and she moved in such a fashion as to distract me entirely, causing the entire chain of events to begin again on my part.

"Unfair," I said, staring into those sea-deep eyes, stroking that pale brow. There was something terribly familiar there, but I could not understand it.

"Think," she said, "for I wish to be remembered."

"I...Rhanda?" I asked.

"Your first love, as you were mine," she said smiling, "there in the mausoleum. Children at play, really. But it was sweet, was it not?"

"It still is," I replied, stroking her hair. "No, I never forgot you. Never thought to see you again, though, after finding that note saying your parents no longer permitted you to play with me...thinking me a vampire."

"It seemed so, my Prince of Chaos and of Amber. Your strange strengths and your magics...."

I looked at her mouth, at her unsheathed fangs. "Odd thing for a family of vampires to forbid," I stated.

"Vampires? We're not vampires," she said. "We are among the last of the shroudling. There are only five families of us left in all the secret images of all the shadows from here to Amber--and farther, on into that place and into Chaos."

I held her more tightly and a long lifetime of strange lore passed through my head. Later I said, "Sorry, but I have no idea of what a shroudling is."

Later still she responded, "I would be very surprised if you did, for we have always been a secret race." She opened her mouth to me, and I saw by spirit-light a slow retraction of her fangs into normal-seeming dentition. "They emerge in times of passion other than feasting," she remarked.

"So you do use them as a vampire would," I said.

"Or a ghoul," she said. "Their flesh is even richer than their blood."

"'Their'?" I said.

"That of those we would take."

"And who might they be?" I asked.

"Those the world might be better off without," she said. "Most of them simply vanish. Occasionally, with a feast of jesters, only parts of some remain."

I shook my head.

"Shroudling lady, I do not understand," I told her.

"We come and go where we would. We are an undetected people, a proud people. We live by a code of honor which has protected us against all your understanding. Even those who suspect us do not know where to turn to seek us."

"Yet you come and tell me these things."

"I have watched you much of my life. You would not betray us. You, too, live by a code."

"Watched me much of my life? How?"

But we distracted each other then and that moment came to a close. I would not let it die, however. Finally, as we lay side by side, I repeated it. By then, however, she was ready for it.

"I am the fleeting shadow in your mirror," she said. "I look out, yet you see me not. All of us have our pets, my love, a person or place of hobby. You have always been mine."

"Why do you come to me now, Rhanda?" I asked. "After all these years?"

She looked away.

"Mayhap you will die soon," she said after a time, "and I wished to recall our happy days together at Wildwood."

"Die soon? I live in danger. I can't deny it. I'm too near the Throne. But I've strong protectors--and I am stronger than people think."

"As I said, I have watched," she stated. "I do not doubt your prowess. I've seen you hang many spells and maintain them. Some of them I do not even understand."

"You are a sorceress?"

She shook her head. "My knowledge of these matters, while extensive, is

purely academic," she said. "My own powers lie elsewhere."

"Where?" I inquired.

She gestured toward my wall. I stared. Finally, I said, "I don't understand."

"Could you turn that thing up?" she asked, nodding toward the spirit-light.

I did so.

"Now move it into the vicinity of your mirror."

I did that also. The mirror was very dark, but so was everything else there in Mandor's guest house, where I had elected to spend the night following our recent reconciliation.

I got out of bed and crossed the room. The mirror was absolutely black, containing no reflection of anything. "Peculiar," I remarked.

"No," she said. "I closed it and locked it after I entered here. Likewise, every other mirror in the house."

"You came in by way of the mirror?"

"I did. I live in the mirrorworld."

"And your family? And the four other families you mentioned?"

"We all of us make our homes beyond the bounds of reflection."

"And from there you travel from place to place?"

"Indeed."

"Obviously, to watch your pets. And to eat people of whom you disapprove?"

"That, too."

"You're scary, Rhanda." I returned to the bed, seating myself on its edge. I took hold of her hand and held it. "And it is good to see you again. I wish you had come to me sooner."

"I have," she said, "using the sleep spells of our kind."

"I wish you had awakened me."

She nodded. "I would like to have stayed with you, or taken you home with me. But for this part of your life you a certified danger bringer."

"It does seem that way," I agreed. "Still...Why are you here now, apart from the obvious?"

"The danger has spread. It involves us now."

"I actually thought that the danger in my life had been minimized a bit of late," I told her. "I have beaten off Dara's and Mandor's attempts to control me and come to an understanding of sorts with them."

"Yet still they will scheme."

