

ALSO BY MICHAEL MOORCOCK

*Behold the Man*

*Breakfast in the Ruins*

*Gloriana*

*The Metatemporal Detective*

THE CORNELIUS QUARTET

*The Final Program*

*A Cure for Cancer*

*The English Assassin*

*The Condition of Muzak*

BETWEEN THE WARS: THE PYAT QUARTET

*Byzantium Endures*

*The Laughter of Carthage*

*Jerusalem Commands*

*The Vengeance of Rome*

*And many more*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MICHAEL JOHN MOORCOCK is the author of a number of science fiction, fantasy, and literary novels, including the Elric novels, the Cornelius Quartet, *Gloriana*, *King of the City*, and many more. As editor of the controversial British science fiction magazine *New Worlds*, Moorcock fostered the development of the New Wave in the U.K. and indirectly in the U.S. He won the Nebula Award for his novella *Behold the Man*. He has also won the World Fantasy Award, the British Fantasy Award, and many others.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

MICHAEL WM. KALUTA studied art at the Richmond Professional Institute (now Virginia Commonwealth University). Arriving in New York in 1969, he was hired by DC Comics and eventually assigned to what is now a classic stint: the creation of *The Shadow* comic book. In the mid-seventies he, Jeffrey Jones, Barry Windsor-Smith, and Bernie Wrightson formed The Studio; he later collaborated with Elaine Lee in adapting her play *Starstruck* to comics. He is inspired by Frank Frazetta, Roy Krenkel, and Al Williamson.

## THE ETERNAL CHAMPION

(1962)

They called for me, that is all I really know. They called for me and I went to them, for I could not do otherwise. The will of the whole of Humanity was a strong thing and it smashed through the ties of Time, the chains of Space and dragged me to it. Why me? I still do not know, though they thought they had told me. But I am here, shall always be here and if, as wise men tell me, time is cyclic, then I shall one day return to the Twentieth Century A.D.—for (it was no doing of mine) I am immortal.

## CHAPTER ONE

**BETWEEN WAKEFULNESS AND** sleeping, we have most of us had the illusion of hearing voices, scraps of conversation, phrases spoken in unfamiliar tones. Sometimes we attempt to attune our minds so that we can hear more, but we are rarely successful. Between wakefulness and sleeping, I began, every night, to hear voices...

*Had I hung, for an eternity in limbo? Was I alive—dead? Was there a memory of a world which lay in the far past or the distant future? Of another world which seemed closer? And the names? Was I John Daker or Erekosë? Was I either of these? Many other names, Shaleen, Artos, Brian, Umpata, Roland, Ilanth, Ulysses, Alric, fled away down the ghostly rivers of my memory. I hung in darkness, bodiless. A man spoke. Where was he? I tried to look but had no eyes to see.*

\* \* \*

“Erekosë the Champion, where are you?”

Another voice, then: “Father...it is only a legend...”

“No, Iolinda. I feel he is listening. Erekosë...”

I tried to answer, but had no voice. Swirling half-dreams of a house in a great city of miracles, a swollen, grimy city of miracles, crammed with dull-coloured machines, many of which bore human passengers. Of buildings, beautiful beneath their coatings of dust and of other, brighter buildings not so beautiful, with austere lines and many glass windows. Of a troop of riders galloping over an undulating countryside, flamboyant in armour of lacquered gold, coloured pennants draped around their blood-encrusted lances. Their faces were heavy with weariness. Of more faces, many faces, some of which I half recognized, others which were unfamiliar, people clad in strange clothes. A picture of a white haired, middle-aged man who had a tall, spiked crown upon his head. His mouth moved, he was speaking . . .

“Erekosë, it is I, King Rigenos, Defender of Humanity. You are needed again, Erekosë. The Hounds of Evil rule a third of the world and humankind is weary of the war against them. Come to us, Erekosë and lead us to victory. From the Plains of Melting Ice to the Mountains of Sorrow they have set up their corrupt standard and I fear they will advance yet further into our territories.”

The woman’s voice: “Father, this is only an empty tomb. Not even the mummy of Erekosë remains—it became drifting dust long ago. Let us leave and return to Necranal to marshal the living peers.”

I felt like a fainting man who strives to fight against dizzy oblivion but, however much he tries, cannot take control of his own brain. Again I tried to answer, but could not.

It was as if I wavered backwards through time, while every atom of me wanted to go forwards. I had the sensation of vast size as if I were made of stone with eyelids of granite, measuring miles across—eyelids which I could not open. And then I was tiny—the most minute grain in the universe, and yet I felt I belonged to the whole far more than the stone giant.

Memories came and went. The whole panorama of the twentieth century, its beauties and its bitteresses, its satisfactions, its strifing, rushed into my mind like air into a vacuum. But it was only momentary, for the next second my entire being was flung elsewhere—to a world which was Earth, but not the Earth of John Daker, not quite the world of dead Erekosë, either.

There were three great continents, two close together, divided from the other by a vast sea containing many islands, large and small.

I saw an ocean of ice which I knew to be slowly shrinking—the Plains of Melting Ice. I saw the third continent which bore lush flora, mighty forests, blue lakes and was bound along its northern coasts by a towering chain of mountains—the Mountains of Sorrow. This I knew to be the domain of the Eldren, whom King Rigenos had called the Hounds of Evil.

Now, on the other two continents, I saw the wheatlands of the West on the continent of Zavara, with their tall cities of multicoloured rock, the rich cities of the wheatlands—Stalaco, Calodemia, Mooros and Ninadoon.

There were the great seaports—Shilaal, Wedmah, Sinana, Tarkar, and Noonos of towers cobbled with precious stones.

Then I saw the fortress cities of the Continent of Necralala, with the capital city Necranal chief among

them, built on, into and about a mighty mountain, peaked by the spreading palace of its warrior kings.

Now a little more came clear as, in the background of my awareness, I heard a voice calling *Erekosë*, *Erekosë*, *Erekosë*...

The warrior kings of Necranal, kings for two thousand years of Humanity united, at war, and united again. The warrior kings of whom King Rigenos was the last living and aging now, with only a daughter, Iolinda, to carry on his line. Old and weary with hate—but still hating. Hating the unhuman folk whom he called the Hounds of Evil, mankind's age-old enemies, reckless and wild, linked, it was said, by a thin line of blood to the human race—an outcome of a union between an ancient queen and the Evil One, Azmobaana. Hated by King Rigenos as soulless immortals, slaves of Azmobaana's machinations.

And, hating, he called upon John Daker, whom he called Erekosë, to aid him with his war against them.

"Erekosë, I beg thee answer me. Are you ready to come?" His voice was loud and echoing and when, after a struggle, I could reply, my own voice seemed to echo also.

"I am ready," I replied, "but appear to be chained."

"*Chained?*" There was consternation in his voice. "Are you, then, a prisoner of Azmobaana's frightful minions? Are you trapped upon the Ghost Worlds?"

"Perhaps," I said. "But I do not think so. It is space and time which chain me. I am separated from you by a gulf."

"Already we pray that you may come to us."

"Then continue," I said.

I was falling away again. I thought I remembered laughter, sadness, pride. Then, suddenly, more faces, I felt as if I witnessed the passing of everyone I had known, down the ages, and then one face superimposed itself over the others—the head and shoulders of an amazingly beautiful woman, with blonde hair piled beneath a diadem of precious stones which seemed to light the sweetness of her oval face. "Iolinda," I said. I saw her more solidly now. She was clinging to the arm of the tall, gaunt man who wore a crown—King Rigenos.

They stood before an empty platform of quartz and gold, and resting on a cushion of dust was a straight sword which they dared not touch. Neither did they dare step too close to it for it gave off a radiation which might slay them.

It was a tomb in which they stood. The Tomb of Erekosë—my tomb. I moved towards the platform, hanging over it. Ages before, my body had been placed there. I stared at the sword which held no dangers for me but was unable, in my captivity, to pick it up. It was my spirit only which inhabited the dark place—but the whole of my spirit now, not the fragment which had inhabited the tomb for thousands of years. The fragment which had heard King Rigenos and had enabled John Daker to hear it, to come to it and be united with it.

"Erekosë!" called the king, straining his eyes through the gloom as if he had seen me. "Erekosë—we pray."

Then I experienced the dreadful pain which I suppose a woman to go through when bearing a child. A pain that seemed eternal and yet was intrinsically its own vanquisher. I was screaming, writhing in the air above them. Great spasms of agony—but an agony complete with purpose—the purpose of creation.

At last I was standing, materially, before them.

“I have come,” I said. “I am here, King Rigenos. I have left nothing worthwhile behind me—but do not let me regret that leaving.”

“You will not regret it, Champion.” He was pale, exhilarated, smiling. I looked at Iolinda who dropped her eyes modestly and then, as if against her will, raised them again to regard me. I turned to the dais on my right.

“My sword,” I said reaching for it.

I heard King Rigenos sigh with satisfaction.

“They are doomed, now, the dogs,” he said.

They had a sheath for the sword. It had been made days before. King Rigenos left to get it, leaving me alone with Iolinda. I did not question my being there and neither, it seemed, did she. We regarded one another silently until the king returned with the scabbard.

“This will protect us against your sword’s poison,” he said.

I took it, slid the sword into it. The scabbard was opaque, like glass. The metal was unfamiliar to me, as John Daker, light, sharp, dull as lead. Yet the feel of it awaked dim remembrance which I did not bother to arouse. Why was I the only one who could wear the sword without being affected by its radiation?

Was it because I was constitutionally different in some way to the rest of these people? Was it that the ancient Erekosë and the unborn John Daker (or was that vice versa?) had metabolisms which had become adapted in some way against the power which flowed from the sword?

I had become, in that transition from my own age to this, unconcerned. It was as if I was aware that my fate had been taken out of my own hands to a large extent. I had become a tool. If only I had known for what I should be used, then I might have fought against the pull and remained harmless, ineffectual John Daker. But perhaps I could not have fought.

At any rate, I was prepared from the moment I materialized in the Tomb of Erekosë to do whatever Fate demanded of me. Later, things were to change.

I walked out of the tomb into a calm day, warm with a light breeze blowing. We stood on a small hill.

Below us a caravan awaited—there were richly caparisoned horses and a guard of men dressed in that same golden armour I had seen in my dreams, but these warriors were fresher-looking.

The armour was fluted, embellished with raised designs, ornate and beautiful but, according to my sparse reading on the subject of armour, coupled with Erekosë's stirring memory, totally unsuitable for war. The fluting and embossing acted as a trap to catch the point of a spear or sword, whereas armour should be made to turn a point. This armour, for all its beauty, acted more as an extra danger than a protection.

The guards were mounted on heavy war horses but the beasts that knelt awaiting us resembled a kind of camel out of which all the camel's lumpen ugliness had been bred. These beasts were beautiful. On their high backs were cabins of ebony, ivory and mother-o'-pearl, curtained in scintillating silks.

We walked down the hill and, as we walked, I noticed that I was dressed in the pyjamas I had worn when first I went to bed. I was surprised, although they were not wholly incongruous, since the king's garments were flowing and loose, but they seemed wrong. I felt that I should have left these, also, behind me—on another body. But perhaps there is no body left behind.

At the request of the king, who seemed to be slightly wary of me, though he himself had summoned me, I entered the cabin he indicated and found it completely lined with deep cushions.

The camels climbed to their feet and we began to move swiftly through a narrow valley, its sides lined with evergreen trees which I could not place, something like spreading monkey-puzzle trees, but with more branches and broader leaves. The sword was across my knees. I inspected it. It was a plain soldier's sword, having no markings, a hilt of iron which fitted perfectly into my right hand as I gripped it. It was a good sword, but why it was poisonous to other humans I did not know. Presumably it was also lethal to those whom King Rigenos called the Hounds of Evil—the Eldren.

On we traveled, through the soft day, until I saw a city I recognized as Necranal, the city I had seen in my dreams. Far away, it towered upwards so that the entire mountain upon which it was built was hidden by buildings of wondrous architecture. Minarets, steeples and battlements shone in the sun and, above them all, many-towered, the Palace of Ten Thousand Windows as it was called.

I heard the king cry from his cabin:

“Katorn! Ride ahead and tell the people that Erekosë the Champion has come to drive the Evil Ones back to the Mountains of Sorrow.”

“Aye, sire,” said the man addressed, a sullen-faced individual, the Captain of the Imperial Guard I presumed.

He drew his horse out of line and galloped speedily along the road of white dust which wound, now, down an incline. I could see the road stretching for many miles into the distance towards Necranal. I watched the rider for a while but eventually wearying of this, strained my eyes to make out details in the great city structure.

The cities of London, New York and Tokyo were probably bigger in area, but not much. Necranal was spread around the base of the mountain for many miles. Surrounding the city was a high wall upon which turrets were mounted at intervals.

So, at last, we came to the great Main Gate of Necranal which swung open to admit us and we passed through into streets packed with jostling, cheering people who shouted so loudly I was forced, at times, to cover my ears for fear they would burst.

## CHAPTER TWO

At length our little caravan arrived at the summit of the mountain and the Palace of Ten Thousand Windows.

Here, I was shown the apartments prepared for me, some twenty rooms, most of them luxuriously furnished, but a few austere, weapon-lined. I was left alone and slaves brought me refreshment.

I felt as if I had been asleep for a long time and had awakened invigorated. I paced the rooms, exploring them, taking more interest in the weapons than in the furnishings which would have delighted even the most jaded sybarite. I stepped out onto one of several covered balconies and surveyed the great city of Necranal as the sun set over it. The faraway sky was full of smoky colour, purples and oranges, yellows and blues, these colours reflected in the domes and steeples of Necranal so that the entire city seemed to take on a softer texture, like a pastel drawing. As night came, slaves entered with lamps and placed them about the rooms.

When they were gone, the king and Katorm, Captain of the Imperial Guard, came and joined me as I stood on the balcony.

“Forgive us,” said King Rigenos, “if we come immediately to the Matter of the Human Kingdoms.”

“Certainly,” I said. “I am ready.” I was in fact very curious to learn the position.

“As I told you in the tomb, the Eldren now dominate the entire Southern Continent which they call Mernadin. Five years ago they recaptured the only real outpost we had on Mernadin—their ancient seaport of Paphanaal. There was little fighting. I admit that we had grown complacent and when they suddenly swept out of the Mountains of Sorrow we were unprepared.”

“You were able to evacuate most of your colonies, I take it?” I put in.

“There was little evacuation necessary—Mernadin was virtually uninhabited since human beings would not live in that land where the Hounds of Evil once ruled—and rule now. They believe the continent to be cursed, inhabited by the spirits of Hell.”

“Then why did you drive the Eldren back to the mountains in the first place if you had no need of their territories?”

“Because while they had the land under their control they were a constant threat to Humanity.”

“I see. Continue.”

“That threat is once again imminent,” the king’s voice was thick and trembling. His eyes were full of fear and hatred. “We expect them, at any moment, to launch an attack upon the Two Continents—upon Zavara and Necralala.”

“Have you had any indication, as yet, that they plan invasion?” I asked. “And if so, how long we have to get ready ourselves?”

“They’ll attack!” Katorm’s bleak eyes came to life. The thin beard framing his pale face seemed to bristle.

“They’ll attack,” agreed King Rigenos. “They would have overrun us now if we did not constantly war against them. We have to keep them back—once a breach is made, they will engulf us. Humanity, though, is battle-weary. We needed one of two things—fresh warriors or a leader to give the warriors we have new hope. The former was impossible—all Mankind fights the Eldren menace. So I called you, Erekosë, and held you to your vow.”

“What vow?” I said.

“That if ever the Eldren dominated Mernadin again you would come to decide the struggle between them and Humanity.”

I sighed. As John Daker I saw a meaningless war between two ferocious, blindly hating factions both of whom seemed to be conducting racial *jehads*, but the danger was patent. Humanity had to be saved.

“The Eldren,” I continued. “What do they say?”

“Under torture they die, but they will not speak their true plans. They are cunning—talk of peace, of mutual help. You cannot trust an Eldren wolf—they are treacherous, immoral and evil. We shall not be safe until their whole race is destroyed utterly. You must lead us to victory, Erekosë.”

“I will lead you,” I said as Iolinda joined us.

So I talked with generals and admirals. We pored over maps and discussed tactics, logistics, available men, animals and ships, while the fleets massed and the Two Continents were scoured for warriors, from boys of fifteen to men of fifty, all were marshaled beneath the double banner of Humanity which bore the arms of Zavara and Necralala and the standards of their King, Rigenos, their War Champion Erekosë. We planned a great land-sea invasion of Mernadin’s chief harbour and the surrounding province—Paphanaal.

Once Paphanaal, province and city, was taken we should have a beachhead from which other attacks inland could be made. When not conferring with the generals, I practised weaponry, riding, until I was skilled in those arts. It was more a case of remembering old skills than learning new ones.

The night before we were due to leave, to sail down the River Droonaa to the port of Noonos and join the fleets, I walked with Iolinda, of whom I had seen much, her arm in mine, along the closed balconies of the Palace of Ten Thousand Windows.

With such speed had matters passed that I still retained my earlier insouciant demeanour. It also seemed natural that after we had conversed a little I should take her face between my hands and raise it up so that I could look down at its beauty. And also, naturally, we kissed.

Her breathing was less regular and she smiled with a mixture of pride and tenderness.

“When I return,” I spoke softly, “we shall be married.”

She nodded her head, drawing off her hand a wonderfully worked ring of gold, pearls and rose-coloured diamonds. This she placed on my little finger—“A token of my love,” she said. “To bring you luck in your battles, to remind you of me.”



I had no ring to give her. I said as much, feeling embarrassed, inadequate.

“Your word is enough,” she said. “Swear that you will return to me.”

“That I’ll swear,” I said feelingly. We looked around as guilty lovers do, for we had heard the approach of footsteps.

Into my apartments came slaves, preceded by King Rigenos. He was excited. The slaves were bearing pieces of black armour of marvelous workmanship.

“This,” said the king, “is the armour of Erekosë, broken from its tomb of rock for Erekosë to wear again.”

The amour was, unlike that worn by the Imperial Guard, smooth without embellishment. The shoulder pieces were grooved fanning high and away from the head to channel a blow of sword, axe or lance away from the wearer. The helmet, breastplates and the rest were all grooved in the same manner. The metal was light but very strong, like that of the sword, but the black lacquer shone. In its simplicity the armour was beautiful. The only ornament, a thick plume of scarlet horse-hair, sprang from the top of the helm and cascaded down the smooth sides. I touched the armour with the reverence one has for fine art—for fine art designed to protect one’s life.

“Thank you, King Rigenos,” I said. “I will wear it tomorrow when we set sail for Noonos.”

Overlaying my excitement for the coming war was my love for Iolinda which seemed to be a calmer, purer love, so much higher than carnal love that it was a thing apart. Perhaps this was the chivalrous love which the Peers of Christendom had held above all other?

That night, I lay at peace, thinking of Iolinda, and in the morning slaves brought my armour to me and helped me don it. It fitted perfectly, comfortably and was no weight at all. With my poisonous sword in its protecting scabbard, I strode to the Great Hall where the Peers of Humanity had been summoned.

There, in the Great Hall hung with hundreds of bright banners which descended from the high, domed roof, the Marshals, the Captains and the Knights were gathered in splendid array.

A little group of marshals kneeled before me as I kneeled before the king. Behind them were a hundred captains, behind them five thousand knights, all kneeling. And surrounding us, along the walls, were the old nobles, the Ladies of the Court, Men-at-arms at attention, slaves and squires. I, Erekosë, Champion of Humanity, was to be their saviour. They knew it.

In my confidence, I knew it, also.

The king spoke:

“Erekosë the Champion, Marshals, Captains and Knights of Humanity—we go to wage war against unhuman evil, to save our fair continents from the Eldren menace. This expedition will be decisive. With Erekosë to lead us we shall win the port and province of Paphanaal, but that will be the first stage in our

campaigns.”

He paused and then spoke again into the silence:

“More battles must follow fast upon the first so that the hated Hounds of Evil will, once and for all, be destroyed, men and women—even children must perish. We drove them to their holes in the Mountains of Sorrow once, but this time we must not let their race survive. Let only their memory remain to remind us of what evil is!”

“We will destroy the Eldren!” we roared, intoxicated by the tense atmosphere of the Great Hall.

“Swear it!” shouted the king and the hatred boiled from his eyes, seared from his voice.

“We so swear! We will destroy the Eldren!”

“Go now, Paladins of Mankind—go—*destroy the Eldren filth!*”

We rose to our feet, turned in precision, and marched from the Great Hall into a day noisy with the swelling roars of the people.

Down the winding streets of Necranal we marched, myself in the lead, my sword raised as if already victorious, down towards the waiting ships which were ready on the river.

\* \* \*

Oars were slipped through the ports and dipped into the placid river waters, strong men, three to a sweep, sat upon the rowing benches. Fifty ships stretched along the river banks, bearing the standards of fifty proud Paladins.



The people of Necranal lined the banks, cheering, cheering so that we became used to their voices, as men become used to the sounds of the sea, scarcely hearing them. Richly decorated cabins were built on the decks and the ships of the Paladins had several masts bearing furled sails of painted canvas.

I went aboard the king's great man-o'-war, a ship with fifty pairs of oars and eight tall masts. Alone for a while in the sumptuous cabin assigned me I parted from Iolinda with a tender kiss.

She went ashore. The king and the captain, his dark eyes veiled, joined me. Katorn seemed to dislike me. For my part I was not attracted to his sullen personality, but he was a good soldier and I allowed no emotion to guide my decisions in the Matter of the Human Kingdoms.

We hauled in our anchors and the drums pounded out the slow rowing rhythm. We beat down the Droonaa River, with the current, moving fast towards Noonos of the Jeweled Towers and the fleets.

"Goodbye, Iolinda," I said softly, waving from the stern of the swaying vessel, and then we had rounded a bend in the river and saw only the rearing city of Necranal above and behind us.

Goodbye, Iolinda.

I was sweating in my war gear for the day was oppressed by a great flaming sun, blazing in a cloudless sky.

The drums beat on. The rowers pulled. Speedily we sailed to Noonos and the Fleets of Humanity.

\* \* \*

Excited, tense, alert and confident of victory, we sailed for Paphanaal, gateway to Mernadin and conquest.

I knew little of the Eldren for they were constantly described in terms of hatred and fear. They were inhumanly beautiful, it seemed, inhumanly merciless, amoral and evil. They were slightly taller than the average man, had long heads with slanting cheekbones—devilish, Rigenos had said—and had no orbs to their eyes. Terrible reckless fighters, they were, cunning and ruthless.

But I felt the need to know more of them. My cloudy memory, as Erekosë, could only conjure an impression of confused battles against them and, also, somewhere a feeling of emotional pain. That was all.

The sea was a good one for the whole month of our sailing and, one day, we came close to Mernadin and lookouts shouted that ships approached. We saw them, at last—a fleet of scarcely half our number. I smiled without humour because I knew we should be victorious.

The Eldren ships came close! I gasped at their rare grace as they leapt lightly over the water like dolphins.

They were not galleons, but ships of sail only and the sails were diaphanous on slim masts. White hulls broke the darker white of the surf as they surged wildly, without faltering, towards us. They mounted a few cannon, but not so many as ours. Their cannon, however, were slender and silver and when I saw them I feared their power.

I saw glimpses of eldritch faces, but could not, at that distance, make out special characteristics.

We gave the orders to heave to, rocked in the sea awaiting the Eldren shark-ships speeding towards us. We manoeuvred, as planned, to form a square with one end opened.

Some eighty ships were at the far end of the square, set stem to stern with cannon bristling while the two other sides were leveled at a safe distance across so that their cannon were out of range of each other. We placed a thinner wall of ships, about twelve, at the open end to give the impression of a closed square.

The Eldren craft, cannon roaring, smashed into the twelve 'bait' ships and, under their own impetus, sailed on to find themselves surrounded on three sides. As they came through, the far ships slowly closed in to form a triangle, trapping the Eldren vessels.

I had never seen such highly manoeuvrable sailing craft as those used by the Eldren. Slightly smaller than our men-o'-war, they darted about and their cannon bellowed roaring balls of flame—fire-bombs, not solid shot. Many of our ships were fired and blazed, crackling and groaning as the flames consumed them. Our ranks began to break and we sailed implacably in to crush the Eldren ships.

So far there had been no hand-to-hand fighting. The battle had depended upon tactics, but now as we closed, grapples were hurled towards the shark-ships of the Eldren and their barbs cut into the white rails, pulling the sailing craft towards them.

In the fore of the battle, our cannon gouting and the whole ship reverberating with the mighty roar, we smashed full with our rams into a slender Eldren craft and broke it completely in two. I saw figures throw up their arms and I heard King Rigenos laughing behind me as the Eldren drowned, with few cries, in silence.

Our ship moved through the wreckage it had created, surrounded by orange tongues of flame, shrieks and yells, thick smoke which obscured vision in all directions so that it was impossible to tell how the Fleets of Humanity fared.

Rigenos pointed through the smoke, his eyes screwed up against its acrid blossomings: "There! The Eldren flagship. With luck that cursed servant of Azmobaana may be aboard. Pray that the Eldren Prince rides her, Erekosë, for if he does our cause is truly won."

I paid him little heed but shouted the order for grappling irons to be readied. Our vessel reared up on a surging wave and then rode it down towards the Eldren flagship. Our grapples were flung, we locked.

King Rigenos bellowed across the narrow drop between our craft and that of the Eldren: "This is King Rigenos and his champion Erekosë. I'd speak with your commander for a moment, in the usual truce. If your master Arjavh of Mernadin is there let him come and do battle with the king's champion!"

Through the shifting smoke I saw, dimly, a pointed golden face with milky blue-flecked eyes staring strangely from the sockets of the slanting head. An eldritch voice, like music, sang across the sea: "I am Duke Baynahn, Commander of the Eldren fleet. I have to tell thee that our Prince Arjavh is not aboard.

He is in the West, in Loos Ptokai, and could not get to Paphanaal for the battle.”

Rigenos turned to his captain, Katorn, who bore a heavy crossbow. “Kill that one, Katorn,” he said quietly.

Duke Baynahn continued: “However, I am prepared to fight your champion if . . .”

“No!” I cried to Katorn. “Stop! King Rigenos, that is dishonourable—you speak during a truce.”

“There is no question of honour, Erekosë, when exterminating vermin. That you will soon learn. Kill him, Katorn!”

The bolt whirred from the bow and I heard a soft gasp as it penetrated the Eldren speaker’s throat. He fell. I was in a rage at the treachery shown by one who spoke so often of treachery in his enemies, but there was no time to remonstrate for I had to lead a boarding party and swiftly while we retained the advantage.

I took a trailing rope, unsheathed my glowing sword and cried: “For Humanity! Death to the Hounds of Evil!”

I swung down, the heated air slashing against my face in that swift passage, and dropped, with howling warriors behind me, among the Eldren ranks.

Then we were fighting.

My followers took care to stay away from me as the sword opened pale wounds in the Eldren foes, destroying all whom it lightly touched. There was no battle-joy in me as I fought, for no skill was needed for such slaying.

The slender shark-ships seemed to hold more men than I had estimated. The long-skulled Eldren, well aware that my sword touch was lethal, flung themselves at me with ferocious courage.

Many of them wielded long-hafted axes, swinging at me out of reach of my sword. The sword was not sharper than most and although I hacked at the shafts I succeeded only in splintering them slightly. I had constantly to duck, stab beneath the whirling axes.

A golden-haired Eldren leapt at me, swung his axe and it smashed against my shoulder plate knocking me off balance. I rolled, trying desperately to regain my footing on the blood-smearred deck. The axe smashed down again, on to my breastplate, wounding me. I struggled to a crouching position, plunged forward beneath the axe and slashed at the Eldren’s wrist. He moaned and died. The poison had done its work again.

Now I saw we had the advantage. The last pocket of fiercely fighting Eldren were on the main deck, back to back around their banner—a scarlet field bearing the Silver Basilisk of Memnadin. They were engulfed by our forces and, although all were badly wounded, fought until slain. They knew we should give them no mercy.

Katorn who had led the attack on the main deck snatched down the banner and flung it in the flowing blood of the Eldren, trampling it. “Thus will all the Eldren perish!” he shouted in triumph.

Now a kind of silence drifted over the scene as the smoke dissipated, hanging in the air high above us. The day was won. Not one prisoner had been taken. The human warriors were busy firing the remaining Eldren vessels.

“Surely,” said I to Katorn, “that is a waste—we could use these ships to replace those lost.”

“Use these cursed craft—never,” he said with a twist of his mouth and strode to the rail of the Eldren flagship, shouting to his men to follow him back to our own vessel.

We clambered aboard our ship. The grapples were removed and the Eldren ship yawed away.

“Fire it,” cried King Rigenos who had taken no part in the actual fighting, though I knew it was said he was a brave man. “Fire the thing.”

Blazing arrows were accurately shot into bales of combustible materials which had been placed in specific parts of the Eldren ship. The slender vessel caught and drifted, blazing away, from us.

The fleets reassembled. We had lost fourteen men-o’-war and a hundred smaller craft—but nothing remained of the Eldren fleet save burning hulks which we left, sinking, behind us as we sailed on, gleeful, to Paphanaal.

### CHAPTER THREE

Night came before we reached the harbour city, so we lay at anchor a league or so offshore.

In the shifting dawn of the morrow we upped anchors and rowed in towards Paphanaal, for there was no wind to fill our sails.

Nearer we came to land.

I saw cliffs and black mountains rising.

Nearer and I saw a flash of brighter colour to the east of us. “*Paphanaal!*” shouted the lookout from his precarious perch on the highest mast.

Nearer and there was Paphanaal, undefended as far as we could make out. We had left her fleet on the bottom of the ocean, far behind.

