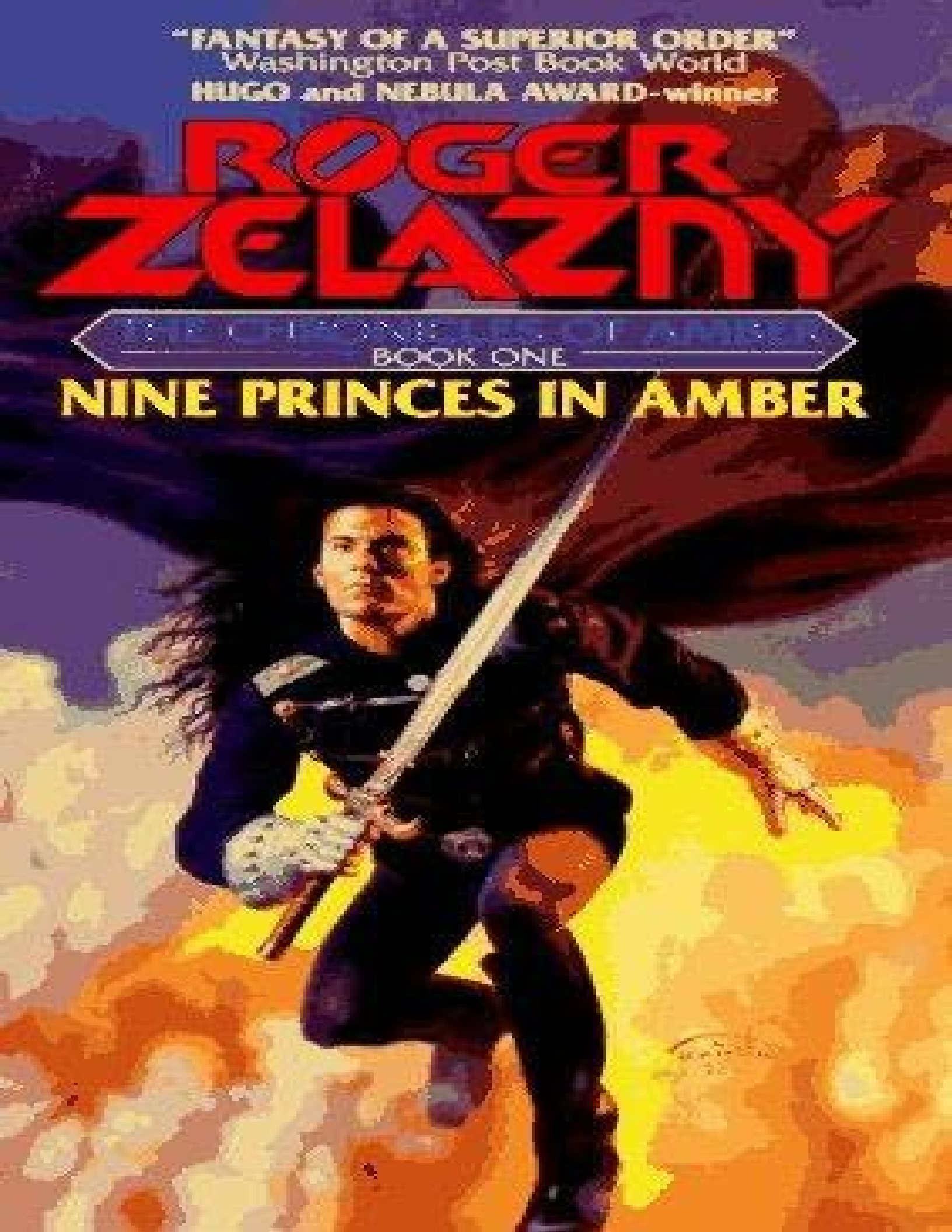


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ROGER ZELAZNY

THE CHRONICLES OF AMBER
BOOK ONE

NINE PRINCES IN AMBER



Nine Princes In Amber

Chapter 1

It was starting to end, after what seemed most of eternity to me. I attempted to wriggle my toes, succeeded. I was sprawled there in a hospital bed and my legs were done up in plaster casts, but they were still mine.

I squeezed my eyes shut, and opened them, three times. The room grew steady.

Where the hell was I?

Then the fogs were slowly broken, and some of that which is called memory returned to me. I recalled nights and nurses and needles. Every time things would begin to clear a bit, someone would come in and jab me with something. That's how it had been. Yes. Now, though, I was feeling halfway decent. They'd have to stop.

Wouldn't they?

The thought came to assail me: Maybe not.

Some natural skepticism as to the purity of all human motives came and sat upon my chest. I'd been over narcotized, I suddenly knew. No real reason for it, from the way I felt, and no reason for them to stop now, if they'd been paid to keep it up. So play it cool and stay dopey, said a voice which was my worst, if wiser, self.