I shrugged. "It is their nature. They know that I know, and they know I am their match. They know I am ready for them now. And my brother Jurt...we,

too, seem to have reached an understanding. And Julia...we have been reconciled. We--"

She laughed. "Julia has already used your 'reconciliation' to try to turn Jurt against you. I watched. I know. She stirs his jealousy with hints that she still cares more for you than for him. What she really wants is you removed, along with the seven in the running with you--and the others who stand ready. She would be queen in Chaos."

"She's no match for Dara," I said.

"Ever since she defeated Jasra, she's had a high opinion of herself. It has not occurred to her that Jasra had grown lazy and lost by a trick, not by a matter of power. She would rather believe her own strength greater than it is. And that is her weakness. She would be reunited with you to put you off-guard as well as to turn your brother against you once again."

"I am forewarned, and I thank you--though there are really only six others in the running for the Throne. I was number one, but a half dozen pretenders have recently turned up. You said seven. There's one I don't know about?"

"There is the hidden one," she said. "I do not know his name to tell you, though I know you saw him in Suhuy's pool. I know his appearance, Chaotic and human. I know that even Mandor considers him a worthy antagonist when it comes to scheming. Conversely, I believe Mandor is the main reason he removed himself to our realm. He fears Mandor."

"He inhabits the mirrorworld?"

"Yes, though he is not yet aware of our existence there. He found it by a near-impossible accident, but he simply thinks he has made a marvelous discovery--a secret way to go nearly anywhere, to see nearly anything without detection. Our people have avoided his awareness, using curves he cannot perceive let alone turn. It has made him considerably more formidable in his path to the Throne."

"If he can look out--even listen--through any mirror without being detected; if he can step out; assassinate someone, and escape by the same route--yes, I can understand it."

The night suddenly seemed very cold. Rhanda's eyes widened. I moved to the chair where I had thrown my garments and began dressing myself.

"Yes, do that," she said.

"There's more, isn't there?"

"Yes. The hidden one has located and brought back an abomination to our peaceful realm. Somewhere, he found a guisel."

"What is a guisel?"

"A being out of our myth, one we had thought long exterminated in the mirrorworld. Its kind nearly destroyed the shroudlings. A monster, it took an entire family to destroy what was thought to be the last of them."

I buckled my sword belt and drew on my boots. I crossed the chamber to the mirror and held my hand before its blackness. Yes, it seemed the source of the cold.

"You closed them and locked them?" I said. "All of the mirrors in this vicinity?"

"The hidden one has sent the guisel through the ways of the mirrors to destroy nine rivals to the Throne. It is on its way to seek the tenth now: yourself."

"I see. Can it break your locks?"

"I don't know. Not easily, I wouldn't think. It brings the cold, however. It lurks just beyond the mirror. It knows that you are here."

"What does it look like?"

"A winged eel with a multitude of clawed legs. It is about 10 feet long."

"If we let it in?"

"It will attack you."

"If we enter the mirror ourselves?"

"It will attack you."

"On which side is it stronger?"

"The same on either, I think."

"Well, hell! Can we enter by a different mirror and sneak up on it?"

"Maybe."

"Let's give it a shot. Come on."

She rose, dressed quickly in a blood-red garment, and followed me through a wall to a room that was actually several miles distant. Like most of the nobles of Chaos, brother Mandor believes in keeping a residence scattered. A long mirror hung on the far wall between the desk and a large Chaos clock. The clock, I saw, was about to chime a nonlinear for the observer. Great. I drew my blade.

"I didn't even know this one was here," she said.

"We're some distance away from the room where I slept. Forget space. Take me through."

"I'd better warn you first," she said. "According to tradition, nobody's ever succeeded in killing a guisel with a sword, or purely by means of magic. Guisels can absorb spells and lashes of force. They can take terrible wounds and survive."

"Any suggestions then?"

"Baffle it, imprison it, banish it. That might be better than trying to kill it."

"OK, we'll play it as it's dealt. If I get into real bad trouble, you get the hell out."

She did not reply but took my hand and stepped into the mirror. As I followed her, the antique Chaos clock began to chime an irregular beat. The inside of the mirror seemed the same as the room without, but turned around. Rhanda led me to the farthest point of the reflection, to the left, then stepped around a corner.

We came into a twisted, twilit place of towers and great residences, none of them familiar to me. The air bore clusters of wavy, crooked lines here and there. She approached one, inserted her free hand, and stepped through it, taking me with her. We emerged on a crooked street lined with twisted buildings.

"Thank you," I said then, "for the warning and for the chance to strike."

She squeezed my hand.

"It is not just for you, but for my family, also, that I do it."

"I know that," I said.

"I would not be doing this if I did not believe that you have a chance against the thing. If I did not, I would simply have warned you and told you what I know. But I also remember one day...back in Wildwood...when you promised to be my champion. You seemed a real hero to me then."