There were no domes on this city, no minarets. There were steeples and buttresses and battlements, all close together making the city seem like one great palace. The materials of their construction were breathtaking—white marble veined with pink, blue, green and yellow, faced with gold, basalt and quartz and bluestone in abundance. It was a shining city, of marvels.

We saw no-one as we came close and I guessed that the city had been deserted. But I was wrong.

We put in to the great harbour and disembarked. I formed our armies into disciplined ranks and warned them of a possible trap, although I didn’t really believe there could be one.

They stood before King Rigenos, Katorn and I, rank upon rank upon rank of them, armour bright, banners moving sluggishly in the breeze. There were seven hundred divisions, each hundred commanded

by a marshal in command of captains and knights. The Paladins and Armies of Humanity stood before me and I was proud. I addressed them:

“Marshals, Captains, Knights and Warriors of Humanity, you have seen me to be a victorious War Leader.”

“Aye!” they roared, jubilant.

“We shall be victorious here and elsewhere in the land of Mernadin. Go now, with caution, and search these houses and buildings for Eldren jackals. Take what booty you desire, but be careful. This city could hide an army, remember.”

The divisions marched past us, each taking a different direction. The city received them in its streets, but it did not welcome them.

We found a city of women. Not one Eldren man had remained. We had slain them all at sea.

We took over the palace which had belonged to the dead Warden of Paphanaal.

They brought a girl to us. Black-haired, elfin-faced, her alien features composed against the fear she felt. She had shifting beauty which was always there, but seemed to change with every breath she took. They had torn her garments and bruised her arms and face.

“Erekosë!” Katorn was drunk. He led the party in to the Central Chamber of the Warden’s palace where I and the king discussed further campaigns. “Erekosë—Rigenos, my lord king—*look!*”

The king looked at the girl with distaste. “Why should we take interest in an Eldren wanton? Get hence, Katorn and use her as you will—but be sure to slay her before we leave Paphanaal.”

“Why have you brought her, Katorn?” said I.

Katorn laughed. His thick lips opened wide and he laughed in our faces. “You know not who she is, that’s plain.”

“Take the Eldren wench away, Katorn,” said the king, his voice rising.

“My lord king—this is Ermizhad!”

“What?” The king leaned forward and stared at the girl. “Ermizhad, the Wanton of the Ghost Worlds. She’s lured many a mortal to his death so I’ve heard. She shall die by torture for her lustful crimes. The stake shall have her.”

“No, King Rigenos—forget you not that she’s Prince Arjavh’s *sister*?”

“Of course. You did right Katorn. Keep her prisoner, keep her safe.” He looked at the swaying captain, noting his drunkenness. “No—enjoy yourself, Katorn. She shall be put in Erekosë’s charge.”

“I accept the charge,” I said, taking my chance. I had pity for the girl, whatever terrible crimes she had committed.

“Keep her from harm, Erekosë,” said the king cynically, eyeing the girl. “Keep her from harm—she’ll be a useful piece in our game with Arjavh.”

“Take her to my apartments in the east wing,” I told the guards, “and make sure she is kept there, unmolested.” They took her away.

I understood her usefulness as a hostage, but had not understood the king’s reference to the Ghost Worlds. I remembered, then, that once before he had mentioned them.

“The Ghost Worlds?” he said when I questioned him. “Know you not of them, Erekosë? Why humankind fear Arjavh’s allies so much that they will rarely mention them, in terror of conjuring them up by their words.”

“But what are they?”

Rigenos looked around him nervously. “I’ll tell you,” he said, “but I’m uncomfortable about doing so in this cursed place. The Eldren know better than we what the Ghost Worlds are—we had thought, at first, that you yourself were a prisoner there. They lie beyond Time, beyond Space, linked to this Earth by tenuous bonds.” His voice dropped, but he whispered on and I shuddered at what he told me.

“There, on the torn Ghost Worlds, dwell the many-coiled serpents which are the terror and the scourge of the eight dimensions. Here, also, live ghosts and men, those who are manlike and those who are unlike men, those who know their fate which is to live without time, and those who are unaware of their doom. And there, also, do kinfolk to the Eldren dwell—the halflings.”

“But what *are* these worlds?” I asked impatiently.

“They are the worlds to which human sorcerers go in search of alien wisdom, and from which they draw helpers of horrible powers and disgusting deeds. It is said that within those worlds an initiate may meet his long-slain comrades who may sometimes help him, his dead loves and kin, and particularly his enemies—those whom he has caused to die. Malevolent enemies with great powers—or wretches who are half-souled and incomplete.”

I was moved to horror by his whispered words, but still curious to know more. “What are they? Where are they?”

“We have no answer to either question. They are worlds full of shadow and gloomy shores upon which drab seas beat. The populace can sometimes be summoned by powerful sorcery to visit this Earth, to haunt, to help or to terrorize. We think that the Eldren came, originally, from these half-worlds if they were not, as our legends say, spawned from the womb of a wicked queen who gave her hand to Azmobaana in return for immortality—the immortality which her offspring inherited. But the Eldren are material enough, for all their lack of souls, whereas the Ghost Armies are rarely of solid flesh.”

“And why is that girl known as the Wanton of the Ghost Worlds?” I asked.

“It is said that she mates with ghouls,” answered the king, “and in return has special powers over the halflings who are friends with the ghouls. The halflings love her, as far as it is possible for such degenerate creatures to love.”



I could not believe the first part. The girl seemed young, innocent. I said as much.

“How do you tell the age of an immortal?” Rigenos replied. I could not, of course, answer. But I thought much of Ermizhad as we went on to talk of the immediate considerations of war against the Eldren.

We had little clear idea where the rest of the Eldren forces were marshaled. There were four other major cities on the continent of Mernadin. The chief of these was Loos Ptokai which lay near to the Plains of Melting Ice. This was Arjavh’s headquarters and, from what the Eldren on the flagship had said, he was either there now or marching to recapture Paphanaal.

“We must not forget the sorcerous fortresses of the Outer Islands,” Rigenos told me, “at World’s Edge. The Outer Islands lie in the Gateway to the Ghost Worlds and from there they can summon their ghoulish allies. Perhaps, now Paphanaal is taken, we should concentrate on smashing their strength in the West, at World’s Edge.”

I wondered if he over-estimated the power of the Ghost World denizens. “Have you ever seen these halflings?” I asked him.

“Oh, yes, my friend,” he replied. “I’ve seen them. You are wrong if you believe them legendary things. They are, in one sense at least, real enough.”

He had convinced me. “Very well,” I said. “We’ll leave a force here strong enough to defend the city, return to Necranal, re-equip the fleets and make war on the Outer Islands. But how do you plan to use Ermizhad? Will you leave her here or take her back to Necranal?”

“Necranal, I think,” he said. “We shall keep her in our principal city until such time as we need to use her, if ever we have to bargain with Arjavh.”

“A sensible plan,” I agreed.

“We’ll settle our position here,” he said, “and set sail back to Necranal within a week. We should waste no time—now that we have gained Paphanaal, we must fear an attack from Prince Arjavh’s frightful Ghost Armies.”

There were minor details of the plan to discuss and, while the victorious warriors pleased themselves on Eldren bounty, we talked of urgent matters.

It was slower going back to the Two Continents, for our mighty vessels groaned with captured Eldren treasure.

Ermizhad had been grudgingly given decent quarters next to mine. This was at my request. Although he hated the Eldren still, King Rigenos had exhausted some of the earlier ferocity he had felt in the heat of war. However, he would have nothing to do with her and when he got the opportunity he spoke of Ermizhad in her presence as if she was not there; spoke disdainfully of her and his disgust for all her kind.

I saw a little of her and, in spite of the king’s warnings, came to like her. She was certainly the most

beautiful woman I had ever seen. Her beauty was different from the cool beauty of Iolinda, my betrothed.

What is love? Even now, now that the whole pattern of my destiny has been fulfilled, I do not know. Oh, yes, I still loved Iolinda, but I think while I did not know it I was falling in love with Ermizhad. I refused to believe in the stories told about her and held affection for her though, at the time, had no thought of pursuing it, remaining loyal to Iolinda. But there must be countless forms of love. Which is the form which conquers the rest? I cannot define it. I shall not try.

Ermizhad's beauty had the fascination for being an unhuman beauty, but close enough to my race's ideal to attract me.

She had the long pointed Eldren face, slanting eyes that seemed blind in their strange milkiness, slightly pointed ears, high slanting cheekbones and a slender body that was almost boyish. All the Eldren women were slender, like this, small-breasted and narrow-waisted. Her red lips were fairly wide, curving naturally upwards so that she always seemed to be on the point of smiling while her face was in repose.

For the first week out she would not speak. I saw that she had everything for her comfort and she thanked me through her guards, that was all. But one day I stood outside the set of cabins where she, the king and I had our apartments, leaning over the rail looking at a grey sea and an overcast sky.

She took the initiative.

"Greetings, Sir Champion," she said half-mockingly as she came out of her cabin.

I turned, surprised.

"Greetings—Lady Ermizhad," said I. She was dressed in a cloak of midnight blue flung around a simple smock of pale blue wool.

"A day of omens, I think," she said looking at the gloomy sky which boiled darkly above us, full of heavy greys and dusty yellows.

"Why thank you?" said I.

She laughed. It was lovely to hear—crystal and gold-strung harps, the music of heaven, not hell.

"Forgive me, I sought to trouble you, but I see you are not so prone to suggestion as others of your race. In fact," she frowned, "there is an air about you which makes me think you are not wholly of that race."

"I am of it," I told her, "but not from this period of time. I have been many heroes—but always human. How I got here, I do not know. I am not sure where I am, in the far future or the far past."

"That would depend on what period of time you came from," she said. "For we believe that time moves in a circle, so that the past is the future and the future is the past."

"An interesting theory," I said.

"More than a theory, Lord Erekosë." She came and stood by the ship's rail, one hand resting upon it.

At that time, I felt the affection that I supposed a father might have for a daughter—a father who delights in his offspring’s assured innocence. She could not have been, I felt sure, more than nineteen. Yet her voice had a confidence that comes with knowledge of the world, her carriage was proud, also confident. I realized that King Rigenos might well have spoken truly. How, indeed, could you gauge the age of an immortal?

“I have the feeling,” I said, “that I come from your past—that this, in relation to what I call the twentieth century—is the far future.”

“This world is very ancient,” she agreed.

“Is there a record of a time when only human beings occupied the Earth?”

“No,” she smiled, “there is an echo of a myth, the thread of a legend, which says that there was a time when only the Eldren occupied the Earth. My brother has studied this—I believe he knows more.”

I shivered. I did not know why, but my vitals seemed to chill within me. I could not, easily, continue the conversation, though I wanted to. She appeared not to have noticed my discomfort.

At last I said: “A day of omens, madam. I hope to talk with you again some time.” I bowed and returned to my cabin.

#### CHAPTERFOUR

I saw her in the same place the next day. The sky had cleared somewhat and sunlight pushed thick beams through the clouds, the rays slanting down on the choppy sea so that the world seemed half dark, half light. A moody day.

We stood for a while in silence, leaning out over the rail, watching the surf slide by, watching the oars smash into the waters in monotonous rhythm.

Again, she was the first to speak.

“What do they plan to do with me?” she asked quietly.

“You will be a hostage against the eventuality of your brother Prince Arjavh ever attacking Necranal,” I told her. “You will be safe—King Rigenos will not be able to bargain if you are harmed.”

She sighed.

“Why did not you and the other Eldren women flee when our fleets put in to Paphanaal?” I asked. This had puzzled me.

“The Eldren do not flee,” she said. “They do not flee from cities theirs by right.”

“They fled to the Mountains of Sorrow centuries ago,” I pointed out.

“No,” she shook her head, “they were driven there. There is a difference.”

“There is a difference,” I agreed.

“Who speaks of difference?” A new, harsher voice broke in. It was Rigenos. He had come out of his cabin silently and stood behind us, feet apart on the swaying deck.

“Greetings, sire,” I said. “We were discussing the meaning of words.”

“You’ve become uncommon friendly with the Eldren bitch,” he sneered. What was it about a man who had shown himself noble and brave in many ways that when the Eldren were concerned he became an uncouth iconoclast?

“Sire,” I pointed out softly, “you speak of one who, though our enemy, is of noble blood.”

Again he sneered. “Noble blood! The vile stuff which flows in their polluted veins cannot be termed thus. Beware, Erekosë! I realize that you are not altogether versed in our ways or our knowledge, that your memory is hazy—but remember that the Eldren wanton has a tongue of liquid gold which can beguile you to your doom and ours. Pay no heed to her.”

“Sire…” I said.

“She’ll weave such a spell that you’ll be a fawning dog at her mercy and no good to any of us. I tell you, Erekosë, beware. Gods, I’ve half a mind to give her to the rowers and let them have their way with her.”

“You placed her under my protection, king,” I said angrily, “and I am sworn to protect her against *all* dangers.”

“Fool!” he said. “I have warned you. I do not want to lose your friendship, Erekosë—and more, I do not want to lose our War Champion. If she shows further signs of enchanting you, I shall slay her. No-one shall stop me.”

“I am doing your work, king,” I said, “at your request. But remember *you* this, I am Erekosë. I have been many other champions. What I do is for the human race. I have taken no oath of loyalty to you or any other king. I am Erekosë, the War Champion—Champion of Humanity, not Rigenos’s Champion!”

His eyes narrowed. “Is this treachery, Erekosë?”

“No, King Rigenos. Disagreement with a single representative of Humanity does not constitute treachery to mankind.”

He said nothing, just stood there, seeming to hate me as much as he hated the Eldren girl. His breathing was heavy and rasped in his throat.

“Give me no reason to regret my summoning of thee, dead Erekosë,” he said at length and turned away, back to his cabin.

“I think we’d best remain apart,” said Ermizhad quietly.

“Dead Erekosë, eh?” I said and then grinned. “If I’m dead then I’m strangely prone to emotion for a corpse.” I made light of our dispute, yet events had taken a turn which had caused me to fear that he would not, for one thing, allow me the hand of Iolinda.

Although he warmed somewhat as the journey reached its end, I was still troubled as we sailed up the

Droonaa River and came again to Necranal.

As it happened, King Rigenos found himself in no position to refuse me aught. I received such an ovation upon my return, that to go against my wishes would have aroused the wrath of the people against him. I think he began to see me as a threat to his throne, then, but I was not interested in his crown, only in his daughter.

The king announced our betrothal the next day and the news was received with joy by the citizens of Necranal. We stood before them on the great balcony overlooking the city. We smiled and waved but, when we went inside again, the king left us with a curt word and hurried away.

“Father seems to disapprove of our match,” Iolinda said in puzzlement, “in spite of his consent.”

“A disagreement about tactics,” I comforted her. “He will soon forget.”

But, I admitted to myself, I still felt troubled.

Iolinda and I lay together, as was the custom in the Human Kingdoms. But, that first night, we did not make love.

Two days later there came word that what we had sought to avert by taking Paphanaal had actually come to pass.

Eldren ships had beached on the coast of Necralala. An Eldren army was pushing towards Necranal and, it was said, none could stand against it.

The king spoke to me sombrely.

“You must go, Erekosë, and do battle with the Hounds of Evil. Evidently we underestimated their strength. News is that Prince Arjavh leads them. This is our opportunity to strike the head from the monster that is the Eldren.”

“I’ll take forty divisions of men,” I said, “and leave at once.”

“Twenty divisions will be enough,” he said. “Even then you will outnumber the Eldren horde.”

“But surely it is best to be safe,” I said.

“Twenty,” he said dogmatically, “we’ll need the rest in case other attacks have been made from other parts of the coasts. You’ll agree that my logic is reasonable?”

“I agree,” I nodded, “but this seems, I think, more a question of emotion than logic.”

“What do you mean?” His eyes had a half-guilty look.

“Nothing,” I said. “I will take twenty divisions. Will you agree to fifteen of those being cavalry?”

“I’ll agree to that,” he said. “Fifteen cavalry divisions and five infantry. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I rode in my proud armour at the head of my army, my lance flaunting my banner of bronze portcullis on an azure field. It was with seeming sorrow that Iolinda had bade me farewell. Ermizhad had said little when I told her of my mission, but she had been tense.

Well before we met Arjavh’s forces, we heard stories of their progress from fleeing villagers. Apparently they were marching doggedly towards Necranal, avoiding any settlements they came to. If I guessed right, the reason for Prince Arjavh being in Necralala was for the purpose of rescuing his sister. I knew little of the Eldren prince save that he was a monster incarnate, a slayer of women and children. I was impatient to meet him in battle. Other stories had told that half his forces were comprised of halflings—things from the Ghost Worlds.

The armies of the Eldren and the forces of the Humanity met on a vast plateau surrounded by distant hills. My marshals and captains were all for rushing upon the Eldren immediately, for their numbers were smaller than ours, but I stood by the Code of War and ordered our herald to the Eldren camp, under a flag of truce. I watched him ride away and then, on an impulse, spurred after him.

He turned in his saddle, hearing the hoof-beats of my horse. “Lord Erekosë?” he said questioningly.

“Ride on, herald—and I’ll ride with you.”

So together we came to the Eldren camp.

We rode through a silent camp until we came to the simple pavilion of Prince Arjavh.

“I bring a challenge from the hosts of Humanity!” cried the herald.

I heard a movement in the tent and from it stepped a lithe figure, dressed in half-armour, a steel breastplate strapped over a loose shirt of green, leather hose beneath leg greaves, also of steel, and sandals on his feet. His long black hair was kept away from his eyes by a band of gold bearing a single great ruby.

And his face—was beautiful. I hesitate to use the word to describe a man, but it is the only one to do his fine features justice. Like Ermizhad he had the tapering skull, the slanting, orbless eyes, but his lips did not curve upwards as did hers. His mouth was grim and there were lines of weariness about it. He passed his hand across his face and looked up at us.

“I am Prince Arjavh of Mernadin,” he said in his liquid voice. “We accept your challenge.”

“Shall we decide the terms of the battle?” I asked softly.

He looked at me, puzzled, then his face cleared. “Greetings, Erekosë,” he said.

“How do you know my name?”

He smiled a smile full of melancholy irony.

“Our scientists are skilful men,” he said. “But why do you come, thus, with your herald?”

“Curiosity,” I said. “I have spoke much with your sister, Ermizhad.”

“How is she?” he asked quickly.

“Well,” I said, “she was placed under my protection.”

“I am relieved,” he said. “We come, of course, to rescue her.”

“That is what I supposed. Now, shall we discuss the terms of the battle?”

“It has been a million years since the Eldren and Humanity agreed on terms—extermination of every warrior is the usual rule, now.”

“Well that rule has been changed,” I said impatiently. “Come, are you prepared?”

“Deliverance of the wounded to their own side,” he said.

“Agreed.”

“No slaying of prisoners taken in battle—the winner releasing his captives.”

“Agreed.”

“Deliverance of Ermizhad from captivity if we shall win.”

“To that I cannot agree. The king holds her. If you win, you must go on to Necranal and lay siege to the city.”

He sighed. “Very well, Sir Champion. We shall be ready at dawn tomorrow.”

I said hurriedly: “We outnumber you, Prince Arjavh—you could go back now, in peace.”

He shook his head. “Let the battle be fought,” he said.

“Until dawn, then, Prince Arjavh.”

He moved his hand tiredly in assent and nodded. “Farewell, Lord Erekosë.”

“Farewell.” I wheeled my horse and rode back to our camp in a sorrowful mood.

As the watery dawn broke, our forces advanced towards each other. Very slowly, it seemed, but implacably.

A flight of swallows flew high above us and glided away towards the far-off hills.

I smelled the stink of sweating men and horses, heard the creak of harness and the clash of metal.

Because of the necessity for speed, we had brought no cannon and neither, it appeared, had the Eldren. Perhaps, I thought, their siege machines were following behind at a slower pace.

I had planned to depend upon my cavalry spreading out on two sides to surround the Eldren while another arrow-head of cavalry pierced the centre of their ranks and pushed through to the rear so that we would surround them on all sides.

As we came close I gave the order for the archers to shoot. We had no crossbows, only longbows, which had a greater range and penetrating power. The first flight of arrows screamed overhead and thudded down into the Eldren ranks.

Our shafts were answered by the slim arrows of the Eldren. Horses and men shrieked as arrows found their marks and for a moment there was consternation in our ranks as they became ragged and then, with discipline, re-formed. I drew my sword.

“Cavalry— *charge!*”

The knights spurred their war-steeds forward and began, line upon line of them, to fan out on two sides while another division rode straight towards the centre of the Eldren host. They were bent over the necks of their fast-moving horses, lances leaning at an angle across their saddles, aimed at the Eldren.

Their multicoloured plumes streamed behind them and the dim sunlight gleamed on their armour. I was almost deafened by the thunder of hoofs as I kicked my charger into a gallop and with a band of fifty picked knights behind me, surrounding the twin standards of Humanity, rode forward, straining my eyes for Arjavh whom, at that moment, I hated with a hate akin to jealousy.

With a fearful din of shouts and clashing metal we smashed into the Eldren army and soon I was oblivious of all but the need to kill and defend my life.

I hewed about me with savage intensity, seeking sight of Arjavh. At last I saw him, a huge mace swinging from his gauntleted hand, battering at the infantrymen who sought to pull him from his saddle.

“Arjavh!”

He heard but paid no attention, intent as he was on defending himself. “Arjavh!”

“A moment, Erekosë, I have work here.”

He kicked his horse towards me, still flaying around him with the giant mace. Then the infantrymen drew back as they saw we were about to engage. I aimed a mighty blow at him but he pulled aside in time and I felt his mace glance off my back as I leaned so far forward in my saddle after the wasted blow that my sword almost touched the churned ground.

I brought the sword up in an underarm swing and the mace was there to deflect it. For several minutes we fought until, in my astonishment, I heard a voice some distance away. “Rally the standard! Rally Knights of Humanity!”

We had not succeeded in our tactics, that was obvious. Our forces were attempting to re-consolidate and attack afresh. Arjavh smiled and lowered his mace. “They sought to surround the halflings,” he said and laughed aloud.



“We’ll meet again, soon, Arjavh,” I shouted as I turned my horse back and forced my way through milling, embattled men towards the standard which swayed to my right. There was no cowardice in my leaving and Arjavh knew it. I had to be with my men when they rallied.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Arjavh had mentioned the halflings. What were they? What kind of creatures were they that they could not, as he had inferred, be surrounded?

The halflings were only part of my problem. Fresh tactics had to be decided upon hurriedly, or the day would be soon lost. Four of my marshals were desperately trying to get our ranks closed as I came up. The Eldren enclosed us and many groups of humans were cut off from our main body.

“What’s the position?” I shouted above the noise of battle.

“It’s hard to tell, Lord Erekosë. One moment we had surrounded the Eldren and the next moment half their forces were surrounding *us*—they vanished and reappeared behind us! Even now we cannot tell which is material Eldren and which halfling.” The man who answered me was Count Roldero, an experienced marshal. His voice was ragged and he was very much shaken.

“What other qualities do these halflings possess?”

“They are solid enough when fighting, Lord Erekosë, and can be slain, but they can disappear at will and be wherever they wish on the field. It is impossible to plan tactics against such a foe.”

“In that case,” I decided, “you had best keep your men together and fight a defensive action. I think we still outnumber the Eldren and their ghostly allies. Let them come to us!”

I could see that the morale of my warriors was bad; they had been disconcerted and were finding it difficult to face the idea of defeat since victory had, at first, seemed so certain.

Through the milling men I saw the basilisk banner of the Eldren approaching as their cavalry moved speedily towards us, Arjavh at their head. Our forces came, again, together and once more I was doing battle with the Eldren prince.

He knew the power of my sword, knew that the touch of it could slay him, but that deadly mace, wielded like a sword, warded off every blow I made. I fought him for half an hour until he showed signs of sweating weariness and my muscles ached horribly.

And again our forces had been split, again it was impossible to tell how the battle went for us. For most of the time I was uncaring, oblivious of the events around me as I concentrated on breaking through Arjavh’s splendid guard.

Then I saw Count Roldero ride swiftly past me, his golden armour split, his face and arms bloody. In one red hand he carried the torn banner of Humanity and his eyes stared out of his wounded head in fear. “Flee, Lord Erekosë,” he shouted as he galloped past. “Flee—the day is lost!”

I could not believe it, until the ragged remnants of my warriors began to stream past me in ignominious flight.

“Rally Humanity!” I screamed. “Rally!” But they paid me no heed. Again Arjavh dropped his mace to his side.

“You are defeated,” he said. “You are a worthy foe, Erekosë, and I will remember our battle terms—go in peace. Necranal will have need of you.”

I shook my head slowly and drew a heavy breath. “Prepare to defend yourself, Prince Arjavh,” I said.

He shrugged, swiftly brought up the mace against the blow I aimed at him and then brought it down suddenly upon my metal-gauntleted wrist. My whole arm went numb. I tried to cling to the sword, but my fingers would not respond. It dropped from my hand and hung by a thong from my wrist.

With a curse, I flung myself from my saddle straight at him, my good hand grasping, but he turned his horse aside and I fell, face forward, in the bloody mud of the field. I attempted once to rise, failed, and lost consciousness.

I shivered, aware that I was no longer clad in my armour. I looked up. Arjavh stood over me.

“I wonder why he hates me,” he said to himself before he realized that I was awake. His expression altered and he gave me a light smile. “You’re a ferocious one, Sir Champion.”

“My warriors,” I said, “what...?”

“Those that were left have fled. We released the few prisoners we had and sent them after their comrades. Those were the terms, I believe?”

I struggled up. “Then you are going to release me?”

“I suppose so. Although...”

“Although?”

“You would be a useful bargaining prisoner.”

I took his meaning and relaxed, sinking back onto the hard bed. I thought deeply and fought the idea which came to me, but it grew too large in me. At length I said, almost against my will: “Trade me for Ermizhad.”

His cool eyes showed surprise for an instant.

“You would suggest that? But Ermizhad is Humanity’s chief hostage.”

“Damn you, Eldren—I said trade me for her.”

“You’re a strange human, my friend. But with your permission granted, that is what I shall do. I thank you.”

He left the tent. I heard him instructing a messenger.

“Make sure the people know,” I shouted from the bed. “The king may not agree, but the people will force his hand.”

Arjavh instructed the messenger accordingly. He came back.

“It puzzles me,” I said at length as he sat on a bench on the other side of the tent. “It puzzles me that the Eldren have not conquered Humanity before now—with those halfling warriors I should think you’d be invincible.”

He shook his head. “We rarely make use of our allies,” he said. “But I was desperate. You can understand that I was prepared to go to almost any measures to rescue my sister.”

“I can,” I told him.

“We would never have invaded,” he continued, “had it not been for her.” It was said so simply that I believed him. Either his cunning was so great that I was completely deceived, or else he spoke the truth.

“What are the halflings?” I asked him.

Again he smiled: “Sorcerous ghouls,” he said.

“That is what King Rigenos told me—it is no explanation.”

“What if I told you they were capable of breaking up their atomic structure at will and assembling it again in another place. You would not understand me—sorcery, you would say.”

I was surprised at the scientific nature of his explanation. “I would understand you better,” I said slowly.

He raised his slanting eyebrows.

“You *are* different,” he said. “Well, the halflings, as you have seen, are related to the Eldren. Not all the dwellers on the Ghost Worlds are our kin—some are closer related to men, and there are other, baser, forms of life, too...”

“The Ghost Worlds are solid enough, but exist in an alternate series of dimensions to our own. On these worlds, the halflings have no special powers—no more than we have—but here they have. We do not know why. On Earth different laws seem to apply to them. More than a million years ago we discovered a means of bridging the dimensions between Earth and these other worlds. We found a race akin to our own who will, at times, come to our aid if our need is especially great. This was one of those times. Sometimes, however, the bridge ceases to exist when the Ghost Worlds move into another phase of their weird orbit, so that any halflings on Earth cannot return and any of our people are in the same position if on the Ghost Worlds. Therefore, you will understand, it is dangerous to stay on either side overlong.”

“Is it possible,” I asked, “that the Eldren came originally from these Ghost Worlds?”

“I suppose it is possible,” he agreed. “There are no records.”

“Perhaps that is why the humans hate you as aliens,” I suggested.

“That is not the reason,” he told me, “for the Eldren occupied the Earth for ages before humankind ever

came to the planet.”

“What!”

“It is true,” he said. “I am an immortal and my grandfather was an immortal. He was slain during the first wars between the Eldren and Humanity. When the humans came to Earth, they had incredible weapons of terrible destructive potential. In those days we also used such weapons. The wars created such destruction that the Earth seemed like a blackened ball of mud when the wars were ended and the Eldren defeated. Such was the destruction that we swore never again to use our weapons, whether we were threatened with extermination or not. We could not assume the responsibility for destroying an entire planet.”

“You mean you still have these weapons?”

“They are locked away, yes.”

“And you have the knowledge to use them?”

“Of course—we are immortal, we have many people who fought in those ancient wars, some even built new weapons before our decision was made.”

“Then why...?”

“I have told you—we swore not to.”

“What happened to the humans’ weapons—and their knowledge of them? Did they make the same decision?”

“No. The human race degenerated for a while—wars between themselves occurred, at one time they almost wiped themselves out, at another they were barbarians, and at another they seemed to have matured at last, to be at peace with themselves and one another. At one stage they lost the knowledge and the remaining weapons. In the last million years they have climbed back from absolute savagery—the peaceful years were short, a false lull—and I’d predict they’ll sink back soon enough. They seem bent on self-destruction as well as ours. We have wondered if the humans who must surely exist on other planets than this are the same. Perhaps not.”

“I hope not,” I said. “How do you think the Eldren will fare against the humans?”