So I did.

A nurse poked her head in the door about ten minutes later, and I was, of course, still sacking Z's. She went away.

By then, I'd reconstructed a bit of what had occurred

I had been in some sort of accident, I remembered vaguely. What had happened after that was still a blur; and as to what had happened before, I had no inkling whatsoever. But I had first been in a hospital and then brought to

this place, I remembered. Why? I didn't know.

However, my legs felt pretty good. Good enough to hold me up, though I didn't know how much time had lapsed since their breaking--and I knew they'd been broken.

So I sat up. It took me a real effort, as my muscles were very tired. It was dark outside and a handful of stars were standing naked beyond the window. I winked back at them and threw my legs over the edge of the bed.

I was dizzy, but after a while it subsided and I got up, gripping the rail at the head of the bed, and I took my first step.

Okay. My legs held me.

So, theoretically, I was in good enough shape to walk out. I made it back to the bed, stretched out and thought. I was sweating and shaking. Visions of sugar plums, etc.

In the State of Denmark there was the odor of decay. . . . It had been an accident involving an auto, I recalled. One helluva one.... Then the door opened, letting in light, and through slits beneath my eyelashes I saw a nurse with a hypo in her hand.

She approached my bedside, a hippy broad with dark hair and big arms. Just as she neared, I sat up.

"Good evening," I said.

"Why-good evening," she replied.

"When do I check out?" I asked.

"I'll have to ask Doctor."

"Do so," I said.

"Please roll up your sleeve."

"No thanks."

"I have to give you an injection"

"No you don't. I don't need it"

"I'm afraid that's for Doctor to say."

"Then send him around and let him say it. But in the meantime, I will not permit it."

"I'm afraid I have my orders."

"So did Eichmann, and look what happened to him," and I shook my head slowly.

"Very well," she said. "I'll have to report this. . ."

"Please do," I said, "and while you're at it, tell him I've decided to check out in the morning."

"That's impossible. You can't even walk--and there were internal injuries...."

"We'll see," said I. "Good night" She swished out of sight without answering.

So I lay there and mulled. It seemed I was in some sort of private place--so somebody was footing the bill. Whom did I know? No visions of relatives appeared behind my eyes. Friends either. What did that leave?

Enemies?

I thought a while.

Nothing.

Nobody to benefact me thus.

I'd gone over a cliff in my car, and into a lake, I suddenly remembered. And that was all I remembered.

I was...

I strained and began to sweat again.

I didn't know who I was.

But to occupy myself, I sat up and stripped away all my bandages. I seemed all right underneath them, and it seemed the right thing to do. I broke the cast on my right leg, using a metal strut I'd removed from the head of the bed. I had a sudden feeling that I had to get out in a hurry, that there was something I had to do.

I tested my right leg. It was okay.

I shattered the cast on my left leg, got up, went to the closet. No clothes there.

Then I heard the footsteps. I returned to my bed and covered over the broken casts and the discarded bandages.

The door swung inward once again.

Then there was light all around me, and there was a beefy guy in a white jacket standing with his hand on the wall switch.

"What's this I hear about you giving the nurse a hard time?" he asked, and there was no more feigning sleep.

"I don't know," I said. "What is it?" That troubled him for a second or two, said the frown then, "It's time for your shot."

"Are you an M.D.?" I asked.

"No, but I'm authorized to give you a shot"

"And I refuse it" I said, "as I've a legal right to do. What's it to you?"

"You'll have your shot," he said, and he moved around to the left side of the bed. He had a hypo in one hand which had been out of sight till then. It was a very foul blow, about four inches below the belt buckle, I'd say, and it left

him on his knees.

" ____ ____!" he said, after a time.

"Come within spitting distance again," I said, "and see what happens."

"We've got ways to deal with patients like you," he gasped. So I knew the time had come to act.

"Where are my clothes?" I said.

" ____ ____!" he repeated

"Then I guess I'll have to take yours. Give them to me." It became boring with the third repetition, so I threw the bedclothes over his head and clobbered him with the metal strut.

Within two minutes, I'd say, I was garbed all in the color of Moby Dick and vanilla ice cream. Ugly.

I shoved him into the closet and looked out the lattice window. I saw the Old Moon with the New Moon in her arms, hovering above a row of poplars. The grass was silvery and sparkled. The night was bargaining weakly with the sun. Nothing to show, for me, where this place was located. I seemed to be on the third floor of the building though, and there was a cast square of light off to my left and low, seeming to indicate a first floor window with someone awake behind it.

So I left the room and considered the hallway. Off to the left, it ended against a wall with a latticed window, and there were four more doors, two on either side. Probably they let upon more doors like my own. I went and looked out the window and saw more grounds, more trees, more night, nothing new. Turning, I headed in the other direction.