I smiled as I recalled that gloomy day. We had been reading tales of chivalry in the mausoleum. In a fit of nobility I led her outside as the thunder rolled, and I stood among the grave markers of unknown mortals--Dennis Colt, Remo Williams, John Gaunt--and swore to be her champion if ever she needed one. She had kissed me then, and I had hoped for some immediate evil circumstance against which to pit myself on her behalf. But none occurred.

We moved ahead, and she counted doors, halting at the seventh. "That one," she said, "leads through the curves to the place behind the locked mirror in your room."

I released her hand and moved past her.

"All right," I said, "time to go a-guiseing," and I advanced. The guisel saved me the trouble of testing the curves by emerging before I got there.

Ten or 12 feet in length, it was, and eyeless as near as I could tell, with rapid-beating cilia all over what I took to be its head. It was very pink, with a long, green stripe passing about its body in one direction, and a blue one in the other. It raised its cilia-end three or four feet above the ground and swayed. It made a squeaking sound. It turned in my direction. Underneath it had a large, angled mouth like that of a shark; it opened and closed it several times and I saw many teeth. A green, venomous-seeming liquid dripped from that orifice to steam upon the ground.

I waited for it to come to me, and it did. I studied the way it moved--quickly, as it turned out--on the horde of small legs. I held my blade before me in an en garde position as I awaited its attack. I reviewed my spells.

It came on, and I hit it with my Runaway Buick and my Blazing Outhouse spells. In each instance, it stopped dead and waited for the spell to run its course. The air grew frigid and steamed about its mouth and midsection. It was as if it were digesting the magic and rushing it down entropy lane. When the steaming stopped, it advanced again and I hit it with my Demented Power Tools spell. Again, it halted, remained motionless, and steamed. This time I rushed forward and struck it a great blow with my blade. It rang like a bell, but nothing else happened, and I drew back as it stirred.

"It seems to eat my spells and excrete refrigeration," I said.

"This has been noted by others," Rhanda responded.

Even as we spoke, it torqued its body, moving that awful mouth to the top, and it lunged at me. I thrust my blade down its throat as its long legs clawed at or caught hold of me. I was driven over backwards as it closed its mouth, and I heard a shattering sound. I was left holding only a hilt. It had bitten off my blade. Frightened, I felt after my new power as the mouth opened again.

The gates of the spikard were opened, and I struck the creature with a raw force from somewhere in Shadow. Again, the thing seemed frozen as the air about me grew chill. I tore myself away from it, bleeding from dozens of small wounds. I rolled away and rose to my feet, still lashing it with the spikard, holding it cold. I tried using the blade to dismember it, but all it did was eat the attack and remain a statue of pink ice.

Reaching out through Shadow, I found myself another blade. With its tip, I traced a rectangle in the air, a bright circle at its center. I reached into it with my will and desire. After a moment, I felt contact.

"Dad! I feel you but I can't see you!"

"Ghostwheel," I said, "I am fighting for my life, and doubtless those of many others. Come to me if you can."

"I am trying. But you have found your way into a strange space. I seem to be barred from entering there."

"Damn!"

"I agree. I have faced this problem before in my travels. It does not lend itself to ready resolution."

The guisel began to move again. I tried to maintain the Trump contact but it was fading. "Father!" Ghostwheel cried as I lost hold. "Try--" Then he was gone. I backed away. I glanced at Rhanda. Dozens of other shroudlings now stood with her, all of them wearing black, white, or red garments. They began to sing a strange, dirgelike song, as if a dark soundtrack were required for our struggle. It did seem to slow the guisel, and it reminded me of something from long ago.

I threw back my head and gave voice to that ululant cry I had heard once in a dream and never forgotten.

My friend came.

Kergma--the living equation--came sliding in from many angles at once. I watched and waited as he/she/it--I had never been certain--assembled itself. Kergma had been a childhood playmate, along with Glait and Gryll.

Rhanda must have remembered the being who could go anywhere, for I heard her gasp. Kergma passed around and around her body in greeting, then came to me and did the same.

"My friends! It has been so long since you called me to play! I have missed you!"

The guisel dragged itself forward against the song of the shroudlings as if beginning to overcome its power. "This is not a game," I answered. "That beast will destroy us all unless we nail it first," I said.

"Then I must solve it for us. Everything that lives is an equation, a complex quantum study. I told you that long ago."

"Yes. Try. Please."

I feared blasting the thing again with the spikard while Kergma worked on it, lest it interfere with his calculations. I kept my blade and spikard at ready as I continued to back away. The shroudling retreated with me, slowly.