“Badly,” he said. “Particularly since they are inspired by your leadership and the gateway to the Ghost Worlds is due soon to close again. Previously Humanity was split by quarrels. King Rigenos could never get his marshals to agree and he was too uncertain of himself to make decisions. But you have made decisions for him and the marshals. You shall win.”

“You are a fatalist,” I said.

“I am a realist,” he said.

“Could not peace terms be arranged?”

He shook his head. “What use is it to talk?” he asked me bitterly. “You humans, I pity you. Why will you always identify our motives with your own? We do not seek power—only peace—peace. But that, I

suppose, this planet shall never have until Humanity dies of old age.”

\* \* \*

I stayed with Arjavh for another day before he released me, on trust, and I rode back expecting, when I arrived, to find Ermizhad gone. But she was not. She was still in captivity. On learning this I visited her in her chambers.

“Ermizhad—you were to be traded for me, those were the terms. Where is the king? Why has he not kept his word?”

“I knew nothing of this,” she said. “I did not know Arjavh was so close, otherwise...”

I interrupted her. “Come with me. We’ll see the king and get you on your journey home.”

I found the king and Katorn in the king’s private chambers. I burst in upon them. “King Rigenos, what is the meaning of this? My word was given to Arjavh that Ermizhad was to leave here freely upon my release. He allowed me to leave his camp on trust and now I return to find the Lady Ermizhad still in captivity. I demand that she be released immediately.”

The king and Katorn laughed at me. “Fool,” said Katorn. “Who needs to keep his word to an Eldren jackal? Now we have our War Champion back and still retain our chief hostage. Forget it, Erekosë, my friend, there is no need to regard the Eldren as humans.”

“You refuse to release her, then?” I said grimly.

Ermizhad smiled. “Do not worry, Erekosë. I have other friends.” She closed her eyes and began to croon. At first the words came softly, but their volume rose until she was giving voice to a weird series of verbal harmonies.

Katorn jumped forward, dragging out his sword. “Sorcery! The bitch invokes her demon kind.” I drew my own sword and held it warningly in front of me, protecting Ermizhad. I had no idea what she was doing, but I was going to give her the chance, now, to do whatever she wanted.

Her voice stopped abruptly. Then she cried: “Brethren! Brethren of the Ghost Worlds—aid me!”

Quite suddenly there materialized in the chamber some dozen or so Eldren, their faces but slightly different from others I had seen. I recognized them as halflings.

“There!” shouted Rigenos. “Evil sorcery. She is a witch—I told you.”

“If that is the extent of her sorcery,” I said, “then her brethren shall, indeed, aid her to return.”

The halflings were silent. They surrounded Ermizhad until all their bodies touched hers and one another’s. Then Ermizhad shouted: “Away, brethren—back to the camps of the Eldren!”

Their forms began to flicker so that they seemed half in our dimension, half in some other. “Goodbye, Erekosë,” she cried. “I hope we shall meet in happier circumstances.”

“I hope so,” I shouted back—and then she vanished.

“Traitor,” cursed King Rigenos. “You aided her escape!”

“You should die by torture,” added Katorn, thwarted.

“I’m no traitor, as well you know,” I said evenly. “You are traitors—traitors to your words. You have no case against me.”

They could not answer. I turned and left the chamber, seeking out Iolinda.

I found her in our apartments and I kissed her, needing at that moment a woman’s friendly sympathy, but I seemed to meet a block. She was not, it seemed, prepared to give me help, although she kissed me. At length, I ceased to embrace her and stood back a little, looking into her eyes.

“Is anything wrong?” I asked her.

“No—why should there be? You are safe. I had feared you dead.”

Was it me, then? Was it...? I pushed the thought from me. But can a man force himself to love a woman? Can he love two women at the same time? I was desperately clinging to the strands of the love I had felt for her when we first met.

“Ermizhad is safe,” I blurted. “She called her halfling brothers to aid her and, when she returns to the Eldren camp, Arjavh will take his forces back to Mernadin. The threat of attack on Necranal has been averted. You should be pleased.”

“I am,” she said, and then: “And you are pleased, no doubt, that our hostage escaped!”

“What do you mean?”

“My father told me how you’d been enchanted by her wanton sorcery. You seemed to be more anxious for her safety than ours.”

“That is foolish talk!”

“Is it? I think he spoke true, Erekosë,” she said, her voice subdued now. She turned from me.

“Iolinda. I will prove how I love you—I swear I shall kill all the Eldren.”

“Including Prince Arjavh—and his sister?”

“Including them,” I said after a moment.

“I will see you later,” she said as she glided swiftly from the room. I unstrapped my sword and flung it savagely on to the floor. I spent the next few hours fighting my own agony of spirit.

**CHAPTERSIX**

In the month we spent preparing for the great war against the Eldren, I saw little of my betrothed and, finally, ceased to seek her out but concentrated on the plans for the campaigns we intended to fight.

I developed the strictly controlled mind of the soldier, allowing no emotion, whether it was love or hate, to dominate me. I became strong—and in my strength, virtually inhuman. I knew people remarked upon it—but they saw in me the qualities of a great battle leader and although all avoided my company, socially, they were glad that Erekosë led them.

We sailed, eventually, for the Outer Islands at World's Edge—the gateway to the Ghost Worlds.

It was a long and arduous sailing, that one, before we sighted the bleak cliffs of the Islands and prepared ourselves for the invasion.

We found naught but a few handfuls of Eldren whom we slew. Their towns were all but deserted and of the halflings there was none. We ripped the towns apart, burning and pillaging, torturing Eldren to elicit the meaning of this, though secretly I knew it. We were possessed of a dampening sense of anticlimax and although we left no building standing, no Eldren alive, we could not rid ourselves of the idea that we had been thwarted in some way. The Eldren had said that the Gateway was closed. I did not want to believe them, but they would not say otherwise.

When our work was done in the Outer Islands, we sailed abruptly for the continent of Mernadin, put into Paphanaal which was still held by our forces, landed our troops and pushed outwards in victorious conquest.

It seemed that no Eldren fortress could withstand our grim thrustings into their territory.

It was a year of fire and steel and Mernadin seemed at times to be a sea of smoke and blood. We were all incredibly tired, but the spirit of slaughter was in us, giving us a terrible vitality and everywhere that the banners of Humanity met the standards of the Eldren, the basilisk standards were torn down and trampled.

We put all we found to the sword. We punished deserters in our own ranks mercilessly, we flogged our troops to greater endurance.



Towns burned behind us, cities fell and were torn, stone by stone, to the ground. Eldren corpses littered the countryside and our camp-followers were carrion birds and jackals.

\* \* \*

A year of bloodshed. A year of hate. If I could not force myself to love, then I could force myself to hate, and this I did. All feared me, humans and Eldren alike as I turned beautiful Mernadin into a funeral pyre for my own terrible bewilderment and grief.

The king was slain that year and Iolinda was declared queen. But the king had become a puppet of authority—for Humanity followed a grimmer conqueror whom they regarded with awe. Dead Erekosë, they called me, the vengeful sword of Humanity.

I did not care what they called me—Reaver, Blood-letter, Berserker—for my goal came closer until it was the last fortress of the Eldren undefeated. I dragged my armies behind me as if by a rope. I dragged them towards the principal city of Mernadin, by the Plains of Melting Ice. Arjavh’s capital—Loos Ptokai.

At last we saw its looming towers silhouetted against a red evening sky. Of marble and black granite, it rose mighty and seemingly invulnerable above us. But I knew we should take it. I had Arjavh’s word for it, after all—he had told me we should win.

At dawn the next day, my features cold as stone, I rode beneath my banner as I had ridden, a year before, into the camp of the Eldren, with my herald at my side. He raised his golden trumpet to his lips and blew an eerie blast upon it which echoed among the black-and-white towers of Loos Ptokai.

“Eldren prince!” I yelled. “Arjavh of Mernadin, we are here to slay thee!”

On the battlements over the main gate, I saw Arjavh appear. He looked down at me, sadness in his eyes.



“Greetings, old enemy,” he called. “You will have a long siege before you break this, the last of our strength.”

“So be it,” I said, “but break it we shall.”

“Before the battle commences,” he said, “I invite you to enter Loos Ptokai as my guest and refresh yourself. You seem in need of refreshment.”

My herald sneered. “They became ingenuous in their defeat if they think they can take you with such a simple trick, my lord.”

“Be silent,” I ordered, my mind a battleground of conflicting thoughts and emotions. I took a deep breath.

“I accept, Prince Arjavh,” I said hollowly, and added: “Is the Lady Ermizhad therein?”

“She is, and looks forward to seeing you.” There was an edge on Arjavh’s voice as he answered this last question. He loved her, I knew, and perhaps was aware of my own affection for her. Aware of it though, at that time, I was not. It was that, of course, which contributed to my decision to enter Loos Ptokai.

The herald said in astonishment: “My lord, surely you cannot be serious. Once inside the gates you will be slain. There were stories, once, that you and Arjavh were not on unfriendly terms, for enemies, but after the havoc you have caused in Mernadin, he will kill you immediately.”

I shook my head in a new and quieter mood. “I think not,” I said, and all the ferocity, the hate, the mad battle-anger, seemed to swell out of me, leaving me, as I turned away from the herald so he should not see me, with tears in my eyes.

“Open your gates, Prince Arjavh,” I called in shaking tones which I could not control. “I come to Loos Ptokai as your guest.”

I rode my horse slowly into the city, having left my sword and lance behind me. The herald, in astonishment, was galloping back to our own camp to give the news to the marshals.

The streets of Loos Ptokai were silent, as if in mourning, as Arjavh came down the steps from the battlements to greet me. I saw, now that he was closer, that he, too, wore the expression which showed upon my own harsh face. His steps were not so lithe and his voice not quite so lilting as when we had first met a year before.

I dismounted. He gripped my hand.

“So,” he said in attempted gaiety, “the barbarian battlemonger is still material. My people had begun to doubt it.”

“I suppose they hate me,” I said.

He seemed a little surprised. “The Eldren cannot hate,” he said as he led me towards the palace wherein

he had residence.

I was shown by Arjavh to a small room containing a bed, a table and a chair of wonderful workmanship. In one corner was a sunken bath, water already steaming in it. After he had left, I stripped off my blood-and dust-encrusted clothing and sank gratefully into the water.

After the initial emotional shock I had received when Arjavh had given his invitation, my mind was now numbed and, for the first time in a year, I relaxed, mentally and physically, washing all the grief and hatred from me as I washed my body.

I was almost cheerful as I donned the fresh clothes which had been laid out for me and, when someone knocked at my door, called lightly for them to enter.

“Hello, Erekosë.” Ermizhad stood there.

“My lady,” I returned, bowing slightly.

“How are you?”

“Better,” I said, “for your hospitality.”

“Arjavh sent me to take you to dinner.”

“I am ready. But first tell me how you have fared.”

“Well enough—in health,” said she. She came closer. “And tell me—are you wed now to Queen Lolinda?”

“We are still betrothed,” I told her, looking into her eyes. “We are to be married when. . .”

“When?”

“When Loos Ptokai is taken,” I said quickly and then stepped towards her so that we were separated by less than an inch. “Could not the Eldren admit defeat, Ermizhad. Could they not acknowledge mankind’s victory?”

“To what purpose—they say you swore to slay us all?”

“Forget that—let peace ensue between our peoples.”

She shook her head. “For all your bloody conquests, Erekosë, you still do not understand the people you serve. Your race will only be satisfied when every Eldren has perished.”

I knew the people I served. She was right.

“I could still try to convince them,” I said lamely.

“Thanks for that,” she said. “Come—the meal awaits.” She paused, frowning, then: “No—they’ll hold you to your vow.”

At dinner, Ermizhad and I sat close together and we all spoke gaily, the wit flowed and we succeeded in driving away the knowledge of the forthcoming battle. But as Ermizhad and I talked softly to one another, I caught a look of pain in Arjavh's eyes and for a moment he was quiet. He broke through our conversation suddenly:

“You spoke earlier of peace, Erekosë. Is there any chance of arranging peace terms?”

“A conditional surrender on your part?” I asked.

“I suppose so.”

“I am in a difficult position, Arjavh, as you know. Technically I am the War Leader of Humanity and will have no power when the war is ended. The new queen, Iolinda, is the ruler of Humanity and only upon her decision can the war be ended by debate. There is also the consideration of the people and the warriors who have been so inflamed against the Eldren that even if the queen declared peace, they might force her to continue the war. Victory is certain, that you know, but, for my part, I should welcome peace.”

“That is what I thought,” he waved his hand tiredly, “there can be no peace.”

“I told Ermizhad that I would strive to convince the queen and the people that peace is desirable. I'll return to Necranal and see what I can do to show her that you offer no threat to our race.”

“You trust us inordinately,” smiled Ermizhad. “We are known for our smooth-tongued cunning. We may be beguiling you.”

“If that is the case,” I said, “the results will not be on my conscience. And the gods know I have enough already.”

“We are reputed to be soulless, Erekosë—bereft, in fact, of consciences.”

I shrugged.

There was still the chance that the Eldren were fooling me into suing for peace on their part, but now that the battle-madness was gone from me, now that Iolinda was so far away that what she felt seemed no longer important, I had become tired of conflict and wanted only peace. I did not want to complete my vow and exterminate the Eldren. How could I?

I would try what I could to bring peace to the wasted land of Mernadin. If the Eldren abused my attempts, I did not know what I should do. I did not think they would.

I spent more than a day with Arjavh and Ermizhad until eventually our herald, accompanied by several marshals, presented himself again outside the gates of Loos Ptokai.

“We fear that you have been guilty of treachery!” called the herald. “Let us see our master—or his body. Then we shall know what to do.”

Arjavh and I mounted the steps to the battlements and I saw relief in the eyes of the herald and marshals as they noted I was unharmed.

“I have been talking with Prince Arjavh,” I said, “in an attempt to discuss peace terms. I’ll join you within the hour.”

“Peace terms, Lord Erekosë! *Peace!*”

“Yes,” I said, “peace. Now go back. Tell the warriors that I am safe.”

“We can take this city, Lord Erekosë,” Count Roldero spoke, “there is no need to talk of peace. We can destroy the Eldren once and for all. Have you succumbed to their cursed enchantments—have they beguiled you with their smooth words?”

“No,” I said, “it was I who suggested it.”

Roldero swung his horse round in disgust.

“Peace!” he spat as he and his comrades headed back to the camp. “Our master’s gone mad.”

“Difficulties already,” said Arjavh to me.

“They fear me,” I told him, “and they’ll obey me—for a while at least.”

“Let us hope so,” he said.

This time there were no cheering crowds in Necranal to welcome me, for news of my mission had gone ahead of me. The people disapproved.

Her new power had given Iolinda a haughty look as she strode about the throne room, awaiting me.

“Well, Erekosë,” she said, “I know why you are here—why you have forsaken your troops, gone against your word to destroy the Eldren.”

“Iolinda,” I said urgently. “I am convinced that the Eldren are weary of war—that they never intended to threaten the Two Continents in the first place. They want only peace.”

“Peace we shall have—when the Eldren race has perished,” she cried.

“Iolinda, if you love me, you will listen to me, at least.”

“If I love *you*. And what of the Lord Erekosë—does he still love his queen?”

I was taken aback. I gaped. I could think of nothing to say—nothing but one word, for then I realized that the reason for my bitterness through the year had not been her lack of response to my love—but my lack of response to hers. That word, of course, was ‘No’. But I did not utter it.

“Oh, Erekosë,” her tone softened. “Can it be true?” There were tears in her eyes.

“No,” I said thickly. “I—I still love you, Iolinda. We are to be married...” But she knew. However, if peace was to be the result, then I was prepared to marry her in spite of anything I personally felt.

“I still want to marry you, Iolinda,” I said.

“No,” she sighed. “No you don’t.”

“I will,” I said. “I will. If peace with the Eldren comes about...”

Again her wide eyes blazed. “Not on those terms, Erekosë. Never. You are guilty of High Treason against us. The people already speak of you as a traitor.”

“But I conquered all of Mernadin for them—all but Loos Ptokai.”

“All but Loos Ptokai—where your wanton Eldren bitch awaits you.”

“Iolinda—you are unfair.”

She was unfair—but, to some degree, she spoke from knowledge of my true position.

“And you are a traitor! Guards!” she called and, as if they had already been told what to do, a dozen of the Imperial Guards rushed in, led by their captain, Katorn. There was a hint of triumph in his eyes and then, at once, I knew why we had never liked one another—he desired Iolinda!

It was an instinctive knowledge—but I knew then that whether I drew my sword or not he would slay me.

I drew my sword.

“Take him, Katorn!” cried Iolinda. “Take him—alive or dead, he is a traitor to his kind!”

“It’s untrue,” I said, as Katorn advanced cautiously, his men spreading out behind him. I backed to a wall, near a window. The throne room was on the first storey of the palace. Outside were the private gardens of the queen. “Think, Iolinda—retract your command. You are driven by jealousy. I’m no traitor.”

“*Slay him, Katorn!*”

But I slew Katorn. As he came rushing at me, my sword flicked across his face. He screamed, staggered, his hands rushed up to his head and then he toppled in his golden armour, toppled and fell with a crash to the ground.

The other guards came on, but more warily. I fought off their blades, slew a couple, drove the others back, glimpsed Iolinda watching me, leapt to the sill of the window.

“Goodbye, Queen. You have lost your champion now.” I jumped.

I landed in a rose-bush that ripped at my skin, broke free and ran hastily towards the gate of the garden, the guards behind me.

I tore the gate open and found myself in a deserted alley. I ran down the twisting streets of Necranal with the guards in pursuit, their ranks joined by a howling pack of the townspeople who had no idea why I was wanted. They chased me for the sheer animal pleasure of the hunt.

I ran blindly at first, and then towards the river. My crew, I hoped, still retained their loyalty to me. If they did there was a faint chance of escape. I gained the ship just before my pursuers. I leapt aboard screaming:

“Prepare to sail!”

Only half the crew was aboard, the others were on shore leave, but these hurriedly shipped out the oars while we held the guards and the citizens at bay. We shoved off and began a hasty flight down the Droonaa River.

It was some time before they managed to commandeer a ship for pursuit and by that time we were safely outdistancing them. My crew asked no questions. They were used to my silences, my actions which sometimes seemed peculiar but, a week after we were on course over the sea, bound for Mernadin, I told them briefly that I was now an outlaw.

“Why, Lord Erekosë?” asked my captain.

“The queen’s malice,” I said, “and, I suspect, Katorm of the Imperial Guard spoke against me, turning her to hate me.”

They were satisfied with the explanation and, when we put in at a small cove near the Plains of Melting Ice, I bade them farewell, mounted my horse and rode swiftly for Loos Ptokai, knowing not what I should do when I got there, only that I must let Arjavh know the turn events had taken.

Two months passed, two ominous months in Loos Ptokai, while we wondered what Iolinda would do. Having no leader, the armies of mankind remained surrounding the city but not attacking it. The inaction was oppressive in itself. I became irritable at times, but there were days of happiness with Ermizhad. We openly acknowledged our love now.

I queried Arjavh about the terrible weapons of which he had spoken while I was his prisoner.

“Use them this once, Arjavh,” I told him. “Make a show of strength, that is all. They will be ready to discuss peace, then.”

“No,” he refused. “No. I do not think even this emergency merits such an action.”

“Arjavh,” I said, “I respect the reason you have for refusing to use the weapons, but I have grown to love the Eldren. I love them more, evidently, than they love themselves. My own race would suffer from your weapons. If the time comes when I feel we could use them, will you let me decide—take the decision away from you?”

“Perhaps,” he said.

“Arjavh—will you?”

“We Eldren have never been motivated by self-interest to the extent of destroying another race, Erekosë. Do not confuse our values with those of mankind.”

“I am not,” I replied. “That is my reason for asking you this. I could not bear to see such a noble race perish at the hands of one which is, in taking this action against you, *ignoble* !”

“Tolinda spoke the truth,” he said quietly. “You are a traitor to your race.”

“I seek only to stop them from continuing in their folly.”

He pursed his lips.

“For the love I have for Ermizhad and the love she has for me. For you and all the Eldren left alive, I ask you to let me take the decision if it becomes necessary.”

“For Ermizhad?” He raised his eyebrows. “Very well, my friend,” he said quickly. “Very well—I leave the decision to you. I suppose that is fair. But remember—do not act as unwisely as others of your kind.”

“I will not,” I promised.

## CHAPTERSEVEN

After much bickering among themselves, I subsequently learned, the marshals had elected one of themselves, the most experienced, to act as their War Champion. They elected Count Roldero. The siege commenced in earnest.

The massive siege engines were brought forward, giant cannon boomed their solid shot against the trembling walls of Loos Ptokai, blazing fireballs screamed into the city, thousands of arrows followed them in black showers—and a million men came against our handful.

But Loos Ptokai, the ancient capital of Memadin, Loos Ptokai held firm during those first days.

Wave upon wave of yelling warriors mounted the siege towers and we replied with arrows, with molten metal and with the fire-spewing silver cannon of the Eldren. We fought bravely, Arjavh and I leading the defenders and, whenever they sighted me, the warriors of Humanity screamed for vengeance and died striving for the privilege of slaying me.

We fought side by side, like brothers, Arjavh and I, but our Eldren warriors were tiring and, after a week of constant barrage, we began to realize that we could not hold against the enemy for more than another week.

During one of the rare lulls in the fighting, I told Arjavh of my decision.

“Break out your weapons,” I said, “and arm the Eldren.”

He made no remonstrations. “Very well,” he said. “I agreed that you would decide. And I know that we are lost if we do not show Humanity our real strength. Very well, they shall be ready for use tomorrow.”

I only hoped that he had not overestimated their power.

The next day I was taken by Arjavh to the vaults which lay within the core of the city. We moved along bare corridors of polished black marble, lighted by small bulbs which burned with a greenish light. We came to a door of dark metal and he pressed a stud beside it. The door moved open and we entered an elevator which bore us yet further downwards.

We stepped out into a great hall full of weirdly wrought machines that looked brand new. They stretched for nearly half a mile ahead of us.

“There are the weapons,” said Arjavh hollowly.

Around the walls were arranged handguns of various kinds, rifles and things that looked like bazookas. There were squat machines on treads, like ultra-streamlined tanks, with glass cabins and couches for a single man to lie flat upon and operate the controls. I saw no flying machines of any kind, however. I asked Arjavh about this.

“Flying machines! It would be interesting if there were such things. We have never, in all our history, been able to develop a machine that will safely stay in the air for any length of time.”

I was amazed at this strange gap in their technology, but did not comment upon it.

“Are you still decided to use them?” he asked me, thinking perhaps that the sight of them would shock me out of my decision.

But these things were not so very different to similar war machines of the age from which, eighteen months before, I had come. I nodded my head.

We returned to the surface and there instructed our warriors to bring the weapons up.

Already I half-doubted my own decision, but felt, as always, that I had to act as I thought best, not as my emotions told me to act.

The weapons were raised. The men were armed. The larger machines were mounted upon the walls. I sent a messenger under a flag of truce to tell the marshals to assemble, the next day, before the walls of Loos Ptokai.

They came, in all their proud panoply of war, which seemed so insignificant, now, against the power of our energy weapons.

We had set one of the new cannon pointing up into the sky so that we could demonstrate its fearful potential.

“We offer you a truce—and peace,” I said.

Roldero laughed aloud. “*You* offer us peace, traitor! You should be begging for peace—though you’ll get none.”



“I warn you Count Roldero,” I shouted. “I warn you all. We have fresh weapons—weapons which once came near to destroying this whole Earth! *Watch!*”

I gave the order to fire the giant cannon.

An Eldren warrior depressed a stud on the controls.

There came a humming from the cannon and all at once a tremendous blinding bolt of golden energy gouted from its snout. The heat alone blistered our skins and we fell back shielding our eyes.

Horses shrieked and reared. The marshals’ faces were grey and their mouths gaped. They fought to control their mounts.

“That is what we offer you if you will not have peace!” I shouted. “We have a dozen like it and hand-cannon which can kill a hundred men at a sweep. What say you now?”

“We fight—we fight assured of your evil pact with Azmobaana. We are pledged to wage war on sorcery—and what better example of sorcery is there than that—that...?” He was lost for a word to describe our cannon.

“It is not sorcery, foolish Count Roldero,” I cried desperately. “It is science—a more developed science than that which invented powder and cannon, that is all. Your own ancestors once had weapons like these!”

“Sorcery! Black sorcery!” he shouted and wheeled his horse away with his men fleeing behind him, back to gather his forces, I knew.

They came and we met them. They were helpless against our weapons. Energy spouted from the guns and seared into their ranks. We all felt pain as we fired the howling waves of force which swept across them and destroyed them, turning proud men and beasts to blackened rubble.

I pitied them as they came on, the cream of Humanity’s menfolk.

It took an hour to destroy a million warriors.

One hour.

When the extermination was over, I was filled with a strange emotion which I could not then, and cannot now, define. It was a mixture of grief and triumph. And it was then that I made my final decision—or did I, indeed, make it at all?

Was I right?

In spite of Arjavh’s constant antagonism to my plan, I ordered the machines out of Loos Ptokai and, mounted in one of them, ordered them overland.

Two months before I had been responsible for winning the cities of Mernadin for Humanity. Now I reclaimed them in the name of the Eldren.

I reclaimed them in a terrible way. I destroyed every human being occupying them. A week and we were at Paphanaal, the fleets of mankind at anchor in the great harbour. I destroyed those fleets as I destroyed the garrison, men, women and children perished.

And then, for the machines were amphibious, I led the Eldren across the sea to the Two Continents.

Noonos of the jewel-studded towers fell. Tarkar fell. The wondrous cities of the wheatlands fell, Stalaco, Calodemia, Mooros and Ninadoon crumbled in an inferno of gouting energy. Wedmah, Shilal, Sinana all burned in a few hours.

In Necranal, the pastel-coloured city of the mountain, Iolinda died with some twenty millions of her citizens. And with the fall of Necranal our work was done.

Arjavh stood with me looking up at the smouldering mountainside which had been Necranal.

“For one woman’s wrath,” he said, “and another’s love, you did this?”

“You are wrong, Arjavh,” I said solemnly. “I did it for the only kind of peace that would have lasted.” I waved my hand at the rubble that was Necranal.

“I know my race too well. This Earth would have been forever rent by strife of some kind. I had to decide who best deserved to live. If they had destroyed the Eldren, then they would have fought among themselves for something. For empty things, too—for power over their fellows, for a bauble, for possession of a woman who didn’t want them.” I sighed.

“They never grew up, Arjavh, ancient as my race was. I’m driven to wonder if that is why the first humans came to Earth—because they had been exiled by others of their kind. Perhaps these weren’t representative of the whole. I think not.”

“It is done now,” Arjavh said. He gripped my arm, “Come friend, back to Mernadin—Ermizhad awaits you.”

I was an empty man, then, bereft of emotion. I followed him towards the river, drifting sluggishly now, choked with black dust.

“I think I did right,” I said. “It was not my will, you know, but something else. There are forces whose nature we shall never know, can only dream of. I think it was another will than mine which brought me to this age—not Rigenos. Rigenos, like me, was a puppet, a tool used, as I was used. It was doomed that Humanity should die on this planet.”

“It is better that you think that,” he said. “Come, now, let us go home.”

## EPILOGUE

The scars of that destruction have healed now, as I end my chronicle. I returned to Loos Ptokai to wed Ermizhad, to have the secret of immortality conferred upon me, to brood for a year or two until my brain cleared.

It is clear, now. I feel no guilt about what I did. I feel more certain than ever that it was the decision of some Other.

So we are here, the three of us, Ermizhad, Arjavh and I. Arjavh is undisputed ruler of the Earth, an Eldren Earth, and we rule with him.

We cleansed this Earth of humankind—I am its last representative—and in doing so knitted this planet back into the pattern, allowed it to drift, at last, harmoniously with a harmonious universe. For the universe is old, perhaps even dying, and it could not tolerate the humans who broke its peace.

Did I do right?

It is too late for that question. I have sufficient control, nowadays, not to ask it, for I could not answer but in seeking to do so would destroy my own sanity.

One thing puzzles me. If, indeed, time is cyclic and the universe will be born again to turn another eternity, then Humanity will one day rise again, somehow, on this Earth and my adopted people will disappear from Earth, or seem to.

Ermizhad and I cannot bear children, so I am aware that I shall not be the father of your race. Then *how* shall you come again to disrupt the harmony of the universe?

There is only one answer which occurs to me. Some Being of a higher order wishes it—it is part of the pattern. It is, in its very disruption, a necessary part of the pattern.

Now, the Earth is peaceful. The silent air carries only the sounds of quiet laughter, the murmur of conversation, the small noises of small animals. We and the Earth are at peace.

But how long can it last? Oh, how long can it last?

## **TO RESCUE TANELORN...**

(1962)

**BEYOND THE TALL** and ominous glass-green forest of Troos, well to the north and unheard of in Bakshaan, Elwher or any other city of the Young Kingdoms, on the shifting shores of the Sighing Desert lay Tanelorn, a lonely, long-ago city, loved by those it sheltered.

Tanelorn had a peculiar nature in that it welcomed and held the wanderer. To its peaceful streets and low houses came the gaunt, the savage, the brutalized, the tormented, and in Tanelorn they found rest.

Now, most of these troubled travelers who dwelt in peaceful Tanelorn had thrown off earlier allegiances to the Lords of Chaos who, as gods, took more than a mild interest in the affairs of men. It happened, therefore, that these same lords grew to resent the unlikely city of Tanelorn and, not for the first time, decided to act against it.

They instructed one of their number (more they could not, then, send) Lord Narjhan, to journey to Nadsokor, the City of Beggars, which had an old grudge against Tanelorn, and raise an army that would attack undefended Tanelorn and destroy it and its inhabitants. So he did this, arming his ragged army and

promising them many things.