Doors, doors, doors, no lights from under any of them, the only sounds my footsteps from the too big borrowed shoes.

Laughing Boy's wristwatch told me it was five forty-four. The metal strut was inside my belt, under the white orderly jacket, and it rubbed against my hip

bone as I walked. There was a ceiling fixture about every twenty feet, casting about forty watts of light.

I came to a stairway, off to the right, leading down. I took it. It was carpeted and quiet.

The second floor looked like my own, rows of rooms, so I continued on. When I reached the first floor I turned right, looking for the door with light leaking out from beneath it.

I found it, way up near the end of the corridor, and I didn't bother to knock.

The guy was sitting there in a garish bathrobe, at a big shiny desk, going over some sort of ledger. This was no ward room. He looked up at me with burning eyes all wide and lips swelling toward a yell they didn't reach, perhaps because of my determined expression. He stood, quickly. I shut the door behind me, advanced, and said:

"Good morning. You're in trouble."

People must always be curious as to trouble, because after the three seconds it took me to cross the room, his words were:

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," I said, "that you're about to suffer a lawsuit for holding me incommunicado, and another one for malpractice, for your indiscriminate use of narcotics. I'm already suffering withdrawal symptoms and might do something violent...."

He stood up.

"Get out of here," he said.

I saw a pack of cigarettes on his desk. I helped myself and said, "Sit down and shut up. We've got things to talk about."

He sat down, but he didn't shut up:

"You're breaking several regulations," he said.

"So we'll let a court decide who's liable," I replied. "I want my clothes and my personal effects. I'm checking out.."

"You're in no condition-"

"Nobody asked you. Pony up this minute, or answer to the law." He reached toward a button on his desk, but I slapped his hand away.

"Now!" I repeated. "You should have pressed that when I came in. It's too late now."

"Mr. Corey, you're being most difficult . .

Corey?

"I didn't check me in here," I said, "but I damn well have a right to check me out. And now's the time. So let's get about it."

"Obviously, you're in no condition to leave this institution," he replied. "I cannot permit it I am going to call for someone to escort you back to your room and put you to bed."

"Don't try it," I said, "or you'll find out what condition I'm in. Now, I've several questions. The first one's Who checked me in, and who's footing my bill at this place?"

"Very well," he sighed, and his tiny, sandy mustaches sagged as low as they could.

He opened a drawer, put his hand inside, and I was wary. I knocked it down before he had the safety catch off: a .32 automatic, very neat; Colt. I snapped the catch myself when I retrieved it from the desk top; and I pointed it and said: "You will answer my questions. Obviously you consider me dangerous. You may be right." He smiled weakly, lit a cigarette himself, which was a mistake, if he intended to indicate aplomb. His hands shook.

"All right, Corey-if it will make you happy," he said, "your sister checked

you in"

"?" thought I.

"Which sister?" I asked.

"Evelyn," he said.

No bells. So, "That's ridiculous. I haven't seen Evelyn in years," I said.

"She didn't even know I was in this part of the country." He shrugged.

"Nevertheless . .

"Where's she staying now? I want to call her," I said.

"I don't have her address handy."

"Get it."

He rose, crossed to a filing cabinet, opened it, rifled, withdrew a card. I studied it. Mrs. Evelyn Flaumel. . . .The New York address was not familiar either. but I committed it to memory. As the card said, my first name was Carl. Good. More data.

I stuck the gun in my belt beside the strut then, safety back on, of course.

"Okay," I told him. "Where are my clothes, and what're you going to pay me?"

"Your clothes were destroyed in the accident," he said, "and I must tell you that your legs were definitely broken-the left one in two places. Frankly, I can't see how you're managing to stay on your feet. It's only been two weeks-"

"I always heal fast," I said. "Now, about the money. . .

"What money?"

"The out-of-court settlement for my malpractice complaint. and the other one."

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Who's being ridiculous? I'll settle for a thousand, cash, right now."

"I won't even discuss such a thint."

"Well, you'd better consider it--and win or lose, think about the name it will give this place if I manage enough pretrial publicity. I'll certainly get in touch with the AMA, the newspapers. the--"

"Blackmail," he said, "and I'll have nothing to do with it."

"Pay now, or pay later, after a court order," I said. "I don't care. But it'll be cheaper this way."

If he came across, I'd know my guesses were right and there was something crooked involved.

He glared at me, I don't know how long.

Finally, "I haven't got a thousand here," he said.

"Name a compromise figure," I said.

After another pause, "It's larceny."

"Not if it's cash-and-carry, Charlie. So, call it."

"I might have five hundred in my safe."

"Get it."

He told me, after inspecting the contents of a small wall safe, there was four-thirty, and I didn't want to leave fingerprints on the safe just to check him out. So I accepted and stuffed the bills into my side pocket.