"A deadly balance," Kergma said at last. "It has a wonderful life equation. Use your toy to stop it now."

I froze it again with the spikard. The shroudling's song went on.

At length Kergma said, "There is a weapon that can destroy it under the right circumstances. You must reach for it, however. It is a twisted blade you have wielded before. It hangs on the wall of a bar where once you drank with Luke."

"The Vorpall Sword?" I said. "It can kill it?"

"A piece at a time, under the proper circumstances."

"You know these circumstances?"

"I have solved for them."

I clutched my weapon and struck the guisel again with a force from the spikard. It squeaked and grew still. Then I discarded the blade I held and reached--far, far out through Shadow. I was a long time in finding what I sought and I had a resistance to overcome, so I added the force of the spikard to my own and it came to me. Once again, I held the shining, twisted Vorpall Sword in my hands.

I moved to strike at the guisel with it, but Kergma stopped me. So I hit it again with a lash of force from the spikard.

"Not the way. Not the way."

"What then?"

"We require a Dyson variation on the mirror equation."

"Show me."

Walls of mirrors shot up on all sides about me, the guisel, and Kergma, but excluding Rhanda. We rose into the air and drifted toward the center of the sphere. Our reflections came at us from everywhere.

"Now. But you must keep it from touching the walls."

"Save your equation. I may want to do something with it by and by."

I struck the dormant guisel with the Vorpall Sword. Again, it emitted a bell-like tone and remained quiescent.

"No," Kergma said. "Let it thaw."

So I waited until it began to stir, meaning that it would be able to attack me soon. Nothing is ever easy. From outside, I still heard the faint sounds of singing.

The guisel recovered more quickly than I had anticipated. But I swung and lopped off half its head, which seemed to divide itself into tissue-thin images which then flew away in every direction.

"Caloo! Callay!" I cried, swinging again and removing a long section of tissue from its right side, which repeated the phenomenon of the ghosting and the flight. It came on again and I cut again. Another chunk departed from its twisting body in the same fashion. Whenever its writhing took it near a wall, I intervened with my body and sword, driving it back toward the center and hacking at or slicing it.

Again and again it came on or flipped toward the wall. Each time my response was similar. But it did not die. I fought it til but a tip of its writhing tail moved before me.

"Kergma," I said then, "we've sent most of it down infinite lines. Now, can you revise the equation? Then I'll find sufficient mass with the spikard to allow you to create another guisel for me--one that will return to the sender of this one and regard that person as prey."

"I think so," Kergma said. "I take it you left that final piece for the new one to eat?"

"Yes, that was my thinking."

And so it was done. When the walls came down, the new guisel--black, its stripes red and yellow--was rubbing against my ankles like a cat. The singing stopped.

"Go and seek the hidden one," I said, "and return the message."

It raced off, passing a curve and vanishing.

"What have you done?" Rhanda asked me. So I told her.

"The hidden one will now consider you the most dangerous of his rivals," she said, "if he lives. Probably he will increase his efforts against you, in subtlety as well as violence."

"Good," I said. "That is my hope. I'd like to force a confrontation. He will probably not feel safe in your world now either, never knowing when a new guisel might come a-hunting."

"True," she said. "You have been my champion," and she kissed me.

Just then, out of nowhere, a paw appeared and fell upon the blade I held. Its opposite waved two slips of paper before me. Then a soft voice spoke: "You keep borrowing that sword without signing for it. Kindly do that now, Merlin. The other slip is for last time." I found a ballpoint beneath my cloak and signed as the rest of the cat materialized. "That'll be \$40," it said then. "It costs 20 bucks for each hour or portion of an hour, to vorp."

I dug around in my pockets and came up with the fees. The cat grinned and began to fade. "Good doing business with you," it said through the smile. "Come back soon. The next drink's on the house. And bring Luke. He's a great baritone."

I noticed as it faded that the shroudling family had also vanished.

Kregma moved nearer. "Where are the others--Glait and Gryll?"

"I left Glait in a wood," I replied, "though he may well be back in the Windmaster's vase in Gramble's museum in the Ways of Sawall by now. If you see him, tell him that the bigger thing has not eaten me--and he will drink warm milk with me one night and hear more tales yet. Gryll, I believe, is in

the employ of my Uncle Suhuy."

"Ah, the Windmaster...those were the days," he said. _"Yes, we must get together and play again. Thank you for calling me for this one,"_ and he slid off in many directions and was gone, like the others.

"What now?" Rhanda asked.

"I am going home and back to bed." I hesitated, then said, "Come with me?"

She hesitated too, then nodded. "Let us finish the night as we began it," she said.

We walked through the seventh door and she unlocked my mirror. I knew that she would be gone when I awoke.