Then, like a ferocious tide, did the beggar rabble set off to tear down Tanelorn and slay its residents. A great torrent of men and women in rags, on crutches, blind, maimed, but moving steadily, ominously, implacably northwards towards the Sighing Desert.

\* \* \*



In Tanelorn dwelt the Red Archer, Rackhir, from the Eastlands beyond the Sighing Desert, beyond the Weeping Waste. Rackhir had been born a Warrior Priest, a servant of the Lords of Chaos, but had forsaken this life for the quieter pursuits of thievery and learning. A man with harsh features slashed from the bone of his skull, strong, fleshless nose, deep eye-cavities, a thin mouth and a thin beard. He wore a red skull-cap, decorated with a hawk's feather, a red jerkin, tight-fitting and belted at the waist, red breeks and red boots. It was as if all the blood in him had transferred itself to his gear and left him drained. He was happy, however, in Tanelorn, the city which made all such men happy, and felt he would die there if men died there. He did not know if they did.

One day he saw Brut of Lashmar, a great, blond-headed noble of shamed name, ride wearily, yet urgently, through the low wall-gate of the city of peace. Brut's silver harness and trappings were begrimed, his yellow cloak torn and his broad-brimmed hat battered. A small crowd collected around him as he rode into the city square and halted. Then he gave his news.

“Beggars from Nadsokor, many thousands, move against our Tanelorn,” he said, “and they are led by Narjhan of Chaos.”

Now, all the men in there were soldiers of some kind, good ones for the most part, and they were confident warriors, but few in number. A horde of beggars, led by such a being as Narjhan, could destroy Tanelorn, they knew.

“Should we, then, leave Tanelorn?” said Uroch of Nieva, a young, wasted man who had been a drunkard.

“We owe this city too much to desert her,” Rackhir said. “We should defend her—for her sake and ours. There will never be such a city again.”

Brut leaned forward in his saddle and said: “In principle, Red Archer, I am in agreement with you. But principle is not enough without deeds. How would you suggest we defend this low-walled city against siege and the powers of Chaos?”

“We should need help,” Rackhir replied, “supernatural help if need be.”

“Would the Grey Lords help us?” Zas the One-handed asked the question. He was an old, torn wanderer who had once gained a throne and lost it again.

“Aye—the Grey Lords!” Several voices chorused this hopefully.

“Who are the Grey Lords?” said Uroch, but no-one heard him.

“They are not inclined to aid anyone at all,” Zas the One-handed pointed out, “but surely Tanelorn, coming as it does under neither the Forces of Law nor the Lords of Chaos, would be worth their while preserving. After all, they have no loyalties either.”

“I’m for seeking the Grey Lords’ aid,” Brut nodded. “What of the rest of us?” There was general agreement, then silence when they realized that they knew of no means of contacting the mysterious and insouciant beings. At last Zas pointed this out.

Rackhir said: “I know a seer—a hermit who lives in the Sighing Desert. Perhaps he can help.”

“I think that, after all, we should not waste time looking for supernatural assistance against this beggar rabble,” Uroch said. “Let us prepare, instead, to meet the attack with physical means.”

“You forget,” Brut said wearily, “that they are led by Narjhan of Chaos. He is not human and has the whole strength of Chaos behind him. We know that the Grey Lords are pledged neither to Law nor to Chaos but will sometimes help either side if the whim takes them. They are our only chance.”

“Why not seek the aid of the forces of Law, sworn enemies of Chaos and mightier than the Grey Lords?” Uroch said.

“Because Tanelorn is a city owing allegiance to neither side. We are all of us men and women who have broken our pledge to Chaos but have made no new one to Law. The forces of Law, in matters of this kind, will help only those sworn to them. The Grey Lords only may protect us, if they would.” So said Zas.

“I will go to find my seer,” Rackhir the Red Archer said, “and if he knows how I may reach the Domain of the Grey Lords, then I’ll continue straight on, for there is so little time. If I reach them and solicit their help you will soon know I have done so. If not, you must die in Tanelorn’s defense and, if I live, I will join you in that last battle.”

“Very well,” Brut agreed, “go quickly, Red Archer. Let one of your own arrows be the measure of your speed.”

And taking little with him save his bone bow and quiver of scarlet-fledged arrows, Rackhir set off for the Sighing Desert.

From Nadsokor, south-west through the land of Vilmir, even through the squalid country of Org which has in it the dreadful forest of Troos, there was flame and black horror in the wake of the beggar horde, and insolent, disdainful of them though he led them, rode a being completely clad in black armour with a voice that rang hollow in the helm. People fled away at their approach and the land was made barren by their passing. Most knew what had happened, that the beggar citizens of Nadsokor had, contrary to their traditions of centuries, vomited from their city in a wild, menacing horde. Someone had armed them—someone had made them go northwards and westwards towards the Sighing Desert. But who was the one who led them? Ordinary folk did not know. And why did they head for the Sighing Desert? There was no city beyond Karlaak, which they had skirted, only the Sighing Desert—and beyond that the edge of the world. Was that their destination? Were they heading, lemminglike, to their destruction? Everyone hoped so, in their hate for the horrible horde.

Rackhir rode through the mournful wind of the Sighing Desert, his face and eyes protected against the particles of sand which flew about. He was thirsty and had been riding a day. Ahead of him at last were the rocks he sought.

He reached the rocks and called above the wind.

“Lamsar!”

The hermit came out in answer to Rackhir’s shout. He was dressed in oiled leather to which sand clung. His beard, too, was encrusted with sand and his skin seemed to have taken on the colour and texture of the desert. He recognized Rackhir immediately by his dress, beckoned him into the cave and disappeared back inside. Rackhir dismounted and led his horse to the cave entrance and went in.

Lamsar was seated on a smooth rock. “You are welcome, Red Archer,” he said, “and I perceive by your manner that you wish information from me and that your mission is urgent.”

“I seek the help of the Grey Lords, Lamsar,” said Rackhir.

The old hermit smiled. It was as if a fissure had suddenly appeared in a rock. “To risk the journey through the Five Gates, your mission must be important. I will tell you how to reach the Grey Lords, but the road is a difficult one.”

“I’m willing to take it,” Rackhir replied, “for Tanelorn is threatened and the Grey Lords could help her.”

“Then you must pass through the First Gate, which lies in our own dimension. I will help you find it.”

“And what must I do then?”

“You must pass through all five gates. Each gateway leads to a realm which lies beyond and within our own dimension. In each realm you must speak with the dwellers there. Some are friendly to men, some are not, but all must answer your question: ‘Where lies the next Gate?’ though some may seek to stop you passing. The last gate leads to the Grey Lords’ Domain.”

“And the first gate?”

“That lies anywhere in this realm. I will find it for you now.” Lamsar composed himself to meditate and Rackhir, who had expected some sort of gaudy miracle-working from the old man, was disappointed.

Several hours went by until Lamsar said: “The gate is outside. Memorize the following: If X is equal to the spirit of humanity, then the combination of the two must be of double power, therefore the spirit of humanity always contains the power to dominate itself.”

“A strange equation,” said Rackhir.

“Aye—but memorize it, meditate upon it and then we will leave.”

“We—you as well?”

“I think so.”

The hermit was old. Rackhir did not want him on the journey. But then he realized that the hermit’s knowledge could be of use to him, so did not object. He thought upon the equation and, as he thought, his mind seemed to glitter and become diffused until he was in a strange trance and all his powers felt greater, both those of mind and body. The hermit got up and Rackhir followed him. They went out of the cave-mouth but, instead of the Sighing Desert, there was a hazy cloud of blue shimmering light ahead and when they had passed through this, in a second, they found themselves in the foothills of a low mountain-range and below them, in a valley, were villages. The villages were strangely laid out, all the houses in a wide circle about a huge amphitheatre containing, at its centre, a circular dais.

“It will be interesting to learn the reason why these villages are so arranged,” Lamsar said, and they began to move down into the valley.

As they reached the bottom and came close to one of the villages, people came gaily out and danced joyfully towards them. They stopped in front of Rackhir and Lamsar and, jumping from foot to foot as he greeted them, the leader spoke.

“You are strangers, we can tell—and you are welcome to all we have, food, accommodation and entertainment.”

The two men thanked them graciously and accompanied them back to the circular village. The amphitheatre was made of mud and seemed to have been stamped out, hollowed into the ground encompassed by the houses. The leader of the villagers took them to his house and offered them food.

“You have come to us at a Rest Time,” he said, “but do not worry, things will soon commence again. My name is Yerleroo.”

“We seek the next Gate,” Lamsar said politely, “and our mission is urgent. You will forgive us if we do not stay long?”

“Come,” said Yerleroo, “things are about to commence. You will see us at our best, and must join us.”

All the villagers had assembled in the amphitheatre, surrounding the platform in the centre. Most of them were light-skinned and light-haired, gay and smiling, excited—but a few were evidently of a different race, dark, black-haired, and these were sullen.

Sensing something ominous in what he saw, Rackhir asked the question directly: “Where is the next Gate?”

Yerleroo hesitated, his mouth worked and then he smiled. “Where the winds meet,” he said.

Rackhir declared angrily: “That’s no answer.”

“Yes it is,” said Lamsar softly behind him. “A fair answer.”

“Now we shall dance,” Yerleroo said. “First you shall watch our dance and then you shall join in.”

“Dance?” said Rackhir, wishing he had brought a sword, or at least a dagger.

“Yes—you will like it. Everyone likes it. You will find it will do you good.”

“What if we do not wish to dance?”

“You must—it is for your own good, be assured.”

“And he—” Rackhir pointed at one of the sullen men. “Does he enjoy it?”

“It is for his own good.”

Yerleroo clapped his hands and at once the fair-haired people leapt into a frenetic, senseless dance. Some of them sang. The sullen people did not sing. After a little hesitation, they began to prance dully about, their frowning features contrasting with their jerking bodies. Soon the whole village was dancing, whirling, singing a monotonous song.

Yerleroo flashed by, whirling. “Come, join in now.”

“We had better leave,” Lamsar said with a faint smile. They backed away.

Yerleroo saw them. “No—you must not leave—you must dance.”

They turned and ran as fast as the old man could go. The dancing villagers changed the direction of their dance and began to whirl menacingly towards them in a horrible semblance of gaiety.

“There’s nothing for it,” Lamsar said and stood his ground, observing them through ironic eyes. “The



mountain gods must be invoked. A pity, for sorcery wearies me. Let us hope their magic extends to this plane. *Gordar!*”

Words in an unusually harsh language issued from Lamsar’s old mouth. The whirling villagers came on.

Lamsar pointed at them.

The villagers became suddenly petrified and slowly, disturbingly, their bodies caught in a hundred positions, turned to smooth, black basalt.

“It was for their own good,” Lamsar smiled grimly. “Come, to the place where the winds meet,” and he took Rackhir there quite swiftly.

At the place where the winds met they found the second gateway, a column of amber-coloured flame, shot through with streaks of green. They entered it and, instantly, were in a world of dark seething colour. Above them was a sky of murky red in which other colours shifted, agitated, changing. Ahead of them lay a forest, dark, blue, black, heavy, mottled green, the tops of its trees moving like a wild tide. It was a howling land of unnatural phenomena.

Lamsar pursed his lips. “On this plane Chaos rules. We must get to the next gate swiftly for obviously the Lords of Chaos will seek to stop us.”

“Is it always like this?” Rackhir gasped.

“It is always boiling midnight—but the rest, it changes with the moods of the lords. There are no rules at all.”

They pressed on through the bounding, blossoming scenery as it erupted and changed around them. Once they saw a huge winged figure in the sky, smoky yellow and roughly man-shaped.

“Vezhan,” Lamsar said. “Let’s hope he did not see us.”

“Vezhan!” Rackhir whispered the name—for it was to Vezhan that he had once been loyal.

They crept on, uncertain of their direction or even of their speed in that disturbing land.

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At length, they came to the shores of a peculiar ocean.

It was a grey, heaving, timeless sea, a mysterious sea which stretched into infinity. There could be no other shores beyond this rolling plain of water. No other lands or rivers or dark, cool woods, no other men or women or ships. It was a sea which led to nowhere. It was complete to itself—a sea.

Over this timeless ocean hovered a brooding ochre sun which cast moody shadows of black and green across the water, giving the whole scene something of the look of being enclosed in a vast cavern, for the sky above was gnarled and black with ancient clouds. And all the while the doom-carried crash of

breakers, the lonely, fated monotony of the ever-rearing white-topped waves; the sound which portended neither death nor life nor war nor peace—simply existence and shifting inharmony. They could go no further.

“This has the air of our death about it,” Rackhir said shivering.

The sea roared and tumbled, the sound of it increasing to a fury, daring them to go on towards it, welcoming them with wild temptation—offering them nothing but achievement—the achievement of death.

Lamsar said: “It is not my fate wholly to perish.” But then they were running back towards the forest, feeling that the strange sea was pouring up the beach towards them. They looked back and saw that it had gone no further, that the breakers were less wild, the sea more calm. Lamsar was a little way behind Rackhir.

The Red Archer gripped his hand and hauled him towards him as if he had rescued the old man from a whirlpool. They remained there, mesmerized, for a long time, while the sea called to them and the wind was a cold caress on their flesh.

In the bleak brightness of the alien shore, under a sun which gave no heat, their bodies shone like stars in the night and they turned towards the forest, quietly.

“Are we trapped, then, in this realm of Chaos?” Rackhir said at length. “If we meet someone, they will offer us harm—how can we ask our question?”

Then there emerged from the huge forest a great figure, naked and gnarled like the trunk of a tree, green as lime, but the face was jovial.



“Greetings, unhappy renegades,” it said.

“Where is the next Gate?” said Lamsar quickly.

“You almost entered it, but turned away,” laughed the giant. “That sea does not exist—it is there to stop travelers from passing through the gate.”

“It exists here, in the Realm of Chaos,” Rackhir said thickly.

“You could say so—but what exists in Chaos save the disorders of the minds of gods gone mad?”

Rackhir had strung his bone bow and fitted an arrow to the string, but he did it in the knowledge of his own hopelessness.

“Do not shoot the arrow,” said Lamsar softly. “Not yet.” And he stared at the arrow and muttered.

The giant advanced carelessly towards them, unhurried. “It will please me to exact the price of your crimes from you,” it said, “for I am Hionhurn the Executioner. You will find your death pleasant—but your fate unbearable.” And he came closer, his clawed hands outstretched.

“Shoot!” croaked Lamsar and Rackhir brought the bow-string to his cheek, pulled it back with might and released the arrow at the giant’s heart. “Run!” cried Lamsar, and in spite of their forebodings they ran back down the shore towards the frightful sea. They heard the giant groan behind them as they

reached the edge of the sea and, instead of running into water, found themselves in a range of stark mountains.

“No mortal arrow could have delayed him,” Rackhir said. “How did you stop him?”

“I used an old charm—the Charm of Justice, which, when applied to any weapon, makes it strike at the unjust.”

“But why did it hurt Hionhurn, an immortal?” Rackhir asked.

“There is no justice in the world of Chaos—something constant and inflexible, whatever its nature, must harm any servant of the Lords of Chaos.”

“We have passed through the Third Gate,” Rackhir said, unstringing his bow, “and have the fourth and fifth to find. Two dangers have been avoided—but what new ones will we encounter now?”

“Who knows?” said Lamsar, and they walked on through the rocky mountain pass and entered a forest that was cool, even though the sun had reached its zenith and was glaring down through parts of the thick foliage. There was an air of ancient calm about the place. They heard unfamiliar bird-calls and saw tiny golden birds which were also new to them.

“There is something calm and peaceful about this place—I almost distrust it,” Rackhir said, but Lamsar pointed ahead silently.

Rackhir saw a large domed building, magnificent in marble and blue mosaic. It stood in a clearing of yellow grass and the marble caught the sun, flashing like fire.

They neared the domed construction and saw that it was supported by big marble columns set into a platform of milky jade. In the centre of the platform, a stairway of blue-stone curved upwards and disappeared into a circular aperture. There were wide windows set into the sides of the raised building but they could not see inside. There were no inhabitants visible and it would have seemed strange to the pair if there had been. They crossed the yellow glade and stepped onto the jade platform. It was warm, as if it had been exposed to the sun. They almost slipped on the smooth stone.

They reached the blue steps and mounted them, staring upwards, but they could still see nothing. They did not attempt to ask themselves why they were so assuredly invading the building; it seemed quite natural that they should do what they were doing. There was no alternative. There was an air of familiarity about the place. Rackhir felt it but did not know why. Inside was a cool, shadowy hall, a blend of soft darkness and bright sunlight which entered by the windows. The floor was pearl-pink and the ceiling deep scarlet. The hall reminded Rackhir of a womb.

Partially hidden by deep shadow was a small doorway and beyond it, steps. Rackhir looked questioningly at Lamsar. “Do we proceed in our exploration?”

“We must—to have our question answered, if possible.”

They climbed the steps and found themselves in a smaller hall similar to the one beneath them. This hall, however, was furnished with twelve wide thrones placed in a semicircle in the centre. Against the wall, near the door, were several chairs, upholstered in purple fabric. The thrones were of gold, decorated

with fine silver, padded with white cloth.

A door behind the thrones opened and a tall, fragile-looking man appeared, followed by others whose faces were almost identical. Only their robes were noticeably different. Their faces were pale, almost white, their noses straight, their lips thin but not cruel. Their eyes were unhuman—green-flecked eyes which stared outwards with sad composure. The leader of the tall men looked at Rackhir and Lamsar. He nodded and waved a pale, long-fingered hand gracefully. “Welcome,” he said. His voice was high and frail, like a girl’s, but beautiful in its modulation. The other eleven men seated themselves in the thrones but the first man, who had spoken, remained standing. “Sit down, please,” he said.

Rackhir and Lamsar sat down on two of the purple chairs.

“How did you come here?” enquired the man.

“Through the gates from Chaos,” Lamsar replied.

“And were you seeking our realm?”

“No—we travel towards the Domain of the Grey Lords.”

“I thought so, for your people rarely visit us save by accident.”

“Where are we?” asked Rackhir as the man seated himself in the remaining throne.

“In a place beyond time. Once our land was part of the Earth you know, but in the dim past it became separated from it. Our bodies, unlike yours, are immortal. We choose this, but we are not bound to our flesh, as you are.”

“I don’t understand,” frowned Rackhir. “What are you saying?”

“I have said what I can in the simplest terms understandable to you. If you do not know what I say then I can explain no further. We are called the Guardians—though we guard nothing. We are warriors, but we fight nothing.”

“What else do you do?” enquired Rackhir.

“We exist. You will want to know where the next gateway lies?”

“Yes.”

“Refresh yourselves here, and then we shall show you the gateway.”

“What is your function?” asked Rackhir.

“To function,” said the man.

“You are unhuman!”

“We are human. *You* spend your lives chasing that which is within you and that which you can find in any

other human being—but you will not look for it there—you must follow more glamorous paths—to waste your time in order to discover that you wasted your time. I am glad that we are no longer like you—but I wish that it were lawful to help you further. This, however, we may not do.”

“Ours is no meaningless quest,” said Lamsar quietly, with respect. “We go to rescue Tanelorn.”

“Tanelorn?” the man said softly. “Does Tanelorn still remain?”

“Aye,” said Rackhir, “and shelters tired men who are grateful for the rest she offers.” Now he realized why the building had been familiar—it had the same quality, but intensified, as Tanelorn.

“Tanelorn was the last of our cities,” said the Guardian. “Forgive us for judging you—most of the travelers who pass through this plane are searchers, restless, with no real purpose, only excuses, imaginary reasons for journeying on. You must love Tanelorn to brave the dangers of the gateways?”

“We do,” said Rackhir, “and I am grateful that you built her.”

“We built her for ourselves, but it is good that others have used her well—and she them.”

“Will you help us?” Rackhir said. “For Tanelorn?”

“We cannot—it is not lawful. Now, refresh yourselves and be welcome.”

The two travelers were given foods, both soft and brittle, sweet and sour, and drink which seemed to enter the pores of their skin as they quaffed it, and then the Guardian said: “We have caused a road to be made. Follow it and enter the next realm. But we warn you, it is the most dangerous of all.”

And they set off down the road that the Guardians had caused to be made and passed through the fourth gateway into a dreadful realm—the Realm of Law.

Nothing shone in the grey-lit sky, nothing moved, nothing marred the grey.

Nothing interrupted the bleak grey plain stretching on all sides of them, for ever. There was no horizon. It was a bright, clean wasteland. But there was a sense about the air, a presence of something past, something which had gone but left a faint aura of its passing.

“What dangers could be here?” said Rackhir shuddering. “Here where there is nothing?”

“The danger of the loneliest madness,” Lamsar replied. Their voices were swallowed in the grey expanse.

“When the Earth was very young,” Lamsar continued, his words trailing away across the wilderness, “things were like this—but there were seas, there were seas. Here there is nothing.”

“You are wrong,” Rackhir said with a faint smile. “I have thought—here there is Law.”

“That is true—but what is Law without something to decide between? Here is Law—bereft of justice.”

They walked on, all about them an air of something intangible that had once been tangible. On they

walked through this barren world of Absolute Law.

Eventually, Rackhir spied something. Something that flickered, faded, appeared again until, as they neared it, they saw that it was a man. His great head was noble, firm, and his body was massively built, but the face was twisted in a tortured frown and he did not see them as they approached him.

They stopped before him and Lamsar coughed to attract his attention. The man turned that great head and regarded them abstractedly, the frown clearing at length, to be replaced by a calmer, thoughtful expression.

“Who are you?” asked Rackhir.

The man sighed. “Not yet,” he said, “not yet, it seems. More phantoms.”

“Are *we* the phantoms?” smiled Rackhir. “That seems to be more your own nature.” He watched as the man began slowly to fade again, his form less definite, melting. The body seemed to make a great heave, like a salmon attempting to leap a dam, then it was back again in a more solid form.

“I had thought myself rid of all that was superfluous, save my own obstinate shape,” the man said tiredly, “but here is something, back again. Is my reason failing—is my logic no longer what it was?”

“Do not fear,” said Rackhir, “we are material beings.”

“That is *what* I feared. For an eternity I have been stripping away the layers of unreality which obscure the truth. I have almost succeeded in the final act, and now you begin to creep back. My mind is not what it was, I think.”

“Perhaps you worry lest we do not exist?” Lamsar said slowly, with a clever smile.

“You know that is not so—you do not exist, just as I do not exist.” The frown returned, the features twisted, the body began, again, to fade, only to resume, once more, its earlier nature. The man sighed. “Even to reply to you is betraying myself, but I suppose a little relaxation will serve to rest my powers and equip me for the final effort of will which will bring me to the ultimate truth—the truth of non-being.”

“But non-being involves non-thought, non-will, non-action,” Lamsar said. “Surely you would not submit yourself to such a fate?”

“There is no such thing as self. I am the only reasoning thing in creation—I am almost pure reason. A little more effort and I shall be what I desire to be—the one truth in this non-existent universe. That requires first ridding myself of anything extraneous around me—such as yourselves—and then making the final plunge into the only reality.”

“What is that?”

“The state of absolute nothingness where there is nothing to disturb the order of things because there is no order of things.”

“Scarcely a constructive ambition,” Rackhir said.

“Construction is a meaningless word—like all words, like all so-called existence. Everything means nothing—that is the only truth.”

“But what of this realm? Barren as it is, it still has light and firm rock. You have not succeeded in reasoning that out of existence,” Lamsar said.

“That will cease when I cease,” the man said slowly, “just as you will cease to be. Then there can be nothing but nothing and Law will reign unchallenged.”

“But Law cannot reign—it will not exist either, according to your logic.”

“You are wrong—nothingness is the Law. Nothingness is the object of Law. Law is the way to its ultimate state, the state of non-being.”

“Well,” said Lamsar musingly, “then you had better tell us where we may find the next gate.”

“There is no gate.”

“If there were, where would we find it?” Rackhir said.

“If a gate existed, and it does not, it would have been inside the mountain, close to what was once called the Sea of Peace.”

“And where was that?” Rackhir asked, conscious now of their terrible predicament. There were no landmarks, no sun, no stars—nothing by which they could determine direction.

“Close to the Mountain of Severity.”

“Which way do you go?” Lamsar enquired of the man.

“Out—beyond—to nowhere.”

“And where, if you succeed in your object, will we be consigned?”

“To some other nowhere. I cannot truthfully answer. But since you have never existed in reality, therefore you can go on to no non-reality. Only I am real—and I do not exist.”

“We are getting nowhere,” said Rackhir with a smirk which changed to a frown.

“It is only my mind which holds the non-reality at bay,” the man said, “and I must concentrate or else it will all come flooding back and I shall have to start from the beginning again. In the beginning, there was everything—Chaos. I *created* nothing.”

With resignation, Rackhir strung his bow, fitted an arrow to the string and aimed at the frowning man.

“You wish for non-being?” he said.

“I have told you so.” Rackhir’s arrow pierced his heart, his body faded, became solid and slumped to the grass as mountains, forests and rivers appeared around them. It was still a peaceful, well-ordered realm and Rackhir and Lamsar, as they strode on in search of the Mountain of Severity, savoured it. There seemed to be no animal life here and they talked, in puzzled terms, about the man they had been



forced to kill, until, at length, they reached a great smooth pyramid which seemed, though it was of natural origin, to have been carved into this form. They walked around its base until they discovered an opening.

There could be no doubt that this was the Mountain of Severity, and a calm ocean lay some distance away. They went into the opening and emerged into a delicate landscape. They were now through the last gateway and in the Domain of the Grey Lords.

\* \* \*

There were trees like stiffened spider-webs.

Here and there were blue pools, shallow, with shining water and graceful rocks balanced in them and around their shores. Above them and beyond them the light hills swept away towards a pastel yellow horizon which was tinted with red, orange and blue, deep blue.

They felt overlarge, clumsy, like crude, gross giants treading on the fine, short grass. They felt as if they were destroying the sanctity of the place.

Then they saw a girl come walking towards them.

She stopped as they came closer to her. She was dressed in loose black robes which flowed about her as if in a wind, but there was no wind. Her face was pale and pointed, her black eyes large and enigmatic. At her long throat was a jewel.

“Sorana,” said Rackhir thickly, “you died.”

“I disappeared,” said she, “and this is where I came. I was told that you would come to this place and decided that I would meet you.”

“But this is the Domain of the Grey Lords—and you serve Chaos.”

“I do—but many are welcome at the Grey Lords’ Court, whether they be of Law, Chaos or neither. Come, I will escort you there.”

Bewildered, now, Rackhir let her lead the way across the strange terrain and Lamsar followed him.

Sorana and Rackhir had been lovers once, in Yeshpotoom-Kahlai, the Unholy Fortress, where evil blossomed and was beautiful. Sorana, sorceress, adventuress, was without conscience but had high regard for the Red Archer since he had come to Yeshpotoom-Kahlai one evening, covered in his own blood, survivor of a bizarre battle between the Knights of Tumbru and Loheb Bakra’s brigand-engineers. Seven years ago, that had been, and he had heard her scream when the Blue Assassins had crept into the Unholy Fortress, pledged to murder evil-makers. Even then he had been in the process of hurriedly leaving Yeshpotoom-Kahlai and had considered it unwise to investigate what was obviously a death-scream. Now she was here—and if she was here, then it was for a strong reason and for her own convenience. On the other hand, it was in her interests to serve Chaos and he must be suspicious of her.

Ahead of them now they saw many great tents of shimmering grey which, in the light, seemed composed of all colours. People moved slowly among the tents and there was an air of leisure about the place.

“Here,” Sorana said, smiling at him and taking his hand, “the Grey Lords hold impermanent court. They wander about their land and have few artifacts and only temporary houses which you see. They’ll make you welcome if you interest them.”

“But will they help us?”

“You must ask them.”

“You are pledged to Eequor of Chaos,” Rackhir observed, “and must aid her against us, is that not so?”

“Here,” she smiled, “is a truce. I can only inform Chaos of what I learn of your plans and, if the Grey Lords aid you, must tell them how, if I can find out.”

“You are frank, Sorana.”

“Here there are subtler hypocrisies—and the subtlest lie of all is the full truth,” she said, as they entered the area of tall tents and made their way towards a certain one.

In a different realm of the Earth, the huge horde careered across the grasslands of the North, screaming and singing behind the black-armoured horseman, their leader. Nearer and nearer they came to lonely Tanelorn, their motley weapons shining through the evening mists. Like a boiling tidal wave of insensate flesh, the mob drove on, hysterical with the hate for Tanelorn which Narjhan had placed in their thin hearts. Thieves, murderers, jackals, scavengers—a scrawny horde, but huge...

And in Tanelorn the warriors were grim-faced as their outriders and scouts flowed into the city with messages and estimates of the beggar army’s strength.

Brut, in the silver armour of his rank, knew that two full days had passed since Rackhir had left for the Sighing Desert. Three more days and the city would be engulfed by Narjhan’s mighty rabble—and they knew there was no chance of halting their advance. They might have left Tanelorn to its fate, but they would not. Even weak Uroch would not. For Tanelorn the Mysterious had given them all a secret power which each believed to be his only, a strength which filled them where before they had been hollow men. Selfishly, they stayed—for to leave Tanelorn to her fate would be to become hollow again, and that they all dreaded.

Brut was the leader and he prepared the defense of Tanelorn—a defense which might just have held against the beggar army but not against it and Chaos. Brut shuddered when he thought that if Chaos had directed its full force against Tanelorn, they would be sobbing in Hell at that moment.

Dust rose high above Tanelorn, sent flying by the hoofs of the scouts’ and messengers’ horses. One came through the gate as Brut watched. He pulled his mount to a stop before the nobleman. He was the messenger from Karlaak, by the Weeping Waste, one of the nearest major cities to Tanelorn.

The messenger gasped: “I asked Karlaak for aid but, as we supposed, they had never heard of Tanelorn

and suspected that I was an emissary from the beggar army sent to lead their few forces into a trap. I pleaded with the Senators, but they would do nothing.”

“Was not Elric there—he knows Tanelorn?”

“No, he was not there. There is a rumour which says that he himself fights Chaos now, for the minions of Chaos captured his wife Zarozinia and he rides in pursuit of them. Chaos, it seems, gains strength everywhere in our realm.”

Brut was pale.

“What of Jadmar—will Jadmar send warriors?” The messenger spoke urgently, for many had been sent to the nearer cities to solicit aid.

“I do not know,” replied Brut, “and it does not matter now—for the beggar army is not three days’ march from Tanelorn and it would take two weeks for a Jadmarian force to reach us.”

“And Rackhir?”

“I have heard nothing and he has not returned. I have the feeling he’ll not return. Tanelorn is doomed.”

Rackhir and Lamsar bowed before the small men who sat in the tent, but one of them said impatiently: “Do not humble yourselves before us, friends—we who are humbler than any.” So they straightened their backs and waited to be further addressed.

The Grey Lords assumed humility, but this, it seemed, was their greatest ostentation, for it was a pride that they had. Rackhir realized that he would need to use subtle flattery and was not sure that he could, for he was a warrior, not a courtier or a diplomat. Lamsar, too, realized the situation and he said:

“In our pride, lords, we have come to learn the simpler truths which are only truths—the truths which you can teach us.”

The speaker gave a self-deprecating smile and replied: “Truth is not for us to define, guest, we can but offer our incomplete thoughts. They might interest you or help you to find your own truths.”

“Indeed, that is so,” Rackhir said, not wholly sure with what he was agreeing, but judging it best to agree. “And we wondered if you had any suggestions on a matter which concerns us—the protection of our Tanelorn.”

“We would not be so prideful as to interfere with our own comments. We are not mighty intellects,” the speaker replied blandly, “and we have no confidence in our own decisions, for who knows that they may be wrong and based on wrongly assessed information?”

“Indeed,” said Lamsar, judging that he must flatter them with their own assumed humility, “and it is lucky for us, lords, that we do not confuse pride with learning—for it is the quiet man who observes and says little who sees the most. Therefore, though we realize that you are not confident that your suggestions or help would be useful, nonetheless we, taking example from your own demeanour, humbly ask if you know of any way in which we might rescue Tanelorn?”

\* \* \*

Rackhir had hardly been able to follow the complexities of Lamsar's seemingly unsophisticated argument, but he saw that the Grey Lords were pleased. Out of the corner of his eye he observed Sorana. She was smiling to herself and it seemed evident, by the characteristics of that smile, that they had behaved in the right way. Now Sorana was listening intently and Rackhir cursed to himself that the Lords of Chaos would know of everything and might, even if they did gain the Grey Lords' aid, still be able to anticipate and stop any action they took to save Tanelorn.

The speaker conferred in a liquid speech with his fellows and said finally: "Rarely do we have the privilege to entertain such brave and intelligent men. How may our insignificant minds be put to your advantage?"

Rackhir realized quite suddenly, and almost laughed, that the Grey Lords were not very clever after all. Their flattery had got them the help they required. He said:

"Narjhan of Chaos heads a huge army of human scum—a beggar army—and is sworn to tear down Tanelorn and kill her inhabitants. We need magical aid of some kind to combat one so powerful as Narjhan *and* defeat the beggars."

"But Tanelorn cannot be destroyed..." said a Grey Lord. "She is Eternal..." said another. "But this manifestation..." murmured the third. "Ah, yes..."

"There are beetles in Kaleef," said a Grey Lord who had not spoken before, "which emit a peculiar venom."

"Beetles, lord?" said Rackhir.

"They are the size of mammoths," said the third Lord, "but can change their size—and change the size of their prey if it is too large for their gullets."

"As for that matter," the first speaker said, "there is a chimera which dwells in mountains south of here—it can change its shape and contains hate for Chaos since Chaos bred it and abandoned it with no real shape of its own."

"Then there are four brothers of Himerscahl who are endowed with sorcerous power," said the second lord, but the first interrupted him:

"Their magic is no good outside our own dimension," he said. "I had thought, however, of reviving the Blue Wizard."

"Too dangerous and, anyway, beyond our powers," said his companion.

They continued to debate for a while, and Rackhir and Lamsar said nothing, but waited.

Eventually the first speaker said:

"The Boatmen of Xerlerenes, we have decided, will probably be best equipped to aid you in defense of Tanelorn. You must go to the mountains of Xerlerenes and find their lake."

“A lake,” said Lamsar, “in a range of mountains, I see.”

“No,” the lord said, “their lake lies above the mountains. We will find someone to take you there. Perhaps they will aid you.”

“You can guarantee nothing else?”

“Nothing—it is not our business to interfere. It is up to them to decide whether they will aid you or not.”

“I see,” said Rackhir, “thank you.”

How much time had passed since he had left Tanelorn? How much time before Narjhan’s beggar army reached the city? Or had it already done so?

Suddenly he thought of something, looked for Sorana, but she had left the tent.

“Where lies Xerlerenes?” Lamsar was asking.

“Not in our realm,” one of the Grey Lords replied. “Come, we will find you a guide.”

Sorana spoke the necessary word which took her immediately into the blue half-world with which she was so familiar. There were no other colours in it, but many, many shades of blue. Here she waited until Eequor noticed her presence. In the timelessness, she could not tell how long she had waited.

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The beggar horde came to an undisciplined and slow halt at a sign from its leader. A voice rang hollowly from the helm that was always closed.

*“Tomorrow, we march against Tanelorn—the time we have anticipated is almost upon us. Make camp now. Tomorrow shall Tanelorn be punished and the stones of her little houses will be dust on the wind.”*

The million beggars cackled their glee and wetted their scrawny lips. Not one of them asked why they had marched so far, and this was because of Narjhan’s power.

In Tanelorn, Brut and Zas the One-handed discussed the nature of death in quiet, over-controlled tones. Both were filled with sadness, less for themselves than for Tanelorn, soon to perish. Outside, a pitiful army tried to place a cordon around the town but failed to fill the gaps between men, there were so few of them. Lights in the houses burned as if for the last time, and candles guttered moodily.

Sorana, sweating as she always did after such an episode, returned to the plane occupied by the Grey

Lords and discovered that Rackhir, Lamsar and their guide were preparing to leave. Eequor had told her what to do—it was for her to contact Narjhan. The rest the Lords of Chaos would accomplish. She blew her ex-lover a kiss as he rode from the camp into the night. He grinned at her defiantly, but when his face was turned from her he frowned and they went in silence into the Valley of the Currents where they entered the realm where lay the Mountains of Xerlerenes. Almost as soon as they arrived, danger presented itself.

Their guide, a wanderer called Timeras, pointed into the night sky which was spiked by the outlines of crags.

“This is a world where the air elementals are dominant,” he said. “Look!”

Flowing downwards in an ominous sweep they saw a flight of owls, great eyes gleaming. Only as they came nearer did the men realize that these owls were huge, almost as large as a man. In the saddle Rackhir strung his bow. Timeras said:

“How could they have learned of our presence so soon?”



“Sorana,” Rackhir said, busy with the bow. “She must have warned the Lords of Chaos and they have sent these dreadful birds.” As the first one homed in, great claws grasping, great beak gaping, he shot it in its feathery throat and it shrieked and swept upwards. Many arrows fled from his humming bow-string to find a mark while Timeras drew his sword and slashed at them, ducking as they whistled downwards.

Lamsar watched the battle but took no part, seemed thoughtful at a time when action was desired of him.

He mused: “If the spirits of air are dominant in this realm, then they will resent a stronger force of other elementals,” and he racked his brain to remember a spell.

Rackhir had but two arrows left in his quiver by the time they had driven the owls off. The birds had not been used, evidently, to a prey which fought back and had put up a poor fight considering their superiority.

“We can expect more danger,” said Rackhir somewhat shakily, “for the Lords of Chaos will use other means to try and stop us. How far to Xerlerenes?”

“Not far,” said Timeras, “but it’s a hard road.”

They rode on, and Lamsar rode behind them, lost in his own thoughts.

Now they urged their horses up a steep mountain path and a chasm lay below them, dropping, dropping, dropping. Rackhir, who had no love for heights, kept as close to the mountainside as was possible. If he had had gods to whom he could pray, he would have prayed for their help then.

The huge fish came flying—or swimming—at them as they rounded a bend. They were semi-luminous, big as sharks but with enlarged fins with which they planed through the air like rays. They were quite evidently fish. Timeras drew his sword, but Rackhir had only two arrows left and it would have been useless against the airfish to have shot them, for there were many of them.

But Lamsar laughed and spoke in a high-pitched, staccato speech. “*Crackhor—pishtasta salaflar!*”

Huge balls of flame materialized against the black sky—flaring balls of multicoloured fire which shaped themselves into strange, warlike forms and streamed towards the unnatural fish.

The flame-shapes seared into the big fish and they shrieked, struck at the fire-balls, burned, and fell flaming down the deep gorge.

“Fire elementals!” Rackhir exclaimed.

“The spirits of the air fear such beings,” Lamsar said calmly.

The flame-beings accompanied them the rest of the way to Xerlerenes and were with them when dawn came, having frightened away many other dangers which the Lords of Chaos had evidently sent against them.



They saw the boats of Xerlerenes in the dawn, at anchor on a calm sky, fluffy clouds playing around their slender keels, their huge sails furled.

“The boatmen live aboard their vessels,” Timeras said, “for it is only their ships which deny the laws of nature, not they.”

Timeras cupped his hands about his mouth and called through the still mountain air: “Boatmen of

Xerlerenes, freemen of the air, guests come with a request for aid!”

A black and bearded face appeared over the side of one of the red-gold vessels. The man shielded his eyes against the rising sun and stared down at them. Then he disappeared again.

At length a ladder of slim thongs came snaking down to where they sat their horses on the tops of the mountains. Timeras grasped it, tested it and began to climb. Rackhir reached out and steadied the ladder for him. It seemed too thin to support a man but when he had it in his hands he knew that it was the strongest he had ever known.

Lamsar grumbled as Rackhir signaled for him to climb, but he did so and quite nimbly. Rackhir was the last, following his companions, climbing up through the sky high above the crags, towards the ship that sailed on the air.

The fleet comprised some twenty or thirty ships and Rackhir felt that with these to aid him, there was good chance to rescue Tanelorn—if Tanelorn survived. Narjhan would, anyway, be aware of the nature of the aid he sought.

Starved dogs barked the morning in and the beggar horde, waking from where they had sprawled on the ground, saw Narjhan already mounted, but talking to a newcomer, a girl in black robes that moved as if in a wind—but there was no wind. There was a jewel at her long throat.

When he had finished conversing with the newcomer, Narjhan ordered a horse be brought for her and she rode slightly behind him when the beggar army moved on—the last stage of their hateful journey to Tanelorn.

When they saw lovely Tanelorn and how it was so poorly guarded, the beggars laughed, but Narjhan and his new companion looked up into the sky.

“ *There may be time,*” said the hollow voice, and gave the order to attack.

Howling, the beggars broke into a run towards Tanelorn. The attack had started.

Brut rose in his saddle and there were tears flowing down his face and glistening in his beard. His huge war-axe was in one gauntleted hand and the other held a spiked mace across the saddle before him.

Zas the One-handed gripped the long and heavy broadsword with its pommel of a rampant golden lion pointed downwards. This blade had won him a crown in Andlermagne, but he doubted whether it would successfully defend his peace in Tanelorn. Beside him stood Uroch of Nieva, pale-faced but angry as he watched the ragged horde’s implacable approach.

Then, yelling, the beggars met with the warriors of Tanelorn and, although greatly outnumbered, the warriors fought desperately for they were defending more than life or love—they were defending that which had told them of a reason for living.

Narjhan sat his horse aside from the battle, Sorana next to him, for Narjhan could take no active part in the battle, could only watch and, if necessary, use magic to aid his human pawns or defend his person.



The warriors of Tanelorn, incredibly, held back the roaring beggar horde, their weapons drenched with blood, rising and falling in that sea of moving flesh, flashing in the light of the red dawn.

Sweat now mingled with the salt tears in Brut's bristling beard and with agility he leapt clear of his black horse as the screaming beast was cut from under him. The noble war-cry of his forefathers sang on his breath and, although in his shame he had no business to use it, he let it roar from him as he slashed about him with biting war-axe and rending mace. But he fought hopelessly for Rackhir had not come and Tanelorn was soon to die. His one fierce consolation was that he would die with the city, his blood mingling with its ashes.

Zas, also, acquitted himself very well before he died of a smashed skull. His old body twitched as trampling feet stumbled over it as the beggars made for Uroch of Nieva. The gold-pommeled sword was still gripped in his single hand and his soul was fleeing for limbo as Uroch, too, was slain fighting.

Then the Ships of Xerlerenes suddenly materialized in the sky and Brut, looking upward for an instant, knew that Rackhir had come at last—though it might be too late.

Narjhan, also, saw the ships and was prepared for them.

They skimmed through the sky, the fire elementals which Lamsar had summoned flying with them. The spirits of air and flame had been called to rescue weakening Tanelorn...

The Boatmen prepared their weapons and made themselves ready for war. Their black faces had a concentrated look and they grinned in their bushy beards. War-harness clothed them and they bristled with weapons—long, barbed tridents, nets of steel mesh, curved swords, long harpoons. Rackhir stood in the prow of the leading ship, his quiver packed with slim arrows loaned him by the Boatmen. Below him he saw Tanelorn and was relieved that the city still stood.

He could see the milling warriors below, but it was hard to tell, from the air, which were friends and which were foes. Lamsar called to the frisking fire elementals, instructing them. Timeras grinned and held his sword ready as the ships rocked on the wind and dropped lower.

Now Rackhir observed Narjhan with Sorana beside him.

"The bitch has warned him—he is ready for us," Rackhir said, wetting his lips and drawing an arrow from his quiver.

Down the Ships of Xerlerenes dropped, coursing downwards on the currents of air, their golden sails billowing, the warrior crews straining over the side and keen for battle.

Then Narjhan summoned the *Kyrenee*.

Huge as a storm-cloud, black as its native Hell, the *Kyrenee* grew from the surrounding air and moved its shapeless bulk forward towards the Ships of Xerlerenes, sending out flowing tendrils of poison towards them. Boatmen groaned as the coils curled around their naked bodies and crushed them.

Lamsar called urgently to his fire elementals and they rose again from where they had been devouring beggars, came together in one great blossoming of flame which moved to do battle with the *Kyrenee*.

The two masses met and there was an explosion which blinded the Red Archer with multicoloured light and sent the ships rocking and shaking so that several capsized and sent their crews hurtling downwards to death.

Blotches of flame flew everywhere and patches of poison blackness from the body of the *Kyrenee* were flung about, slaying those they touched before disappearing.

There was a terrible stink in the air—a smell of burning, a smell of outraged elements which had never been meant to meet.

The *Kyrenee* died, lashing about and wailing, while the flame elementals, dying or returning to their own sphere, faded and vanished. The remaining bulk of the great *Kyrenee* billowed slowly down to the earth where it fell upon the scrabbling beggars and killed them, leaving nothing but a wet patch on the ground for yards around, a patch glistening with the bones of beggars.

Now Rackhir cried: “Quickly—finish the fight before Narjhan summons more horrors!”

And the boats sailed downwards while the Boatmen cast their steel nets, pulling large catches of beggars aboard their ships and finishing the wriggling starvelings with their tridents or spears.

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Rackhir shot arrow after arrow and had the satisfaction of seeing each one take a beggar just where he had aimed it. The remaining warriors of Tanelorn, led by Brut who was covered in sticky blood but grinning in his victory, charged towards the unnerved beggars.

Narjhan stood his ground, while the beggars, fleeing, streamed past him and the girl. Sorana seemed frightened, looked up and her eyes met Rackhir’s. The Red Archer aimed an arrow at her, thought better of it and shot instead at Narjhan. The arrow went into the black armour but had no effect upon the Lord of Chaos.

Then the Boatmen of Xerlerenes flung down their largest net from the vessel in which Rackhir sailed and they caught Lord Narjhan in its coils and caught Sorana, too.

Shouting their exhilaration, they pulled the struggling bodies aboard and Rackhir ran forward to inspect their catch. Sorana had received a scratch across her face from the net’s wire, but the body of Narjhan lay still and dreadful in the mesh.

Rackhir grabbed an axe from a Boatman and knocked back the helm, his foot upon the chest.

“Yield, Narjhan of Chaos!” he cried in mindless merriment. He was near hysterical with victory, for this was the first time a mortal had ever bested a Lord of Chaos.

But the armour was empty, if it had ever been occupied by flesh, and Narjhan was gone.

Calm settled aboard the Ships of Xerlerenes and over the city of Tanelorn. The remnants of the warriors had gathered in the city's square and were cheering their victory.

Friagho, the Captain of Xerlerenes, came up to Rackhir and shrugged. "We did not get the catch we came for—but these will do. Thanks for the fishing, friend."

Rackhir smiled and gripped Friagho's black shoulder. "Thanks for the aid—you have done us all a great service." Friagho shrugged again and turned back to his nets, his trident poised. Suddenly Rackhir shouted: "No, Friagho—let that one be. Let me have the contents of that net."

Sorana, the contents to which he'd referred, looked anxious as if she had rather been transfixed on the prongs of Friagho's trident. Friagho said: "Very well, Red Archer—there are plenty more people on the land." He pulled at the net to release her.

She stood up shakily, looking at Rackhir apprehensively.

Rackhir smiled quite softly and said: "Come here, Sorana." She went to him and stood staring up at his bony hawk's face, her eyes wide. With a laugh he picked her up and flung her over his shoulder.

"Tanelorn is safe!" he shouted. "You shall learn to love its peace with me!" And he began to clamber down the trailing ladders that the Boatmen had dropped over the side.

Lamsar waited for him below. "I go now, to my hermitage again."

"I thank you for your aid," said Rackhir. "Without it Tanelorn would no longer exist."

"Tanelorn will always exist while men exist," said the hermit. "It was not a city you defended today. It was an ideal. That is Tanelorn."

And Lamsar smiled.

## **THE LAST ENCHANTMENT**

(JESTING WITHCHAOS)

(written 1962)

THROUGH THE BLUE and hazy night ran a shuddering man. He clutched terror to him, his bloated eyes full of blood. First behind him and then seemingly ahead of him came the hungry chuckles, the high whispered words.

*"Here toothsome. Here sweetmeat."*

He swerved in another direction, moaning. Like a huge husk he was, like a hollow ornament of thin bone, with his great, rolling head swaying on his shoulders resembling a captive balloon, the wet cavern of his wide mouth fully open and gasping, the yellow spikes of teeth clashing in his head.

Awkwardly he ran, sometimes scuttling like a wounded spider, sometimes lurching, mooing to himself through the tall and ancient forest, his feet sinking into the carpet of wet, pungent bracken and rotting roots. He held in his hand, that long, white, metal-coloured claw, a glowing black talisman, held it out and cried:

“Oh Teshwan—aid me, Teshwan. Aid me...”



In the sluggish brew that was the contents of his rolling skull a few words swam to the surface and seemed to lie there, moving with the tide of his mind. And the voice which spoke them was sardonic: “*How can Teshwan aid thee, little mortal?*”

But this relic of disoriented flesh could not form a coherent thought; could not answer save to scream its fear. So Teshwan took his presence away and it was left to the horseman to find the horror-crazed man.

Elric of Melniboné heard the voice and recognized the name. He sensed other, more ominous, denizens lurking about him in the forest.

Moodily he curled his hands about the reins of his mount and jerked its head, guiding it in the direction of the screams. He only casually considered aiding the man and he rode his horse towards him more from curiosity than anything. Elric was untroubled by the terrors that the forest held, regarding them as another, more normal man might regard the omnipresent song of birds and the rustle of small rodents in the undergrowth.

Great tremblings shuddered through Slorg’s ruined body and he still heard the sharp whisperings. Were

they carried on the air or were they slithering about in his jellied brain?

He gasped as he turned and saw the white-faced horseman riding like a grim, handsome god into the moon-glazed glade.

The horseman's long, sharply delineated skull was leper-white, as if stripped of flesh, and his slightly slanting eyes gleamed crimson. He wore a jerkin of black velvet caught at the throat by a thin silver chain. His britches, too, were of black cloth, and his leather boots were high and shining. Over his shoulders was a high-collared cape of scarlet and a heavy longsword slapped at his side as he pulled his steed to a standstill. His long, flowing hair was as white as his face. The horseman was an albino.

The shock of confronting this new and more tangible figure jerked Slorg back into half-sanity and broken words sidled from his lips.

"Who are you? Aid me! I beg you, aid me!"

Elric laughed lightly. "Now why should I, my friend? Tell me that."

"I have been—been profaned—I am Slorg. I was once a man—but those..." He rocked his body and flung his rolling head backwards, the curved lids falling down to cover his bulging eyes. "I have been profaned..."

Elric leaned forward on the pommel of his saddle and said lazily: "This is none of my business, Master Slorg."

The great head darted forward, the eyes snapped open and Slorg's long lips writhed over his teeth like a camel's. "Address not me by a mundane title! I am Siletah Slorg—Siletah of Oberlorn—rightfully—rightfully."

The title was unknown to Elric.

"My apologies, O Siletah," he mocked, "for now I observe a man of rank."

"A man no longer," whispered Slorg and he began to sob. "Help me."

"Are you, then, in danger?"

"Aye, danger—my kinsmen have set the Hungry Whisperers upon me; do you not hear them?"

And Elric cocked his head to listen. Yes, he heard sibilant voices now, "*Where are you, morsel?*"

"Oh, help me, help me," begged Slorg and lurched towards Elric. The albino drew himself up and pulled his horse back.

"No closer," he warned. "I am Elric of Melniboné."

Slorg's tattered face squeezed itself into a frown. "Ah, the name and the face," he mumbled to himself, "the face and the name. Elric of Melniboné. *Outcast!*"

"Indeed," smiled Elric, "but no more than you, it seems. Now I must bid you farewell and suggest, by way of friendly advice, that you compose yourself soon. It is better to die with dignity, Siletah Slorg."

“I have powers, outcast of Melniboné—I have powers, still! Help me and I will tell you secrets—such secrets!”

Elric waved a disdainful hand. A moonbeam caught for an instant the flash of the rare Actorios ring which reposed on his finger. “If you know me, you should also know that I’m no merchant to bargain. I ask nothing and give nothing. Farewell!”

“I warn you, Elric—I have one power left. I can send you screaming from this place—into another. It is the power which Teshwan gives all his servants—it is the one he never takes back!”

“Why not send your hungry friends into this other place?”

“They are not human. But if you leave me, I shall lay my last enchantment upon you.”

Elric sighed. “Your last, perhaps, but not the last or the first to be laid upon me. Now I must go and search for a quieter place than this where I can sleep undisturbed.”

He turned his horse and his back on the shaking remnant of a man and rode away.

He heard Slorg calling again as he entered another part of the forest, untainted by the Siletah or those he had termed the Hungry Whisperers.

“Teshwan—return! Return to do me one last service—a deed of vengeance—a part of our bargain, Teshwan!”

A short time later Elric heard a thin, wailing scream come flowing out of the night behind him and then the whole forest seemed alive with horrible laughter. Satiated, triumphant, chuckling.

His mood altered by his encounter, Elric rode through the night, not caring to sleep, and came out of the forest in the morning, glad of the sight of the green plateau stretching ahead of him.

“Well,” he mused, “Teshwan disdained to aid Slorg and it seems there is no enchantment on me. I am half regretful. Now Slorg resides in the bellies of those he feared and his soul’s at home in Hell.”

Then the plateau changed quite suddenly to grey rock.

Swiftly Elric wheeled his horse. The plateau and the forest were behind him. He spurred his mount quickly forward and the plateau and forest faded away to leave a vast and lonely expanse of flat, grey stone. Above him the sun had disappeared and the sky was bright and white and cold.

“Now,” said Elric grimly into silence, “it seems I was wrong in my assumption.”

\* \* \*

The plateau—its atmosphere—reminded him of another environment in which he had once found himself. Then he remembered clearly a time when he and two companions had sought an ancient volume

called the Dead Gods' Book. Their questing had led them to a cavern guarded at its entrance by the symbol of the Lords of Chaos. In that cavern they had discovered an underground sea which had had unnatural qualities. There was the same sense of a sardonically amused *presence* here as there had been in the Caverns of Chaos.

Teshwan was a Lord of Chaos.

Hastily Elric pulled his runesword Stormbringer from its thick scabbard.

The sword was dead.

Normally the blade, forged by unhuman smiths for Elric's royal ancestors, was alive with sentience—throbbing with the life-force it had stolen from a hundred men and women whom Elric had slain. Once before it had been like this—in the Caverns of Chaos long ago.

Elric tightened his lips, then shrugged as he replaced the sword in its scabbard.

"In a world completely dominated by the forces of Chaos," he said, "I cannot rely on the powers which normally aid me in my sorcery. Thank Arioeh I have a good supply of drugs about me, or I would indeed be doomed."

In earlier times Elric had relied on his soul-stealing runesword to give him the energy which, as an albino, he lacked intrinsically, but recently he had rediscovered a cleaner way of counteracting his deficiency, by taking herbs he had discovered in the Forest of Troos where many unlikely things grew, both flora and fauna.

"By my father's plague-infested bones," he swore, "I must find a way off this granite plain and discover who, if anyone, rules in this world. I have heard of the powers invested in Teshwan's worshippers—and I seem to remember a hint of why the Lords of Chaos confer such peculiar talents upon them."

He shuddered.

He began to sing an ululating hate-song of old Melniboné. Elric's ancestors had been clever haters. And on he rode beneath the sunless sky.

He could not tell how much time had passed before he saw the figure standing out strongly against the featureless horizon.

Now on the flat waste of stone there were two points at which the monotony was broken.

Elric—white, black and scarlet on a grey gelding.

The morose man, black hair lying like a coat of lacquer on his rounded skull, dressed in green, a silver sword dangling in his right hand.

Elric approached the man who raised his eyes to regard the albino.

"This is a lonely place," said the stranger, sucking at his fleshy cheeks, and he stared at the ground again.

"True," replied Elric halting his horse. "Is this your world or were you sent here, also?"

“Oh, it’s my world,” said the man, without looking up. “Where are you bound?”

“For nowhere, seeking something. Where do you journey?”

“I—oh, I go to Kaneloon for the Rites, of course.”

“All things, it is said, are possible in the World of Chaos,” Elric murmured, “and yet this place seems unusually barren.”

The man looked up suddenly, and jerking his lips into a smile, laughed sharply.

“The Rites will alter that, stranger. Did you not know that this is the Time of the Change, when the Lords of Chaos rest before re-forming the world into a fresh variety of patterns?”

“I did not know that,” said Elric. “I have come here only recently.”

“You wish to stay?”

“No.”

“The Lords of Chaos are fickle. If you wished to stay they might not let you. Now that you are resolved to leave, they might keep you here. Farewell. You will find me therein!” He lifted his sword and pointed. A great palace of greenstone appeared at once. The man vanished.

“This, at least, will save me from boredom,” Elric said philosophically, and rode towards the palace.

The many-pinnacled building towered above him, its highest points hazy and seeming to possess many forms, shifting as if blown by a wind. At the great arch of the entrance a giant, semi-transparent, with a red, scintillating skin, blocked his way. Over the archway, as if hanging in the air above the giant’s proud head, was the Symbol of Chaos, a circle which produced many arrows pointing in all directions.

“Who visits the Palace of Kaneloon at the Time of the Change?” enquired the giant in a voice like limbo’s music.

“Your masters, I gather, know me—for they aided their servant Slorg in sending me hither. But tell them it is Elric of Melniboné, nonetheless—Elric, destroyer of dreaming Imrryr. Kinslayer and outcast. They will know me.”

The giant appeared to shrink, to solidify and then to drift in a red mist, pouring like sentient smoke away from the portal and into the palace. And where he had been a portcullis manifested itself to guard the palace in the giant’s absence.

Elric waited patiently until at length the portcullis vanished and the giant re-formed himself.

“My masters order me to inform you that you may enter but that, having once come to the Palace of Kaneloon, you may never leave save under certain conditions.”

“Those conditions?”

“Of these they will tell you if you enter. Are you reckless—or will you stand pondering?”



“I’ll avail myself of their generosity,” smiled Elric and spurred his nervous horse forward.

As he entered the courtyard, it appeared that the area within the palace was greater than that outside it. Not troubling to seek any mundane explanation for this phenomenon in a world dominated by the Lords of Chaos, Elric instead dismounted from his horse and walked for nearly a quarter of a mile until he reached the entrance of the main building. He climbed the steps swiftly and found himself in a vast hall which had walls of shifting flame.

In the glow from the fiery walls, there sat at a table at the far end of the hall nine men—or at least, men or not, they had assumed the form of men. Different in facial characteristics, they all had the same sardonic air. In the centre of these nine was the one who had first addressed Elric. He leaned forward and spoke words carefully from his red lips.

“Greetings to you, mortal,” he said. “You are the first for some time to sit with the Lords of Chaos at the Time of the Change. Behold—there are others who have had the privilege.”

A rent appeared in the wall of flame to disclose some thirty frozen human figures, some men and some women. They were petrified in positions of many kinds, but all had madness and terror in their eyes—and they were still alive, Elric knew.

He lifted his head.

“I would not be so impertinent, my lords, as to set myself beside you all insofar as powers are concerned, but you know that I am Elric of Melniboné and that my race is old; my deficient blood is the royal blood of the kings of the Dreaming City. I have little pity or sentiment of any kind within me, for sentiment, whether love or hate, has served me badly in the past. I do not know what you require of me, and I thank you for your hospitality nonetheless, but I believe that I can conduct myself better in most ways than can any other mortal.”

“Let us hope so, Elric of Melniboné, for we would not wish you to fail, know that. Besides, you are not fully mortal as humans understand the word. Now, know you that I be Teshwan, and these need not be named and may be addressed singly or collectively by the name of Lords of Chaos.”

Elric bowed politely. “Lord Teshwan—my Lords of Chaos.”

They returned his bow by slightly inclining their heads and broadening a trifle their sardonic, crooked smiles.

“Come,” said Teshwan briskly, “sit here beside me and I will inform you of what we expect. You are more favoured than others have been, Elric, and, in truth, I welcomed the opportunity given me by my vengeful servant Slorg before he died.”

Elric climbed upon the dais and seated himself in the chair which appeared beside Teshwan. About him the walls of flame soared and tumbled, mumbled and roared. Sometimes shadow engulfed them, sometimes they were bathed in light. For a while they all sat in silence, pondering.

At last Teshwan spoke.

“Now,” he said decisively. “Here’s the situation in which we have decided to place you. You may leave only if you can create something which it has never occurred to us to create.”

“But you, surely, are the Masters of Creation?” said Elric in puzzlement. “How may I do this?”

“Your first statement is not strictly true and in qualifying it I can give you a hint of the answer to your question. We of Chaos cannot make anything new—we may only experiment with combinations of that already created. Do you understand?”

“I do,” said Elric.

“Only the Greatest Power, of which we know little more than do humans, can create fresh conceptions. The Greatest Power holds both Law and Chaos in perpetual balance, making us war only so that the scale will not be tilted too far to one side. We wish not for power—only for variety. Thus every time we weary of our domain we let our old creations fade and conceive new ones. If you can bring a fresh element to our domain, we shall free you. We create jokes and paradoxes. Conceive a better joke and a better paradox for our entertainment and you may leave here.”

“Surely you expect the impossible from me?”

“You alone may assess the truth of your question. Now, we begin.”

And Elric sat and watched, pondering his problem, as the great Lords of Chaos began their mighty experiments.

The walls of fire slowly flickered and faded and again he saw the vast and barren plain of flat stone. Then the air darkened and a sighing wind began to moan over the plain. In the sky clouds blossomed in myriad shapes, alien, dark, unfamiliar, blacks and smoky orange, at the same time familiar...

The rock heaved like lava, became liquid, rearing upwards and as it reared it became giants, mountains, ancient beasts, monsters, gryphons, basilisks, chimerae, unicorns. Forests bloomed, their growths huge and exotic, elephants flew and great birds crushed boiling mountains beneath their feet. Fingers of brilliant colour climbed the sky, crisscrossing and blending. A flight of wildly singing lions fell from the firmament towards the forest and soared upwards again, their music lonely.

As the forest melted to become an ocean, a vast army of wizened homunculi came tramping from its depths dragging boats behind them. For a short while they marched over the seething waters and then, with precision, began, in ordered style, to climb into the flaring sky. When they had all left the ocean behind them, they righted their boats, set their sails, laughed and screamed and shouted, waved their arms, climbed into the boats and with fantastic speed streamed towards the horizon.

All creation tumbled and poured, malleable in the Domain of Chaos. All was gusto, craze and roaring terror, love, hate and music mingled.

The sky shook with multicoloured mirth, blossoming white shot through with veins of blue and purple and black, searing red, splattered with spreading flowers of yellow, smeared, smeared, smeared with ghoulish green. Across this seething backdrop sped bizarre shapes.

The Lords of Chaos shouted and sang their weird creation and Elric, shouting also, thought the frozen statues he had seen were weeping and laughing.

A grotesque combination of man and tree sent roots streaming towards the earth to tug mountains from

the caverns it exposed and set them, peak first, like inverted pyramids, into the ground. Upon the flat surfaces dancers appeared in bright rags which fluttered and flared around them. They were warped, unhuman, pale as dead beauty, grinning fixedly and then Elric saw the strings attached to their limbs and the silently laughing puppet-master, bearlike and gigantic, controlling them. From another direction sped a small, blind figure bearing a scythe that was a hundred times bigger than the bearer. With a sweep, he cut the strings and, with that action, the whole faded to be replaced by a gushing brilliance of green and orange flame which formed itself into streamers of zig-zagging disorder.

All this went on around them. The Lords of Chaos smiled to themselves now, as they created, but Elric frowned, watched with wonder and no little pleasure, but puzzled how he might emulate such feats.

For long hours the pageant of Chaos continued as the lords took the elements of Elric's world and shook them about, turned them inside out, stood them on end, made startling, strange, beautiful, unholy combinations until they were satisfied with the constant movement of the scene about them, the perpetual shifting and changing.

They had set a pattern that was no pattern, which would last until they became bored with their domain again and brought about another Time of the Change.

Then their heads turned and all regarded Elric expectantly.

Teshwan said a trifle wearily, "There—you have seen what we can do."

"You are artists, indeed," said Elric, "and I am so amazed by what I have witnessed that I need a little time to think. Will you grant it me?"

"A little time—a little time only—we want to see what you prepare for us while the excitement is still upon us."

And Elric placed his white albino's head upon his fist and thought deeply.

Many ideas occurred to him, only to be discarded, but at length he straightened his back and said: "Give me the power to create and I will create."

So Teshwan said smilingly, "You have the power—use it well. A joke and a paradox is all we require."

"The reward for failure?"

"To be forever conscious."

At this, Elric shivered and put his mind to concentrating, searching his memory until a manlike figure formed before him. Then he placed features on its head and clothes on its body until there stood before Elric and the Lords of Chaos a perfect replica—of Elric.

Puzzledly, Teshwan said: "This is splendid impertinence, I grant you—but this is nothing new—you already sit here beside us."

"Indeed," replied Elric, "but look in the man's mind."

They frowned and did as he asked. Then, smiling, they nodded: "The paradox is good," said Teshwan, "and we see your point. We have, for an eternity, created the effect. You, in your pride and innocence,

have created the cause. In that man's mind was all that could ever exist.”

“You have noted the paradox?” asked Elric, anxious that the correct interpretation had been divulged.

“Of course. For though the mind contains the variety beloved of we of Chaos, it contains the order that those barren Lords of Law would foist on the world. Truly, young mortal, you have created everything with a stroke. And thank you, also, for the joke.”

“The joke?”

“Why truly—the best joke is but a simple statement of truth. Farewell. Remember, friend mortal, that the Lords of Chaos are grateful to you.”

And with that, the whole domain faded away and Elric stood on the grassy plain. In the distance he observed the city of Bakshaan which had been his original destination, and nearby was his horse to take him there.

He mounted, flapped the reins, and, as the grey gelding broke into a trot, he said to himself: “A joke indeed, but it is a pity that men do not laugh at it more often.”

Reluctantly, he headed for the city.

## **THE GREATER CONQUEROR**

### **CHAPTER ONE**

*HE FELT HE was much more than one man. Not one god, even, but many... There seemed to be a hundred other entities writhing within him. Writhing to release themselves. Every limb, every projection of bone seemed to be part of another being.*

*He lay on the fur-strewn bed, sweating, dominated by movements in his mind and body which he was incapable of controlling. Alexander the Great groaned in torment.*

The buxom Corinthian woman spat into the rushes on the floor of the tavern.

“That for the God-King!”

But the silence around her put a stop to her enlarging the theme. The Thracian known as Simon of Byzantium lifted his bronze cup, the sleeve of his silk-trimmed jerkin falling back down his brown arm, and sucked sweet Persian wine into his throat. He sensed the discomfort the other roisterers felt towards the woman and, because he could be cautious, dropped his arm from her thick waist and pushed her from him.

He looked down his long nose. His scarred face moved and he smiled as he addressed an old Persian

soldier.

“You say you were in the army Darius led against Alexander?”

“That’s right—a charioteer. His cavalry ran rings round us.”

“What did you think of him?”

“Alexander? I don’t know. I was quite close to him at one stage and saw a spearman get a blow at him—struck him in the thigh. He yelled—not in pain but when he saw his own blood flowing. He couldn’t believe it. For a short time he was an open target as he stared down at his thigh, dabbing at the blood with his finger and inspecting it. Then he shouted something—I didn’t recognize the language—and was in command of himself again. They said the wound healed unnaturally quickly.”



“He claims to be the son of Zeus,” the Corinthian woman said from the shadows, “but many Persians say he’s evil Ahriman’s spawn.”

Simon pursed his lips and fingered his wine-cup. “Perhaps he’s just a mortal,” he suggested, “a mortal of unusual vitality?”

“Perhaps,” the Persian soldier said. “I only know he’s conquered the world.”

“I heard he halted his Indian campaign at the River Indus—why should he do that?” Simon said.

“His Macedonians say they forced him to stop, but I cannot believe that. Even Alexander must tire—that’s my theory. I think he needed to rest and recuperate. Throughout his campaigns he’s hardly slept; must move on continually as if driven to conquer. Who knows what spurred him to conquest—or what made him put a temporary halt to his victories?”

“The Indians have an ancient and mighty religion of which we know little,” said a middle-aged and scrawny trader from Carthage. “Could their gods be stronger than ours? Stronger than Alexander?” He pulled at his grey-streaked beard. His many rings glinted in the ill-lit place.

“Such talk is heresy these days,” cautioned the Persian, but it could be seen that he was contemplating this idea.

“People talk of nothing but the Macedonian,” said the swarthy trader. “From the Bosphorus to the Nile they curse or praise him. But what is he other than a man who has been lucky? Events have shaped him, not he them. He owes much to his foresighted father King Philip, and that warped mother Queen Olympias, both of whom, in their separate ways, prepared the world for his conquests. What reason for instance did he have for his meanderings in Persia some years ago? Why, instead of pressing on, did he embark on a wild goose chase after Darius? He had no reason save that events were not ready for him.”

“I like to think this of great men, also.” Simon smiled. “But I would join his army for my own convenience.”

“So that’s why you’re in Babylon. I wondered about you, my friend. Where are you from?” The Carthaginian poured himself more wine from a skin.

“I was born in Thrace, but I’m Byzantine by adoption. I’ve spent seven years there as Captain of Infantry. But now I’ve the urge to see the East and since Alexander goes east, decided to attach myself to his army. I hear he’s in Babylon now.”

“That’s true. But you might find him hard to meet—obviously he is not personally concerned with the hiring of mercenaries.” The Persian’s tone was friendly.

“I’ve heard this man—or god—spoken of so often that I’ve a mind to meet him if that’s possible.”

“Good luck to you, friend. He’ll either kill you or promote you. He’s a man of extremes.”

“Are not all great conquerors?”

“You’re marvelous learned for a mercenary.” The Carthaginian grinned.

Simon picked up his scabbarded short-sword from the bench.

“And you’re marvelous curious, friend. Know you not that all Arts are encouraged in Byzantium, just as they were in ancient Greece—including the Arts of Reading and Philosophy.”

The Persian laughed. “That’s the story Byzantium tells. I for one do not believe that any city could be so enlightened. All you Westerners yearn for a Greece that never was—your whole philosophy is based on a need for perfection; a perfection you can never attain because it never existed. Believe me, the gutters of Byzantium still stink!”

“Not so strongly as Persian jealousy,” Simon said, and left before he was called upon to take the argument to its conclusion.

But behind him in the tavern the Persian had not been angered. Instead he was laughing, wiping his mouth with his arm stump.

\* \* \*

Simon heard the laughter as he crossed the dim Square of the Bazaar, almost deserted of merchants and customers. The sun was still setting. It was nearly curfew. A few merchants baling their goods looked up as he strode, a tall, gaunt, fighting man, in smooth old leather, towards the Street of the Bronzeworkers where he had a friend.

Around him, golden Babylon squatted like an ancient monster, containing all knowledge, all secrets, her stepped houses, palaces and temples soaking the last of the sun into their burnished hides. He walked up the steeply rising street and came at length to a small white house without windows. He knocked.

For a while he waited patiently as darkness came. Eventually bolts were withdrawn on the other side of the door and it was opened. An eye gleamed. The door opened wider.

Wizened Hano smiled welcomingly. “Come in, Simon. So you reached our splendid Babylon!”

Simon stepped into the house. It was very dark, overhot, with the unpleasantly bitter smell of metal. The old Phoenician clutched at his arm and led him down the dark passage.

“Will you be staying in Babylon, my boy?” Hano said, and then, before Simon could answer this question: “How’s the sword?”

“I intend to see Alexander,” Simon said, disliking the old man’s touch though he liked Hano greatly. “And the sword is excellent, has kept its edge in a dozen fights—I intend to hire it to Alexander.”

Hano’s grip tightened as they entered a dark, smoky room, a red brazier gleaming in its centre. Around the smoke-stained walls were weapons—swords, shields, lances—and several couches and small tables were scattered on the floor. The smoke caught in Simon’s lungs and he coughed it out. Hano pointed to a couch. “Sit down, Simon.” He shuffled towards his own couch on the other side of the brazier, stretched himself at full length and scratched his hooked nose.

“Alexander has many swords.”

“I know—but if you granted me a favour it might facilitate my meeting him.”

“I owe you friendship and more,” Hano said, “for you saved me from an unpleasant death that time in Thebes nine years ago. But though I sense what you want of me I am reluctant to agree to it.”

“Why?”

“An old man’s caution, maybe, but the stories I’ve been hearing of late have been disquieting. Alexander claims himself son of Zeus, Jupiter-Ammon. Others say that the Persian evil one Ahriman possesses him.

All or none of this may be true—but every oracle from here to Pela is prophesying turmoil and trouble for the world and the king who rules it. Perhaps you would be wiser to join some ordinary caravan traveling east?” Hano pulled back his woolen robe, revealing a pale and unlovely leg. He poised his wrinkled hand and then almost hurled it at a spot on his leg and began to scratch at the place with his talons of nails.

“I’m sick of this prattle of gods and demons. Can no-one be content simply to believe in men and what men could be if they ceased blaming their misfortunes on unseen gods rather than on their own ineffectiveness? Life’s not easy, it is a hard task to live it well and with grace—but, by Hades, let’s not complicate it with deities and water-nymphs!”

Simon spat into the brazier which flared and spluttered.

Hano scratched at his thigh, drawing back more of his robe to do so, revealing a greater expanse of unhealthy flesh.

“I have seen supernatural manifestations of evil, my boy.”

“You have seen what a muddled brain wished you to see.”

“What matter? Now, let’s end this conversation before you yell more heresies and have us both arrested.”

“Heresy and treason combined if Alexander’s chest-puffing claim be true.” Simon looked away from the old man’s thin legs and stared into the brazier.

Hano changed the subject.

“In Utopia,” he said to Simon, “you’d yet be seeking further perfection. You call yourself a realist, Simon—perfection is not a reality.”

“Realities can be created,” said Simon.

“True,” Hano agreed. “But by the same logic, realities can be made unreal—unrealities made real. What if there *were* supernatural beings? How would you fit them into your theory?”

“The situation will never arise.”

“Let us hope so.”

The Phoenician turned his old twisted face towards Simon. The brazier light stained it a reddish brown, showing the wrinkles of mingled cynicism, fatalism and good nature. Hano said at length: “Very well.”

He got up and moved about the crowded room taking a pot from one shelf, a skin of wine from another.

Soon the smell of herbs came from the pot on the brazier as Hano brewed wine for his guest.

“You’ll help,” Simon said.

“Alexander owes me a favour. But he has strange ways of repaying debts and I’d not normally be foolish enough to remind him of this one.”



“What did you do for him?”

“Set the handle of a star-metal blade with black opals.”

“That was a favour!” Simon laughed.

Hano scowled, but genially. “Know you not what that meant? It meant he could not directly handle iron or anything likely to conduct its force to his body. Black opal is one of the few gems which will serve to negate the flow.”

“So?”

“So Alexander has a weakness. Iron will harm him.”

“If I had such a secret I would kill the man who held it,” Simon said reflectively.

“Not if you were Alexander and the man was dear to Olympias.”

“*You know* Queen Olympias!”

“Olympias wishes me kept alive so I can feed her with secrets.”

“Dark secrets, I’ll warrant, if the stories of her are half-true.”

“They do not touch the real truth about her.”

“Does she really sport with snakes at these rites?”

“Aye—and black goats are present too.”

Simon swore.

Hano handed him a cup of hot wine. As he drank he said: “I’m impatient to meet the God-King—how will you help?”

“I’ll give you a letter and a token to take to Alexander. But be wary, my boy. Be wary.”

## CHAPTERTWO

Though he rarely admitted it, the idea of a supernatural world of gods and spirits disturbed Simon. Had it been practicable he might have become a militant atheist but instead he kept his opinions secret for the most part and did his utmost not to question them or even think of them.

When he reached the great golden palace of Alexander he paused and stared up at it with admiration. It was illuminated by hundreds of torches many of which, on long poles, surrounded the palace. Others flared on its many ramparts.

Two guards came forward. They were Babylonians in high helmets with oiled hair and beards. Their javelins threatened him.

In poor Babylonian Simon said:

“I come to see King Alexander—I have a token and a letter for him.”

They treated him with some respect, though they divested him of his sword and led him to the main gate where, after conversation, he was admitted.

He was made to wait several times, being studied and questioned by a variety of viziers and minions of the king, but at last he was ushered into a large chamber.

Big windows let in the flickering torchlight. A great bed of brass, silver, and gold, heaped with silks and furs, was in the centre of the room.

Alexander was sitting up in bed. He had been sweating, Simon could see. His nose told him the same story.

The odour, in fact, was bad. Far worse than ordinary perspiration. Simon couldn't place the smell.

With a degree of nervousness Simon approached the huge bed.

Suddenly, King Alexander grinned and stuck out a handsome hand.

“You have a letter for me, I hear—and a token?”

“I have, sire.” Simon gave the letter and the little talisman to Alexander, studying the king's strange face. In a way it was boyish, in another ancient and sensuous. He had a long nose and thick lips, heavily lidded eyes and brown, curly hair. Simon was taken aback by the king's lack of ceremony, by his friendly grin. Was this the God-King? The spawn of evil?

Alexander read the letter quickly, nodding to himself.

“Did Hano tell you of my debt to him?”

“No, sire,” Simon said tactfully.

“He has many secrets, Hano—but he's an old man and, in his generosity, keeps few to himself, I've heard.”

“He seems curiously tight-lipped, sire,” Simon replied, anxious for his friend's life, “and even I who saved his life one time in Thebes can never get a full reply to any question I ask him.”

Alexander looked up sharply, staring Simon in the face with peculiarly wide eyes.

“So you wish to join my army. Hano recommends you as a fighting man—suggests you join my staff. I choose my officers with care, Simon of Byzantium.”

“I wish only a trial, sire.”

“You shall have it.”

Alexander studied the letter again.

“You’re from Byzantium, I note. My father Philip was repulsed by that city some years ago—but that does not mean I can have no love for the city—perhaps the contrary. It’s well known I disliked him and can admire a city which withstood his attack.” Alexander smiled again. “Though she did not hold out for long against Philip’s son, did she?”

“No, sire.”

Alexander had an almost tangible vitality, but he was evidently unwell. This ailment was not solely confined to his body, either, Simon felt.

Alexander mused, caressing the little amulet.

“I have need of a herald—a man who can travel between wherever I am campaigning and the capital of Macedonia.”

“I thought Persia was your base these days, sire.”

“You’ve been listening to Greek and Macedonian criticism, no doubt. They say I’ve forsaken my own lands for the fleshpots and honours of the East. That’s a lie. It is too far to travel back always to Pela. Persia offers a better base for my operations. There are still a few acres of the world left for me to conquer, Simon—and they all lie eastwards.”

Alexander sank back into his silks, eyeing the Thracian.

“You’ll serve my mother and myself as a messenger.”

Simon put his hand to his lips and said courteously: “I had rather hoped to go with the army, sire.”

Alexander frowned slightly. “And so you will, of course. No doubt there’ll be fighting for you—and new knowledge. I’m pleased that you’re literate. Most of my captains are chosen for several qualities—courage, loyalty—and learning. You appear to have courage and learning—but I must find out about your loyalty, you understand.”

Simon nodded. “That is logical, sire.”

“Good, then—” Alexander broke off as the doors of the chamber opened behind Simon. The Thracian turned to stare at the door.

A vizier, in long cloth-of-gold robes, hurried into the room.

He prostrated himself before the king’s bed.

“Son of Zeus,” he mumbled, “a message.”

“Is it secret?”

“No, sire—they say it is already common knowledge.”

“Then speak—what is it?” Alexander propped himself into a sitting position again.

“A massacre, sire—in Lonarten—a troop of your Macedonian horse went berserk, killed many hundreds of women and children. There are rumours of cannibalism and unhealthy rites...” The vizier stopped as a smile crossed Alexander’s sensuous lips. “The people are asking for your interference—for compensation.”

Alexander smiled again. Simon was sickened by the sight. The king could be seen to grip hold of the bed-clothes as if attempting to control himself. He groaned once, slightly.

With effort he said: “We must call a halt to—we must stop...” Then he flung back his handsome head and bellowed with laughter. It was a laughter totally evil, a horrible, malicious joy which seethed around the room, echoing and roaring in Simon’s horrified ears.

“Seize the complainers,” Alexander shouted, “we’ll sell them as eunuchs to the harems of Turkey. Teach them that the ways of a god are not the ways of a mere king—teach them not to question the word or actions of the Son of Zeus!”

Hurriedly, the vizier backed out of the room.

Simon, forgetful for his own safety, leaned forward and shouted into Alexander’s twisted face:

“You are mad—for your own sake do not let this massacre continue. Your unruly troops will cause a revolution—you will lose your empire.”

Alexander’s eyes opened even wider. A hand leapt from the silks and furs and seized Simon’s ear. The mouth curled and even teeth moved as Alexander snarled:

“For you I will *invent* a death!”

Simon grasped the wrist, attempting to wrest himself from Alexander’s grip. He was sickened, trembling and shaken by the strength in one so evidently ill. He felt the presence of something more than common insanity. What had changed the pleasant, practical soldier into this manifestation of evil? How could such different qualities exist in one body? Terror clouded his mind.

With a wrench he was free of the king’s grasp and backed panting away from him.

“They said you were Ahriman’s spawn—and I did not believe them,” he gasped.

Alexander grimaced, flung back the bed-clothes and leapt to the ground, advancing towards Simon, with hands outstretched.

“I am Zeus’s son—born of god and mortal to rule the world. Abase yourself, heretic, for I have the power to send you to Hades!”

“All men have that power,” Simon said, turned and ran for the great doors, tugged them open and, before he could be stopped, fled down the shouting corridors, blind to everything but the need to escape from the screaming madman behind him.

He remembered little of the flight, of the two fights, in the first of which he somehow gained a weapon, of his breathless running through the streets of Babylon with hordes of soldiers seeking him out.

He ran.

He had run himself virtually to death when several warriors pinned him in a blind alley and he turned, snarling like an animal to defend himself. Crouching, sword raised, he waited for them as they cautiously advanced.

They had not expected such ferocity. He had cut the first soldier down in a trice and sliced the flesh from another's arm.

In front of him, as if superimposed on the real scene before him, was the great, sensuous head of Alexander still roaring with crazy laughter.

Simon had seen madmen many times. But Alexander had more than madness. He slashed with his sword and missed his target, fell forward, rolled on his back, brought his sword across his face to deflect a blade which had hurtled down through the confused night. He edged back, flung himself sideways, slashing, scrambled up and brought the edge of his sword up to chop a man's jugular.

Then he was running again, every limb aching, but a terrible fear, a fear of more than death or torture, driving, driving him onward to escape.

When the silent, dark-robed men appeared out of the night and surrounded him he cut at one but his sword seemed to meet metal, his hand went numb and the blade fell to the stones of the streets.

Alexander's face rose before him, laughing, laughing. The roaring, evil merriment filled his head, then his whole body until it seemed that he, Simon, was Alexander, that he was enjoying the bloody joke, the evil, malignant glee pouring wildly from his shaking body.

Then peace of a kind, and hazy, mysterious dreams where he saw strange shapes moving through the smoke from a million red and glowing braziers.

Simon felt a hard, smooth surface beneath his back.

He opened his eyes warily.

A lean, white, thin-lipped face looked kindly down at him.

"I am Abaris," he said.

"Simon of Byzantium," said the Thracian.

"You have witnessed darkness?" It was only half a question.

"Yes," Simon replied, bemused.

"We are men of light. The Magi welcome you. You are safe here."

"Magi? They are priests in Persia—but you're not Persian."

“That is so.”

“Abaris? There is an Abaris of legend—a wizard, was he not—a priest of Apollo who rode on an arrow?”

The Magi made no reply to this, simply smiled.

“You have incurred the wrath of Alexander. How long would you say you had to live?”

“A strange question. I’d say as long as my wits were sharp enough to evade the searchings of his soldiers.”

“You would be wrong.”

Simon pushed himself upright on the wide bench and looked around him. Two other priests sat regarding him from across the bare room. Daylight filtered in from a hole in the ceiling.

“Do I really owe you my life?”

“We think you do—but you are in no debt. We wish we could give such concrete aid to all enemies of Alexander.”

“I am not his enemy—he is mine.”

“You have witnessed what he is—can you still say that?”

Simon nodded. “I am his enemy,” he agreed and then amended this with: “Or at least the enemy of what he represents.”

“You are exact—we also are the enemies of what Alexander represents.”

Simon put his head on one side and smiled slightly. “Ah—let us be careful. He is insane, that is all. He represents material evil, not supernatural.”

Briefly, Abaris looked impatiently away, frowning. Then his features resumed their earlier look.

“It is a bold thing to be an unbeliever in these times.”

“Bold or not—it is what I am.” Simon swung his legs off the bench. He felt incredibly weak.

Abaris said: “We Magi worship Ormuzd. Simply—Alexander represents Ahriman.”

“These are the twin facets of your single deity are they not?” Simon said. He nodded. “I know a little about your cult—it’s cleaner than most. You worship Fire, Sun and Light—with a minimum of ritual.”

“True. A man who is confident in his soul needs little ritual.”

Simon was satisfied by this.

“We would be grateful if you would ally yourself with us, the Magi,” Abaris said quietly. “In return we

will protect you from Alexander's minions as best we can."

"I told you—and I do not wish to seem ungrateful—my wits will keep me safe from the Macedonian's warriors."

"We refer to his supernatural minions."

Simon shook his head. "I respect your beliefs—but I cannot accept them personally."

Abaris leaned forward and said urgently, softly:

"Simon, you must aid us. Alexander and his mother are both possessed. For years we have been aware of this. For years we have attempted to fight the forces possessing them—and we are losing. You have seen how Ahriman controls Alexander. You must aid us!"

Simon said: "You have cloaked the simple fact of Alexander's madness in a shroud of supernatural speculation."

Abaris shook his head, saying nothing. Simon continued:

"I have seen many men go mad with riches and power—Alexander is another. When he dies his good works will survive but the evil will be eliminated by time."

"You are naïve, young man. Why, Achilles believed that..." Abaris bit his lip and lapsed into silence.

"Achilles? He died a thousand years ago. How do you know what he believed?"

Abaris turned away. "Of course, I could not know," he said. His eyes were hooded.

"You give me cause to think you really are the Abaris of legend," Simon smiled. He was joking. But even to his ears the joke rang true.

Abaris said: "Can a man live for more than a thousand years?"

"No," Simon said, "no." He said it almost savagely, for it was what he wished to believe.

Out there, in a palace of Babylon, there was *evil*, he thought. But it was not, could not be—*mustnot* be supernatural.

Abaris now said:

"Alexander has reigned almost thirteen years—a mystic number. Our oracles prophesied that the turning point would come after thirteen years of rule. Now, as we fear, Alexander and the forces which act through him will bring an unchecked reign of evil to the world—or else, and the chance is small, he will be stopped."

"You wish me to aid you in this. I must dissent. To help you I would have to believe you—that I cannot do."

Abaris seemed to accept this. When he next spoke it was in a detached, trancelike voice.

“Ahriman—the multiplicity of Ahrimans whom we designate by the one name—selected Olympias many years ago. He needed a vessel through which to work and, at that time, no mortal had been born who would serve Ahriman’s purpose. So he took possession of poor Olympias. Philip, that great and wronged man, went regularly to the Isle of Samothrace on pilgrimage and, one year, Olympias made it her business to be there also. A love potion was all she needed. Philip was enamoured of her. They had a son—Alexander...”

Simon said wearily: “This is mere gossip such as old women make in the markets.”

“Ormuzd protect you if you ever learn the truth,” was all Abaris said.

Simon rose shakily. “If there is anything I can do to repay you—some material act, perhaps—I am very willing.”

Abaris thought for a moment. Then he took a scroll from his robe. He unrolled it and glanced over the weird script. It was not Persian, Simon knew, but what it was he could not tell.

Abaris handed the scroll to Simon. “We’ll furnish you with a horse and a disguise. Will you go to Pela for us? Will you deliver a message to our brothers?”

“Willingly,” Simon said, though he was aware that to journey to the capital of Macedonia would be courting danger.

“They live in secret,” Abaris told Simon, “but we will tell you how to find them. Also we will furnish you with weapons.”

“I’d be grateful for that,” Simon smiled.

“We’ll give you a day for resting and allowing the herbs we’ll give you to drink to do their work—then you can start off. You should have little trouble here, for our magic will protect you and we know a secret way out of the city.”

Simon lay back on the bench. “Healing herbs will be very welcome,” he said, “and something to help me take a dreamless sleep...”

### CHAPTER THREE

Outside, the courtiers glanced at one another, not daring to enter the room where a man groaned.

A short, clever-looking man in ornate war-gear turned to a calm-faced, sensitive man.

“Why was he so anxious to apprehend the Thracian, I wonder, Anaxarchus?”

The sensitive man shook his head. “I have no idea. I hear he was from my home city, Abdera, before he went to Byzantium. For all my people say that the folk of Abdera are stupid, some very clever men were born there.”

“And you, of course, are one,” the soldier smiled ironically.

“I must be—I am a philosopher attached to Alexander’s train,” Anaxarchus said.



The warrior took several nervous paces up the corridor, wheeled around, cursing. “By the Salamander’s breath, are we never to finish our conquests? What is wrong with Alexander, Anaxarchus? How long has he been like this? Rumours came to Egypt, but I discounted them.”

“He is ill, Ptolemy, that is all,” Anaxarchus said, but he did not believe his own words.

“That is *all* ! Even if I had not heard the Oracle of Libya speak of terrible strifings in this world and the others I would be troubled. Things are happening. Anaxarchus—doom-clouds are covering the world.”

“Gloomy, Ptolemy—he is only sick. He has a fever.”

Another awful groan came from behind the doors, a terrified and terrible groan of awful agony. Neither did it seem to represent physical pain but some deeper agony of spirit.

“An unusual fever,” Ptolemy said savagely. He strode towards the doors, but Anaxarchus blocked his passage.

“No, Ptolemy—you would not emerge with your sanity intact, I warn you.”

Ptolemy looked at the scholar for a moment, then turned and almost ran down the corridor.

*Inside the locked room, the man—or god—groaned terribly. It was as if the bones of his face were breaking apart to form individual beings. What was he? Even he could not be sure. For years he had been certain of his own power, confident that his greatness was his own. But now, it was obvious to him, poor, tormented Alexander, that he was nothing—nothing but a vessel, an agent through which many forces worked—and even those forces were united under a common name. He knew then, also, that they had entered many others in the past, that, if his strength broke, they would enter many more until their work was done.*

\* \* \*

*Part of him begged for death.*

*Part of him attempted to fight that which was in him.*

*Part of him planned—crime.*

Simon, cloaked and armed, clamped his knees against his steed’s back and galloped over the sparsely covered plains of Babylon, the folds of his cloak flying behind him like the wings of a stooping hawk.

The horse snorted, its sturdy legs flashing, its eyes big and its heart pounding.

For two hours, Simon had ridden in safety.

But now the cold night air above him was alive with dreadful sounds.

He drew his sword from its scabbard and rode on, telling himself that the noises were the flapping wings of vultures.

Then a shape came swooping in front of him. He caught a glimpse of a pale, human face. But it was not entirely human. Snakes twined on its head, blood dripped from its eyes. The horse came to a sudden halt, reared whinnying.

Simon closed his eyes against the sight.

“The herbs the Magi gave me have induced visions,” he told himself aloud in shaking tones.

But he could not believe it. He had seen them.

The Eumenides—the Furies of legend!

For the face had been that of a woman.

Now the sounds came closer, ominous. Simon urged the frightened horse onwards. Sharp female faces with serpents in place of hair, blood streaming from malevolent eyes, hands like talons, swooped and cackled about him. It was a nightmare.

Then, quite suddenly, there came a dull booming sound from the distance, like the faraway sound of surf. Nearer and nearer it came until the night opened to brightness, a strange golden light which seemed to break through the blackness, splintering it into fragments.

\* \* \*

The winged creatures were caught in the glare, wheeled about uncertainly, shrieking and keening.

They were gone.

The light faded.

Simon rode on. And still he insisted to himself that what he had witnessed was hallucination. Something done to his weary brain by the potion the Magi had given him.

The rest of the night was full of nauseous sound, glimpses of things which flew or wriggled. But, convinced that he dreamed, horrified yet keeping close hold on sanity, Simon pushed the steed onwards towards Pela.

Horse and man rested for only a few hours at a time. The journey took days until, at length, eyes sunken in his head from tiredness, face grey and gaunt and mind numb he arrived at the Macedonian capital and sought out the Magi in the clay-built slums of the city.

Massiva, head of the secret order in Pela, was a tall, handsome Numidian. He greeted Simon warmly.

“We were informed of your coming and did our best, when you came close enough, to ward off the

dangers which Alexander's minions sent against you."

Simon did not reply to this. Silently, he handed over the scroll.

Massiva opened it, read it, frowning.

"This we did not know," he said. "Olympias has sent aid to Alexander in Babylon."

The priest offered no explanation, so Simon did not ask for one.

Massiva shook his head wearily. "I do not understand how one human can endure so much," he said, "but then she has other aid than human..."

"What are these stories about her?" Simon asked, thinking that he might at last find some truth where before he had heard nothing but rumour and hints.

"The simple facts concerning her activities are common knowledge here," Massiva told him. "She is an ardent initiate of a number of mystery cults, all worshipping the dark forces. The usual unpleasant rites, secret initiations, orgiastic celebrations. Three of the main ones, supposedly having no communication with one another, are the cults of Orpheus, Dionysius and Demeter. It's hinted that Alexander was conceived at one of these rites. In a way that is the truth—for Olympias was selected by the Dark One when she was a girl participating in the rites of a similar cult."

Simon shook his head impatiently at this. "I asked you for facts—not speculation."

Massiva looked surprised. "I indulged in no speculation, my friend. Why, the whole city lives in fear of Olympias and her friends and servants. Evil is so thick here that ordinary folk can hardly breathe for its stink."

Simon said shortly: "Well, I hope the information is useful to you. I've paid my debt, at least. Now, can you recommend a tavern where I can stay?"

"I can recommend none well, in this cursed city. You might try the Tower of Cimbri. It's comfortable, so I've heard. But be wary, take iron to bed with you."

"I'd do that in any event," Simon grinned, "with Alexander after my blood and me staying in his home city."

"You're courageous, Thracian—do not be foolish."

"Don't worry, friend." Simon left the house, remounted his horse and rode it towards the tavern quarter, eventually locating the Tower of Cimbri.

He was about to enter when he heard the sound of running from an alley which ran along the side of the building. Then a girl screamed. Drawing his sword he ran into the alley and, because he had become so hardened to sights of horror, hardly noticed the misshapen creatures menacing a frightened girl, save that they were armed and evidently powerful. The girl's eyes were round with fear and she was half-fainting. One of the twisted men put out a blunt paw to seize her, but wailed out its pain as Simon's sword caught it in the shoulder blades.

The others turned, reaching for their weapons. Simon cut two down before they could draw their

swords. The fourth swung at Simon but was too clumsy. He died in a moment, his neck cloven.

Instead of thanking him, the girl stared down at the corpses in terror.

“You fool,” she muttered.

“Fool?” Simon was taken aback.

“You have killed four of Queen Olympias’s retainers—did you not recognize the livery—or their kind?”

“I’m a stranger in Pela.”

“Then leave now—or be doomed.”

“No, I must see that you are safe. Quickly—I have a horse waiting in the street.” He supported her with one arm though she protested and helped her into the saddle.

He got up behind her.

“Where do you live?”

“Near the west wall—but hurry, by Hera, or they’ll find the corpses and give chase.”

Following her directions, Simon guided the horse through the evening half-light.

They came to a pleasant, large house, surrounded by a garden which in turn was enclosed in high walls. They rode through the gates and she dismounted, closing them behind her. An old man appeared in the doorway to the courtyard.

“Camilla? What’s happening?”

“Later, father. Have the servants stable the horse and make sure all the gates are locked—Olympias’s retainers attempted to kidnap me again. This man saved me from them—but four are dead.”

“Dead? Gods!” The old man pursed his lips. He was dressed in a loose toga and had a stern, patrician face. He was evidently a nobleman, though his black-haired daughter was most unlike him.

Quickly, Simon was ushered into the house. Servants were summoned bringing bread, cheese and fruit. He ate gratefully. As he ate he told as much of his personal story as he wished to divulge. The patrician, Merates, listened without commenting.

When Simon had finished, Merates made no direct remark but instead said, half to himself:

“If King Philip had not continued his line, there would be peace and achievement in this war-wrecked world. I curse the name of Alexander—and the she-snake who bore him. If Alexander had been left to his father’s teaching, he might well have carried on the great plan of Philip. But his warped mother put different ideas into his head—turned him against his father. Now there is evil on every wind, it blows east and west, south and north—and the hounds of darkness rend, slaver and howl in Alexander’s bloody wake.”

Camilla shuddered. She had changed her street robe into a loose, diaphanous gown of blue silk. Her

long, black, unbound hair fell down her back, gleaming like dark wine.

She said: “Now, though Alexander’s off on his conquests, Olympias terrorizes Pela more than ever before. All comely youths and girls are sought out to take part in her ghastly rituals. For ten or more months she has tried to encourage me to join until, at last, her patience failed and she attempted to kidnap me. She will know that someone killed the servitors—but she need not know it was you, Simon.”

Simon nodded mutely. He found it difficult to speak as he breathed in the girl’s dark beauty, intoxicated by it as he had never before been.

*They were troubled times. Times of high deeds and feats of learning; times of obscene evil and wild daring. Alexander mirrored his times. With one breath he would order a massacre, with another honour a conquered city for its courage in withstanding him. His great horse Bucephalus bore his bright-armoured master across the known world. Fire destroyed ancient seats of civilization, wise men were slain and innocents drowned in the flood tide of his conquests. Yet he caused new cities to be raised and libraries to be built. Men of learning followed in his train—this pupil of Aristotle—and he was an enigma to all. Greece, Persia, Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt, all fell to him. Four mighty races, four ancient civilizations bore Alexander’s yoke. People had speculated on whether he was a force for darkness or enlightenment—whether he would rend the world to fragments or unite it in lasting peace. An enigma.*

*But now the year was 323BC and Alexander was aged thirty-two. He had ruled over twelve years—soon he would have reigned thirteen...*

*In the dark caverns of creation, existing within a multiplicity of dimensions, vital evil thrived, chuckling and plotting—crime.*

*For thirteen years had the forces of Light and Darkness warred in poor Alexander’s soul and body, unbeknownst to the proud, grandiose and arrogant world-conqueror. But now the stars proclaimed that a certain time had come.*

*And Alexander suffered...*

Riders galloped towards the corners of the world. Bright banners whipped in the wind as armies sped across the lands around the Mediterranean. Ships groaned with the weight of armoured soldiers. Blood flowed like wine and wine like water. Corpses roasted in guttering castles and the earth shook to the coming of Alexander’s cavalry.

And now messengers rode to the camps of his captains, recalling them. They were needed. The final conquest was to be made. But it would not be Alexander’s triumph. The triumph would belong to a greater conqueror. Some called him Ahriman.

Hastily now Alexander’s captains mounted their chariots and headed towards Babylon. Many had to cross oceans, continents.

Every oracle prophesied doom—some said for Alexander, some said for the world. Never, they said, had evil clouded the world as much as now.

Ahriman had prepared the world through Alexander.

Soon the powers of Light would be destroyed for ever and, though it might take many more centuries of completion, Ahriman could begin his plans of conquest and, finally, destruction.

There were more vehicles for his plans.

## CHAPTERFOUR

Simon lazed back on a bench and ran his hand over Camilla's warm shoulders.

"Do not the heroes of legend always claim such reward from the maidens they rescue?" he asked mockingly.

She smiled at him affectionately.

"The Camilla of legend, if you remember, had nought to do with men. I've a mind to emulate her."

"A sad waste."

"For you, perhaps, but not for me..."

Simon pretended to sigh. "Very well," he said, "I can see I shall have to wait until you eventually succumb to my undoubted attraction."

Again she smiled. "You have been here a week and I have not fallen yet."

"It was good of your father to give me the position of Captain of his Bodyguard, particularly since he is risking arrest if Olympias should ever discover that I slew her servants."

"Merates is a good and wise man," Camilla said seriously, "one of the few left in Pela, these days. He was close to Philip and admired him greatly. But Philip's son would have nothing to do with his father's councilors so now Merates lives in quiet retirement."

Simon had already learned that Camilla was the foster daughter of Merates, that she had been born to a loved and trusted Paeonian slave who had died when she was a child.

He had grown to respect the old nobleman and planned, though it was dangerous for him, to stay in Pela and probably settle there. He had already fallen in love with Camilla.

And so he courted her and although she gave him no reason to cease this courtship, on the other hand she did not encourage him overmuch. She knew him for a soldier-of-fortune and a wanderer. Perhaps she wanted to be certain of him.

But they were dark times and Simon, rationalist though he was, could not be unaware of them. He sensed the gathering storm and was restless.

\* \* \*

One day as he was instructing a group of slaves in the art of using the shield, Merates came hurrying into the courtyard.

“Simon—a word with you.”

The Thracian propped a sword against the wall and went with Merates into the house.

There were tears in Merates’s eyes when he spoke.

“Camilla is gone. She had to go on an errand in the market—a regular monthly visit to settle our score with the merchants with whom we trade. She has been gone four hours—she is normally gone one...”

Simon’s body grew taut. “Olympias? Do you think...?”

Merates nodded.

Simon turned, went swiftly to his quarters where he buckled on his leather belt bearing the scabbarded sword the Magi had given him.

He flung a blanket over his horse’s back, rode it from the stable, ducking his head beneath the door beam, through the gates of the house and down the streets of Pela to the city centre.

He enquired in the market for her. She had not been seen there for well over two hours. Thinking swiftly, he headed for the slums of the city, dismounted outside a certain door and knocked.

Massiva, the black Numidian priest, answered the door himself. He was dressed like a slave—evidently disguised.

“Come in, Simon. It is good to see you.”

“I wish aid, Massiva. And in return I may be able to help you.”

Massiva ushered him inside.

“What is it?”

“I am certain that Queen Olympias has kidnapped Camilla, Lord Merates’s daughter.”

Massiva’s expression did not change. “It is likely—Camilla is reputed beautiful and a virgin. Olympias seeks such qualities. Either she will corrupt Camilla and force her to take an active part in the rites—or else she will make her take a passive part.”

“Passive? What do you mean?”

“The blood of virgins is needed in several spells.”

Simon shuddered.

“Can you help me? Tell me where I may find her!”

“The Rites of Cottyttia begin tonight. That is where to look.”

“Where do they take place?”

“Come, I will draw you a map. You will most likely perish in this, Simon. But you will be convinced that we have spoken the truth in the past.”

Simon looked at the negro sharply. Massiva’s face was expressionless.

*They called her Cotys and she was worshipped as a goddess in Thrace, Macedonia, Athens and Corinth. For centuries her name had been connected with licentious revelry—but never had she prospered so well than in Pela where Queen Olympias danced with snakes in her honour. Though only part of a greater Evil One, she flourished and grew on the tormented souls of her acolytes and their victims.*

The house stood on its own on a hill.

Simon recognized it from Massiva’s description. It was night, silver with rime and moonlight, but there were movements in the shadows and shapes of evil portent. His breath steaming white against the darkness, Simon pressed on up the hill towards the house.

A slave greeted him as he reached the door.

“Welcome—be you *Baptae* or heretic?”

*Baptae*, Simon had learned from Massiva, was the name that the worshippers of Cotys called themselves.

“I come to take part in tonight’s Cottyttia, that’s true,” Simon said and slew the slave.

Inside the house, lighted by a single oil-lamp, Simon located the door which opened on reeking blackness. He bent and entered it and soon was creeping downwards, down into the bowels of the hill. The walls of the tunnel were slippery with clammy moss and the air was thick and difficult to breathe. The sharp sound of his sword coming from its scabbard was comforting to Simon.

His sandaled feet slipped on the moss-covered stones of the passage and, as he drew nearer to his goal, his heart thudded in his rib-cage and his throat was tight for he now had something of the emotion he had felt when confronted by Alexander’s insanity.

Now he heard a low chanting, half ecstatic moaning, half triumphant incantation. The sound grew louder, insinuating itself into his ears until he was caught for a moment in the terrible evil ecstasy which the Cottyttian celebrants were feeling. He controlled himself against an urge to flee, the even stronger urge to join them, and continued to advance, the rare steel sword gleaming in his fist. The iron was a comfort, at least, though he still refused to believe that there was any supernatural agency at work.

Almost tangibly the evil swirled about him as he pressed on and here his rational, doubting nature was to his advantage. Without it, he might easily have succumbed.



The chanting swelled into a great roar of evil joy and through it he heard a name being repeated over and over:

“*Cotys. Cotys. Cotys. Cotys.*”

He was half hypnotized by the sound, stumbled towards a curtain and wrenched it back.

He retreated a pace at what he saw.

The air was thick with incense. Golden light flared from tall black candles on an altar. From the altar rose a pillar and tied to the pillar was Camilla. She had fainted.

But it was not this that sickened him so much as the sight of the things which swarmed about the altar. They were neither men nor women but neuter. Perhaps they had once been men. They were young and good-looking, their hair long and their faces thin, the bones prominent and the eyes flickering with malignant glee. Naked, to one side of the altar, Simon saw an old woman. Her face was that of a woman of sixty, but her body seemed younger. Around it twined great serpents, caressing her. She crooned to them and led the chanting. Young women danced with the neuters, posturing and prancing.



“*Cotys. Cotys. Cotys.*”

The candles spurted seething light and sent shadows leaping around the walls of the caverns. Then a peculiar golden orange brightness appeared at the top of the column to which Camilla was tied and seemed to twine and coil down the pillar.

Other shapes joined the dancing humans. Twisted shapes with great horns on their heads and the faces of beasts, the hoofs of goats.

Simon moved forward, his sword held before him in instinctive protection against the evil in the cavern.

“Cease!” A name came to his lips and he shouted it out: “In the name of Ormuzd—cease!”

A huge swelling of unhuman laughter came from the boiling brightness on the pillar and Simon saw figures form in it. Figures that were man-shaped and seemed to be at the same time part of the structure of a huge face, lined and pouched with a toothless, gaping mouth and closed eyes.

Then the eyes opened and seemed to fix themselves on Simon. The smaller figures writhed about it and it laughed again. Bile was in his throat, his head throbbed, but he gripped the sword and pushed his way through the sweating bodies of the worshippers. They grinned at him maliciously but did not attempt to stop him.

He was lost in the pull of those malicious eyes.

“Ormuzd is too weak to protect thee, mortal,” the mouth said. “Ahriman rules here—and will soon rule the world through his vessel, Alexander.”

Still Simon pushed his way towards the pillar, towards Camilla and the leering face above her.

“Ormuzd will not aid thee, mortal. We are many and stronger. Behold me! What do you see?”

Simon made no reply. He gripped the steel blade tighter and advanced closer.

“Do you see us all? Do you see the one these revelers call Cotys? Do you see the Evil One?”

Simon staggered forwards, the last few paces between him and the entity coiling about the pillar. Olympias now pushed her face forward, the snakes hissing, their forked tongues flickering.

“Go to her, Thracian—my son knows thee—go to her and we’ll have a double sacrifice this night.”

With his free hand, Simon pushed against the scaly bodies of the snakes and sent the woman staggering back.

With trancelike deliberation he cut the bonds that held Camilla to the pillar. But many hands, orange-gold hands, shot out from the column and gripped him in a shuddering, yet ecstatic embrace. He howled and smote at the hands and, at the touch of steel they flickered back again into their scintillating parent body.

Then he felt the clammy hands of the acolytes upon his body. Sensing that he had some advantage, Simon dragged a bunch of herbs from his shirt—herbs which Massiva had given him—and plunged them into the candle flames. A pungent aroma began to come from the flaring herbs and the naked

worshippers dropped back. The apparition itself seemed to fade slightly, its light less bright.

Simon sprang at the shape, his sword flashing like silver and passing through the hazy face which snarled and laughed alternately. The sword clanged on the stone of the column. Desperately, he drew back his arm to strike another blow, his whole body weakened. He felt like an old, worn man.

“Ormuzd!” he shouted as he struck again.

Again the face snarled at him; again the golden hands shot out to embrace him so that his body thrilled with terrible weakening joy.

Then Simon felt that he was all his ancestors and a knowledge came to him, the knowledge of darkness and chaos which his forebears had possessed.

And this knowledge, though terrifying, contained within it a further knowledge—the awareness that the Forces of Darkness had been vanquished in the past and could be vanquished again.

This gave him strength. Ahriman-Cotys realized that from somewhere Simon had gained renewed energy and its shape drew in on itself, began to slide down the pillar towards Camilla.

But Simon reached her, tugged her away from the column and onto the ground. Then he drew back his arm and flung the flaming herbs into the face of the apparition.

A horrid growling sound filled the air, and, for a moment, the face faded entirely.

Simon grasped Camilla and fell back through the crowd, slashing at their naked bodies with his bright sword. Blood flowed and faces reappeared, bellowing with laughter.

Many little faces joined in the merriment, piping their mirth and detaching themselves from the greater entity to fall upon the blood of the slain.

Simon observed, with a degree of relief, that the beings could not pass through the smoke from the herbs and, by this time, the whole room was full of the pungent odour.

“Nothing can destroy us, mortal!” Ahriman-Cotys bellowed. “Slay more—give me more! You may escape now—but I will sport with you both soon. The huntsmen of my servitor, Olympias, will hound you across the earth. You cannot escape. And when you are ours—you will both become the most willing of my slaves. . .”

Simon reached the doorway of the cavern, turned, bearing the insensible Camilla and ran up the slippery tunnel.

Now he knew. Now he could no longer rationalize. He had seen too much.

Now he knew that reason had passed from the world and that the ancient gods had returned to rule once more.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*The body was strong enough. Ahriman had tested it to his satisfaction. He had given the vessel superhuman strength and vitality which it had used for what it thought were its own purposes.*

*Alexander, though he possessed little of his own personality now, was ready. Soon entire populations would be the slaves of Ahriman, their bodies bent to him. Darkness such as the world had never known would come. Ormuzd and the Forces of Light would be vanquished for ever.*

*Ahriman had many facets—many names. Shaitan was another.*

Now Alexander's captains gathered. They were loyal to him, would do his bidding—would become Ahriman's agents in bringing Hell to the surface of the Earth.

323BC . A time of omens of evil. A turning point in history.

Alexander rose from his bed. He walked like an automaton and called for his slaves. They washed him, dressed him and clad him in his golden armour.

“Hail, Jupiter-Ammon!” they intoned as he strode from the room and walked steadily to the chamber where his generals and advisors awaited him.

Ptolemy stood up as Alexander entered. His master seemed no different, yet there was a strange, detached air about him.

“Greetings, Jupiter-Ammon,” he said bowing low. Normally he refused to designate Alexander by the name of the god—but this time he was wary, remembering perhaps how Alexander had killed his close friend Clitus in Bactria.

Anaxarchus also bowed. The remaining ten did the same.

Alexander seated himself in the middle of the long table. The leather joints of the golden armour groaned as he bent. There was food and maps on the table. He stuffed a bit of bread into his mouth and unrolled a map, chewing. The twelve men waited nervously for him to speak.

Studying the map, Alexander held out his goblet. Ptolemy filled it with wine from a long-necked bottle of brass. Alexander drank it in a single gulp. Ptolemy replenished the cup.

Simon and Camilla had fled from Pela. The night was like a clammy cloak about them and lightning split the sky, rain hurling itself like tiny spears against their faces.

Camilla rode slightly behind Simon, following him in a terror-filled flight towards the east.

There was no other direction they might go and Simon needed to find Abaris the Magi and get his help, though Alexander still dwelled in Babylon.

Behind them now they heard the Huntsmen of Olympias—great dogs baying, horns sounding and wild shouts urging the hounds on. And these huntsmen were not mortal—but loaned to Olympias by Ahriman that they both might sport with the fleeing humans.

They caught glimpses of their pursuers—things of legend. Offspring of Cerberus, the three-headed dog

which guarded the gates of Hades—dogs with the tails of serpents and with snakes twining round their necks, great, flat, hideous-eyed heads and huge teeth.

The huntsmen rode on the progeny of Pegasus, winged horses which skimmed over the ground, white and beautiful, fast as the North Wind.



And on the backs of the horses—the huntsmen. The grinning shades of dead villains, spewed from Hades to do Ahriman's work. Beside them loped the leopard-women, the Maenades, worshippers of Bacchus.

Behind all these came a screaming multitude of ghouls, demons and were-beasts, released from the depths of Hell.

For two weeks they had been thus pursued and Simon and Camilla were well aware that they could have been caught many times. Ahriman—as he had threatened—was sporting with them.

But still they pushed their horses onwards until they had reached the Bosphorus, hired a boat and were on the open sea.

Then came the new phantoms to haunt them. Sea-shapes, rearing reptilian monsters, things with blazing eyes which swam just beneath the surface and occasionally put clawed hands on the sides of the boat.

Simon realized at last that all this was calculated to torment them and drive them mad, to give in to Ahriman's evil will.

Camilla, Simon could see, was already beginning to weaken. But he kept tight hold of sanity—and his purpose. Whether the Fates wished it or not, he knew what he must do, had taken upon himself a mission. He refused to attend to anything but that—and his strength aided Camilla.

Soon, Simon knew, the Evil One would realize that he could not break his spirit—then they would be doomed for Ahriman had the power to snuff them out. He prayed to Ormuzd, in whom he now believed with a fervour stemming from his deep need of something to which he could cling, and prayed that he

might have a little more time—time to get to Babylon and do what he had taken upon himself to do.

Over the barren plains of Asia Minor they rode and all the nights of their journey the wild huntsmen screamed in their wake until Simon at least could turn sometimes and laugh at them, taunting them with words which were half-mad ravings.

He had little time, he knew.

One night, while great clouds loomed across the sky, they lost their way.

Simon had planned to follow the Euphrates on the banks of which was built Babylon, but in the confusion of the shrieking night he lost his way and it was not until the following morning that they sighted a river.

With relief, they rode towards it. The days were theirs—no phantoms came to torment them in the sunlight. Soon, Simon knew with a feeling of elation, they would be in Babylon with Abaris and the Magi to aid them against the hordes of Ahriman.

All day they rode, keeping to the cracked bed of the river, dried in the heat of the searing sun. When dusk came, Simon calculated, they should reach the outskirts of Babylon. Which was well, for their horses were by now gaunt skeletons, plodding and tripping in the river bed, and Camilla was swaying, pale and fainting, in the saddle.

The sun began to go down lividly on the horizon as they urged the weary horses forward and already in their ears they heard the faint howling of the Maenades, the insane howlings of Cerberus's spawn. The nightmare of the nights was soon to begin again.

“Pray to Ormuzd that we reach the city in time,” Simon said wearily.

“Another such night and I fear my sanity will give way,” Camilla replied.

The howling, insensate cries of the Bacchae grew louder in their ears and, turning in the saddle, Simon saw behind him the dim shapes of their pursuers—shapes which grew stronger with the deepening darkness.

They turned the bend in the river and the shape of a city loomed ahead.

But then, as they drew closer, Simon's heart fell.

This desolate, jagged ruin, this vast and deserted place was not Babylon! This city was dead—a place where a man, also, might die.

\* \* \*

Now the armies of Alexander gathered. And they gathered, unbeknownst to them, not for material conquest but for a greater conquest—to destroy the powers of Light and ensure the powers of Darkness of lasting rule.

Great armies gathered, all metal and leather and disciplined flesh.

323BC and a sick man, drawing vitality from a supernatural source—a man possessed—ruled the known world, ordered its fighting men, controlled its inhabitants.

Alexander of Macedonia. Alexander the Great. Son of Zeus, Jupiter-Ammon. He had united the world under a single monarch—himself. And, united, it would fall...

In Babylon, oldest city of the ancient world, Alexander gave his orders to his captains. One hundred and forty-four miles square was Babylon, flanking each side of the great River Euphrates, embanked with walls of brick, closed by gates of bronze. Dominating the city was the Temple of Baal, rising upwards and consisting of eight storeys gradually diminishing in width, ascended by a flight of steps winding around the whole building on the outside. Standing on its topmost tower, Alexander surveyed the mighty city which he had chosen as the base for his military operations. From here he could see the fabulous hanging gardens built by Nebuchadnezzar, laid out upon terraces which were raised one above the other on arches. The streets of the city were straight, intersecting one another at right angles.

Babylon, which had brooded for centuries, producing scientists, scholars, artists, great kings and great priests, splendid warriors and powerful conquerors. Babylon, whose rulers, the Chaldaeans, worshipped the heavenly bodies and let them guide their law-making.

Babylon, city of secrets and enlightenment. Babylon, soon to be abased by the most terrible blight of evil the world had known. The forces of Light were scattered, broken by Alexander's conquerings, and Alexander himself had become the focus for the forces of evil. Soon the world would sink into darkness.

Desperately the adherents of Light strove to find a way to stop him, but they were weakened, outlawed. Little pockets of them, chief of these being the Magi of Persia, strove to stand against him—but it was almost futile. Slowly, surely, implacably, evil Ahriman and his minions were gaining ascendancy.

And Simon of Byzantium had failed to reach Babylon and contact the Magi.

Simon and Camilla had never seen such a vast city. The crumbling walls encompassed a fantastic area... Where they were still intact three chariots might have passed each other on them and they were over 100 feet high. Broken towers rose everywhere, hundreds of them, twice as high as the walls.

But the wind moaned in the towers and great owls with wide, terrible eyes hooted and glided about them, seeming the city's only occupants.

Camilla reached over and found Simon's hand. He gripped it to give her a comfort he did not himself feel.

Behind them they still heard the hunters. Wearied, they could go no further and their tired brains told them that here, among ruins, they would find no hiding place.

The slow clapping of their horses' hoofs echoed in the empty city as they followed a broad, overgrown avenue through jagged shadows thrown by the broken buildings. Now Simon could see that the city had

been destroyed by fire. But it was cold, chillingly cold in the light of the huge moon which hung overhead like an omen of despair.

The cries of the huntsmen joined the hoots of the owls, a horrid cacophony of fearful, foreboding sound.

But now they could no longer run before their hunters. Fatalistically they must wait—to be caught.

Then suddenly, ahead of them, Simon saw a dark shape framed against the moonlight. He drew his sword and halted his horse. He was too tired to attack, waited for the figure to approach.

When it came closer it flung back the cowl of its cloak and Simon gasped in relief and astonishment.

“Abaris! I was going to seek you in Babylon. What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you, Simon.” The priest smiled gently and sympathetically. He, also, looked dreadfully worn. His long un-Persian face was pale and there were lines about his mouth.

“Waiting for me? How could you have known that I should lose my way and come here?”

“It was ordained by the Fates that you should do so. Do not question that.”

“Where are we?”

“In the ruins of forgotten Nineveh. This was a great city once, larger than Babylon and almost as powerful. The Medes and Babylonians razed it three hundred years ago.”

“Nineveh,” Camilla breathed, “there are legends about it.”

“Forget those you have heard and remember this—you are safe here, but not for long. The remnants of Ormuzd’s supporters fled here and form a strong company—but not so strong that we can last for ever against Ahriman’s dreadful minions.”

“Now I realize what happened,” Simon said. “We followed the Tigris river instead of the Euphrates.”

“That is so.”

Behind them the wild baying came closer. Abaris signed to them to follow him.

Abaris led them into a dark sidestreet and then into a maze of alleys choked with fallen masonry, weed-grown and dank. By a small two-storeyed house which was still virtually intact, he stopped, withdrew a bolt and motioned them inside. They took their horses with them.

The house was much larger inside than it seemed and Simon guessed that it consisted of several houses now. There were about two hundred people in the large room behind the one they had entered. They sat, squatted and stood in positions of acute weariness. Many were priests. Simon recognized several cults.

Here were Chaldaeans, the ruling caste of Babylon, proud and arrogant-seeming still, Egyptian priests of



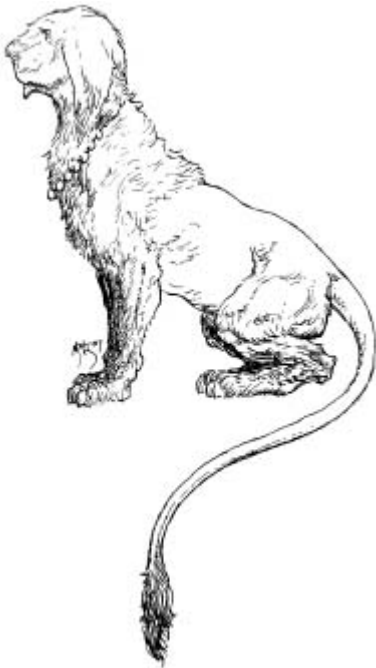
Osiris, a Hebrew rabbi. Others Simon did not recognize and Abaris whispered answers to his questions. There were Brahmin from India, Pythagoreans from Samos and Crotona in Etrusca, Parsees from the deserts of Kerman and Hindustan, Druids from the far North, from the bleak islands on the world's edge, blind priests of the Cimmerians who, history told, were the ancestors of the Thracians and Macedonians.

Alexander had destroyed their temples, scattered them. Only in the far North and the far East were the priests of Light still organized and they had sent deputations to Nineveh to aid their brothers.

And Alexander's wrath had been mainly turned on the Zoroastrians, the Persian and Chaldaean Magi, strongest of the sects who worshipped the powers of Law and Light.

Here they all were, weary men, tired by a battle which required no material weapons yet sapped their vitality as they strove to hold Ahriman at bay.

Abaris introduced Simon and Camilla to the gathering, and he appeared to know the best part of their story, how they had been present at the Cottyttia, how they had fled from Pela, hounded by the infernal hordes, crossed the Bosphorus and came, at length, to fallen Nineveh.



Outside, Nineveh's streets were filled with a hideous throng, weird beasts of all kinds, dead souls and malevolent denizens of Hell. Three-headed, snake-tailed dogs, winged horses, chimerae, basilisks, sphinx, centaurs and griffins, fire-spewing salamanders. All roamed the broken streets hunting for Ahriman's prey. But there was an area where they could not pass—an area which gave out emanations which meant death for them, so they avoided this area.

For the meantime, Simon and Camilla were safe. But it was stalemate, for while they were in Nineveh, secure against the forces of evil, Alexander strode the golden towers of Babylon and readied the world for the final conquest.

## CHAPTERSIX

Abaris told Simon: “Alexander slew your friend Hano the Phoenician a week ago.”

Simon cursed: “May the Harpies pluck his eyes from his skull!”

Camilla said: “Do not evoke the Harpies, also. We have enough to contend with.”

Abaris half smiled, waved his hand towards a small table in a corner of the room. “You had better eat now. You must be very tired.”

Gratefully the pair began to eat, drinking the spiced wine of the Magi—a wine which was unnaturally invigorating. Abaris said, while they ate:

“Ahriman dwells constantly, now, in Alexander’s body. He intends to make a final campaign, north and east, to subdue the barbarian tribes of Gaul and the Dark Island, crush the Indian kings and rule the entire world. And, it seems, he will be able to do all this through his vessel, Alexander—for the whole world already responds to Alexander’s whims; he commands the fighting men and a host of subject kings and princes. It will be an easy matter...”

“But he must be stopped,” Simon said. “Have you no means of stopping him?”

“For months we have tried to fight the forces of evil, without success. We have almost given up and wait for the coming of Darkness.”

“I believe I know what can be done,” Simon said, “and it will be a cleaner method than that used by any of you. With your aid I must get to Babylon—and with your aid I will do what I must.”

“Very well, my friend,” Abaris said, “tell me what you need.”

Kettle-drums beat and brazen trumpets sounded. The dust swelled into the heated air before the feet of Alexander’s armies. Coarse soldiers’ voices bellowed orders and the captains rode in military pomp at the head of their armies. Plumes of dyed horse-hair bobbed bright beneath the sun, horses stamped, bedecked in trappings of blue and red and yellow, bronze armour glinted like gold and shields clashed against javelins, lances rose like wheat above the heads of the marching men, their tips bright and shining.

Hard-faced warriors moved in ordered ranks—men from Macedonia, Thrace, Greece, Bactria, Babylon, Persia, Assyria, Arabia, Egypt and the Hebrew nations.

Millions of fighting men. Millions of souls trained for slaying and destruction.

And ordering them, one man—Alexander the Great. Alexander in his hawklike helm of gold, standing on the steps of the Temple of Baal in Babylon and readying his hosts for the final conquest. Alexander in the trappings of a Persian monarch, absolute ruler of the civilized world. In his right hand a gleaming sword, in his left the sceptre of the law-giver. In his body, possessing it, flowing through it, dominating it—black evil. Ahriman, Master of Darkness, soon to commit the absolute crime—the destruction of Law, the birth of the Dark Millennium.

Around Babylon, mighty armies were camped and it was easy for Simon to enter the city, for many mercenaries had flocked to fight beneath Alexander’s banner.

Wrapped around the Thracian was what seemed to be a simple stained black soldier's cloak, but inside, lining it, was richer stuff marked with curious symbols. The Cloak of the Magi, it served to ward off evil and kept Simon, for the time being, safe from Ahriman's attentions.

That day he stood in the square surrounding the Temple of Baal and heard Ahriman speak through Alexander. It was dangerous for him to do this, he knew, but he had to see the man again.

Alexander addressed the populace.

"People of Babylon, my warriors, the morrow sees the start of our final conquests. Soon no spot of soil, no drop of ocean shall be independent of our Empire. I, Jupiter-Ammon, have come to Earth to cleanse it of heretics, to destroy unbelievers and bring the new age to the world. Those who murmur against me shall die. Those who oppose me shall suffer torments and will wish to die. Those who would halt my plans—they shall never die but will be sent living to Hades. Now the armies are marshaled. Already we control most of the world, save for a few patches to the north and a few to the east. Within months these, also, will be ours. Worship us, my people, for Zeus has returned from Olympus, born of a woman named Olympias, father of the son, son and father are One. We are Jupiter-Ammon and our will is divine!"

The people screamed their exultation at these words and bowed low before the man-god who stood so proud above them.

Only Simon remained standing, clad in his bagging and dusty cloak, his face thin and his eyes bright. He stared up at Alexander who saw him almost immediately, opened his mouth to order the unbeliever destroyed, and then closed it again.

For long moments the two men stared into one another's eyes—the one representing total evil, the other representing the forces of Light. In that great, hushed city nothing seemed to stir and the air carried only faint sounds of military preparation from behind the city walls.

There was a peculiar communication between them. Simon felt as if he were looking into the Abyss of Hell and yet sensed something else lurking in the eyes—something cleaner that had long since been subdued and almost erased.

Then he was in motion, running for the steps that wound upwards around the Temple of Baal.

He bounded up the steps, twenty, fifty, a hundred and he had still not reached Alexander who stood like a statue awaiting him.

The God-Emperor turned as Simon finally reached the upper level. As if Simon were not there he strode back through the shaded pillars and into the building. That was where Simon confronted him.

Sunlight lanced through the pillars and criss-crossed the place in a network of shadow and light. Alexander now sat on a huge golden throne, his chin resting in one hand, his back bent as if in meditation. Steps led up to the dais on which the throne was placed. Simon stopped at the first step and looked up at the conqueror of the world.

Alexander leaned back in his throne and clasped his hands in front of him. He smiled slowly, at first a smile of irony which twisted into a grin of malice and hatred.

“There is a sacred bull in Memphis,” Alexander said slowly, “which is called Apis. It is an oracle. Seven years ago I went to Memphis to hear the sacred bull and to ascertain whether it had, indeed, oracular powers. When it saw me it spoke a rhyme. I have remembered that rhyme for seven years.”

Simon drew the Cloak of the Magi closer about him. “What did it say?” he asked in a strained half-whisper.

Alexander shook his head. “I did not understand it until recently. It went:

The City that thy father lost shall fall to thee,

The City that gives birth to fools shall bear a sword.

The City that thy father lost shall be its home.

The City that thou mak'st thy home shall feel its edge.”

Simon brooded over this for a moment and then he nodded, understanding.

“Byzantium, Abdera, Byzantium—Babylon,” he said.

“How sharp is the sword?” Alexander asked and changed shape.

A dazzling orange-golden haze burst upwards and a black and scarlet figure stood framed in the centre. It vaguely resembled Alexander but was twice as high, twice as broad, and bore a weirdly wrought staff in its hand.

“So!” Simon cried. “At last you show your true shape. You bear the Wand of Ahriman, I see!”

“Aye, mortal—and that only Ahriman may bear.”

From beneath the Cloak of the Magi, Simon produced a short javelin and a small shield of about ten inches in diameter. He held the shield in front of his face and through it could see unnerving and alien shapes where the figure of Ahriman stood. He was seeing the true shape of Ahriman, not the warped and metamorphosed body of Alexander.

He drew back his arm and hurled the javelin at a certain spot in the intricate supernatural pattern.

There came an unearthly groaning and muttering from the figure. It threw up its arms and the wand flickered and sent a bolt of black lightning at Simon who put up his shield again and repelled it, though he was hurled back against a far column. He leaped to his feet, drawing his sword and saw that, as Abaris had told him, Alexander had resumed his usual shape.

The God-King staggered and frowned. He turned and saw Simon standing there, sword in hand.

“What's this?” he said.

“Prepare to fight me, Alexander!” Simon cried.

“But why?”

“You must never know why.”

And Simon leapt forward.

Alexander drew his own lovely blade, a slim thing of strong tempering, of glowing star-metal with a handle of black onyx.

The iron clashed with a musical note, so fine were both blades and the two men feinted, parried and stabbed, fighting in the Greek manner, using the points of their swords rather than the edges.

Alexander came in swiftly, grasped Simon’s wrist and pushed his sword back, bringing his own sword in, but Simon side-stepped just in time and the blade grazed his thigh. Alexander cursed a very human curse and grinned briefly at Simon in the old, earlier manner.

“You are swift, my friend.”

Simon disliked this. It was harder to fight such a light-hearted and likable warrior than the thing which Alexander had earlier been. It was almost unjust—yet the action had to be made.

In and out of the network of light and shadow the two men danced, skipping away, coming in close, swords flashing and the music of their meeting echoing about the Temple of Baal.

Then Alexander’s soldiers came running into the place but Alexander cried:

“Stand back—I do not know why this man attacked me, but I have never fought such a swordsman before and would not miss the privilege. If he wins—free him.”

Bewildered, the guards retreated.

For hours the fight continued, the men evenly matched. Dusk came, sunset flooding the temple with blood-red rays. Like two archetypal gods they fought on, thrusting, parrying, employing every tactic at their command.

Then Alexander, whose earlier sickness had wearied him, stumbled and Simon saw his opportunity, paused, deliberating the act, then rushed upon his opponent and struck him a terrible thrust in the lung.

“Go—be Charon’s guest!” he cried.

Alexander went hurtling back to land with a crash, sprawled on the steps of the dais. Again the watching warriors rushed forward, but Alexander waved them back.

“Do not tell the people how I met my end,” he gasped. “I have united the world—let it stay united in the confidence that a—a—god created that unity. Perhaps that will serve to ensure peace...”

Dismissed, the guards returned, wondering, down the steps of the temple and Simon and the dying

Alexander were left alone in the half-light while a wind blew up and sent a cold chill through the silent columns.

\* \* \*

“I remember you now,” Alexander said, blood beginning to trickle from his mouth. “You are the Thracian. What happened—I remember interviewing you and then the rest is hazed in blackness and chaos—what happened then?”

Simon shook his head.

“Call it madness,” he said. “A madness which came upon you.”

In the shadows behind the throne he saw a black mist begin to form. Hurriedly he shouted: “Abaris—quickly!”

The priest appeared then. He had slipped up the steps and had been standing behind a column. Others followed him. He motioned them in. They began a weird and beautiful chanting, advancing towards the hazy form behind the throne, making peculiar passes in the air.

After them, Camilla appeared and stood framed in a gap between two columns, the wind ruffling her hair.

Alexander grasped Simon’s arm. “I remember a prophecy—one made by the Oracle of Memphis. How did it go?”

Simon quoted it.

“Yes,” Alexander gasped. “So you are the sword which the City of Fools, Abdera, bore...”

“What shall we remember of you, Alexander?” Simon asked quietly as there came a commotion behind the throne which was now surrounded by chanting Magi. He looked up. The priests seemed to be straining to hold back some horrible force which whimpered and moaned at them, yet was still very strong.

“Remember? Will not the world always remember me? My dream was to unite the world and bring peace. But a nightmare interrupted that dream, I think...”

“Your father’s dream and yours,” Simon said.

“My father—I hated him—yet he was a good and wise king, and moulded me for a purpose. Aristotle was my teacher, you know. But I had other indoctrination. My mother Olympias, taught me peculiar things which I cannot remember now.”

“Let us hope no-one shall ever know them again,” Simon breathed.

“What has happened?” Alexander asked again. Then his eyes closed. “What did I do?”

“You did nothing that was not for the good of the world,” Simon told him. Alexander was dead. “But,”

the Thracian added quietly as the emperor's grip loosened and the limp hand fell to the marble of the step, "that which possessed you wrought harm. You could not help it. You were born to perish..."

He rose and called: "Abaris. Abaris—he is dead."

The chanting ceased. The black shape still hovered there, veins of orange-gold, black and scarlet throbbing in it like blood-vessels. Simon and the priests fell back.

The shape shot towards Alexander's corpse, sank down over it. The corpse jerked but then was still again. For an instant a face—the face Simon had seen at the Rites of Cotys in Pela—appeared.

"There will be others, never fear!" Ahriman said and vanished.

Abaris went over to Alexander's corpse and made a pass over the wound. When Simon looked there was no sign of a wound.

"We'll say he died of a fever," Abaris said softly. "It was well known that he was ill. They will believe us—we will let the Chaldeans speak in Babylon for they long ruled the people before Alexander's coming."

Simon said: "I knew that clean steel could end this matter for us."

Abaris looked at him a trifle cynically.

"Without our magic to drive Ahriman out of Alexander's body for the time you needed, you would never have succeeded."

"That's true, I suppose."

Abaris continued:

"That was the solution. Ahriman works through many people—but he needs a single human vessel if he is to carry out his Great Plan. Several have been born in the past—others will be born again. Fanatical conquerors who will set out to rule the world. Men with superhuman vitality, the power of dominating great masses of people and driving them to do that one man's will. Yes, Ahriman—under whatever name he takes—will try again. That is certain."

"Meanwhile," Simon said as Camilla came up to him, "we have succeeded in halting Ahriman this time."

"Who knows?" Abaris said. "History will show if we were in time or not."

Simon said gravely: "I am not sure what Alexander, himself, was. He could have been a force for good or evil. He was something of both. But the evil gained ascendancy towards the end. Was I right to kill him? Could not his course have been turned so that the good in him could have continued his plan to unite the world in peace?"

"That may have been possible," the priest said thoughtfully, "but we men set limits to our endeavours—it is easier that way. Perhaps, in time, we will not stop short but will learn to choose the harder paths and so achieve more positive results. As it is we strive merely to keep a balance. One day Alexander's dream may be realized and the world united. Let us hope that the unity will be inspired by Ormuzd. Then it may be possible to build."

Simon sighed and made his body relax.

“Meanwhile, as you say, we’ll strive for balance alone. Pray to Ormuzd, priest, and pray that men will one day cease to need their gods.”

“That day may come and, if I am right, the gods themselves will welcome it.”

Abaris bowed and left Simon and Camilla staring at one another. For a long time they remained so before embracing.

## **MASTER OF CHAOS**

(Earl Aubec)

(1964)

FROM THE GLASSLESS window of the stone tower it was possible to see the wide river winding off between loose, brown banks, through the heaped terrain of solid green copses which blended very gradually into the mass of the forest proper. And out of the forest, the cliff rose, grey and light green, up and up, the rock darkening, lichen-covered, to merge with the lower, and even more massive, stones of the castle. It was the castle which dominated the countryside in three directions, drawing the eye from river, rock or forest. Its walls were high and of thick granite, with towers; a dense field of towers, grouped so as to shadow one another.

Aubec of Malador marveled and wondered how human builders could ever have constructed it, save by sorcery. Brooding and mysterious, the castle seemed to have a defiant air, for it stood on the very edge of the world.

At this moment the lowering sky cast a strange, deep yellow light against the western sides of the towers, intensifying the blackness untouched by it. Huge billows of blue sky rent the general racing greyness above, and mounds of red cloud crept through to blend and produce more and subtler colourings. Yet, though the sky was impressive, it could not take the gaze away from the ponderous series of man-made crags that were Castle Kaneloon.

Earl Aubec of Malador did not turn from the window until it was completely dark outside; forest, cliff and castle but shadowy tones against the overall blackness. He passed a heavy, knotted hand over his almost bald scalp and thoughtfully went towards the heap of straw which was his intended bed.

The straw was piled in a niche created by a buttress and the outer wall and the room was well-lighted by Malador’s lantern. But the air was cold as he lay down on the straw with his hand close to the two-handed broadsword of prodigious size. This was his only weapon. It looked as if it had been forged for a giant—Malador was virtually that himself—with its wide crosspiece and heavy, stone-encrusted hilt and five-foot blade, smooth and broad. Beside it was Malador’s old, heavy armour, the casque balanced on top with its somewhat tattered black plumes waving slightly in a current of air from the window.



Malador slept.

His dreams, as usual, were turbulent; of mighty armies surging across the blazing landscapes, curling banners bearing the blazons of a hundred nations, forests of shining lance-tips, seas of tossing helmets, the brave, wild blasts of the war-horns, the clatter of hoofs and the songs and cries and shouts of soldiers. These were dreams of earlier times, of his youth when, for Queen Eloarde of Klant, he had conquered all the Southern nations—almost to the edge of the world. Only Kaneloon, on the very edge, had he not conquered, and this because no army would follow him there.

For one of so martial an appearance, these dreams were surprisingly unwelcome, and Malador woke several times that night, shaking his head in an attempt to rid himself of them.

He would rather have dreamed of Eloarde, though she was the cause of his restlessness, but he saw nothing of her in his sleep; nothing of her soft, black hair that billowed around her pale face, nothing of her green eyes and red lips and her proud, disdainful posture. Eloarde had assigned him to this quest and he had not gone willingly, though he had no choice, for as well as his mistress she was also his queen. The Champion was traditionally her lover—and it was unthinkable to Earl Aubec that any other condition should exist. It was his place, as Champion of Klant, to obey and go forth from her palace to seek Castle Kaneloon alone and conquer it and declare it part of her empire, so that it could be said Queen Eloarde's domain stretched from the Dragon Sea to World's Edge.

Nothing lay beyond World's Edge—nothing save the swirling stuff of unformed Chaos which stretched away from the Cliffs of Kaneloon for eternity, roiling and broiling, multicoloured, full of monstrous half-shapes—for Earth alone was Lawful and constituted of ordered matter, drifting in the sea of Chaos-stuff as it had done for aeons.

In the morning, Earl Aubec of Malador extinguished the lantern which he had allowed to remain alight, drew on greaves and hauberk, placed his black plumed helm upon his head, put his broadsword over his shoulder and sallied out of the stone tower which was all that remained whole of some ancient edifice.

His leathern-shod feet stumbled over stones that seemed partially dissolved, as if Chaos had once lapped here instead of against the towering Cliffs of Kaneloon. That, of course, was quite impossible, since Earth's boundaries were known to be constant.

Castle Kaneloon had seemed closer the night before and that, he now realized, was because it was so huge. He followed the river, his feet sinking in the loamy soil, the great branches of the trees shading him from the increasingly hot sun as he made his way towards the cliffs. Kaneloon was now out of sight, high above him. Every so often he used his sword as an axe to clear his way through the places where the foliage was particularly thick.

He rested several times, drinking the cold water of the river and mopping his face and head. He was unhurried, he had no wish to visit Kaneloon, he resented the interruption to his life with Eloarde which he thought he had earned. Also he, too, had a superstitious dread of the mysterious castle, which was said to be inhabited only by one human occupant—the Dark Lady, a sorceress without mercy who commanded a legion of demons and other Chaos creatures.

He arrived at the cliffs by midday and regarded the path leading upwards with a mixture of wariness and relief. He had expected to have to scale the cliffs. He was not one, however, to take a difficult route where an easy one presented itself, so he looped a cord around his sword and slung it over his back,

since it was too long and cumbersome to carry at his side. Then, still in bad humour, he began to climb the twisting path.



The lichen-covered rocks were evidently ancient, contrary to the speculations of certain philosophers who asked why Kaneloon had only been heard of a few generations since. Malador believed in the general answer to this question—that explorers had never ventured this far until fairly recently. He glanced back down the path and saw the tops of the trees below him, their foliage moving slightly in the breeze. The tower in which he'd spent the night was just visible in the distance and, beyond that, he knew, there was no civilization, no outpost of Man for many days' journey north, east, or west—and Chaos lay to the south. He had never been so close to the edge of the world before and wondered how the sight of unformed matter would affect his brain.

At length he clambered to the top of the cliff and stood, arms akimbo, staring up at Castle Kaneloon which soared a mile away, its highest towers hidden in the clouds, its immense walls rooted on the rock and stretching away, limited on both sides of the cliff. Malador watched the churning, leaping Chaos-substance—predominantly grey, blue, brown and yellow at this moment, though its colours changed constantly—spew like the sea-spray a few feet from the castle.

He became filled with a feeling of such indescribable profundity that he could only remain in this position for a long while, completely overwhelmed by a sense of his own insignificance. It came to him, eventually, that if anyone did dwell in the Castle Kaneloon, then they must have a robust mind or else must be insane, and then he sighed and strode on towards his goal, noting that the ground was perfectly flat, without blemish, green, obsidian and reflecting imperfectly the dancing Chaos-stuff from which he averted his eyes as much as he could.

Kaneloon had many entrances, all dark and unwelcoming, and had they all not been of regular size and shape they might have been so many cave-mouths.

Malador paused before choosing which to take, and then walked with outward purposefulness towards

one. He went into blackness which appeared to stretch away for ever. It was cold; it was empty and he was alone.

He was soon lost. His footsteps made no echo, which was unexpected; then the blackness began to give way to a series of angular outlines, like the walls of a twisting corridor—walls which did not reach the un-sensed roof, but ended several yards above his head. It was a labyrinth, a maze. He paused and looked back and saw with horror that the maze wound off in many directions, though he was sure he had followed a straight path from the outside.

For an instant, his mind became diffused and madness threatened to engulf him, but he batted it down, unslinging his sword, shivering. Which way? He pressed on, unable to tell, now, whether he went forward or backward.

The madness lurking in the depths of his brain filtered out and became fear and, immediately following the sensation of fear, came the shapes. Swift-moving shapes, darting from several different directions, gibbering, fiendish, utterly horrible.

One of these creatures leapt at him and he struck at it with his blade. It fled, but seemed unwounded. Another came and another and he forgot his panic as he smote around him, driving them back until all had fled. He paused and leaned, panting, on his sword. Then, as he stared around him, the fear began to flood back into him and more creatures appeared—creatures with wide, blazing eyes and clutching talons, creatures with malevolent faces, mocking him, creatures with half-familiar faces, some recognizable as those of old friends and relatives, yet twisted into horrific parodies. He screamed and ran at them, whirling his huge sword, slashing, hacking at them, rushing past one group to turn a bend in the labyrinth and encounter another.

Malicious laughter coursed through the twisting corridors, following him and preceding him as he ran. He stumbled and fell against a wall. At first the wall seemed of solid stone, then, slowly it became soft and he sank through it, his body lying half in one corridor, half in another. He hauled himself through, still on hands and knees, looked up and saw Eloarde, but an Eloarde whose face grew old as he watched.

*“I am mad,”* he thought. *“Is this reality or fantasy—or both?”*

He reached out a hand. *“Eloarde!”*

She vanished but was replaced by a crowding horde of demons. He raised himself to his feet and flailed around him with his blade, but they skipped outside his range and he roared at them as he advanced. Momentarily, while he thus exerted himself, the fear left him again and, with the disappearance of the fear, so the visions vanished until he realized that the fear preceded the manifestations and he tried to control it.

He almost succeeded, forcing himself to relax, but it welled up again and the creatures bubbled out of the walls, their shrill voices full of malicious mirth.

This time he did not attack them with his sword, but stood his ground as calmly as he could and concentrated upon his own mental condition. As he did so, the creatures began to fade away and then the walls of the labyrinth dissolved and it seemed to him that he stood in a peaceful valley, calm and idyllic. Yet, hovering close to his consciousness, he seemed to see the walls of the labyrinth faintly outlined, and disgusting shapes moving here and there along the many passages.

He realized that the vision of the valley was as much an illusion as the labyrinth and, with this conclusion, both valley and labyrinth faded and he stood in the enormous hall of a castle which could only be Kaneloon.

The hall was unoccupied though well-furnished, and he could not see the source of the light, which was bright and even. He strode towards a table, on which were heaped scrolls, and his feet made a satisfying echo. Several great metal-studded doors led off from the hall, but for the moment he did not investigate them, intent on studying the scrolls and seeing if they could help him unravel Kaneloon's mystery.

He propped his sword against the table and took up the first scroll.

It was a beautiful thing of red vellum, but the black letters upon it meant nothing to him and he was astounded for, though dialects varied from place to place, there was only one language in all the lands of the Earth. Another scroll bore different symbols still, and a third he unrolled carried a series of highly stylized pictures which were repeated here and there so that he guessed they formed some kind of alphabet. Disgusted, he flung the scroll down, picked up his sword, drew an immense breath and shouted:

“Who dwells here? Let them know that Aubec, Earl of Malador, Champion of Klant and Conqueror of the South claims this castle in the name of Queen Eloarde, Empress of all the Southlands!”

In shouting these familiar words, he felt somewhat more comfortable, but he received no reply. He lifted his casque a trifle and scratched his neck. Then he picked up his sword, balanced it over his shoulder, and made for the largest door.

Before he reached it, it sprang open and a huge, manlike thing with hands like grappling irons grinned at him.

He took a pace backwards and then another until, seeing that the thing did not advance, stood his ground observing it.

It was a foot or so taller than he, with oval, multifaceted eyes that, by their nature, seemed blank. Its face was angular and had a grey, metallic sheen. Most of its body was composed of burnished metal, jointed in the manner of armour. Upon its head was a tight-fitting hood, studded with brass. It had about it an air of tremendous and insensate power, though it did not move.



“A golem!” Malador exclaimed for it seemed to him that he remembered such man-made creatures from legends. “What sorcery created *you* !”

The golem did not reply but its hands—which were in reality composed of four spikes of metal apiece—began slowly to flex themselves; and still the golem grinned.

This thing, Malador knew, did not have the same amorphous quality of his earlier visions. This was solid, this was real and strong, and even Malador’s manly strength, however much he exerted it, could not defeat such a creature. Yet neither could he turn away.

With a scream of metal joints, the golem entered the hall and stretched its burnished hands towards the earl.

Malador could attack or flee, and fleeing would be senseless. He attacked.

His great sword clasped in both hands, he swung it sideways at the golem’s torso, which seemed to be its weakest point. The golem lowered an arm and the sword shuddered against metal with a mighty clang that set the whole of Malador’s body quaking. He stumbled backwards. Remorselessly, the golem followed him.

Malador looked back and searched the hall in the hope of finding a weapon more powerful than his sword, but saw only shields of an ornamental kind upon the wall to his right. He turned and ran to the wall, wrenching one of the shields from its place and slipping it onto his arm. It was an oblong thing, very light and comprising several layers of cross-grained wood. It was inadequate, but it made him feel a trifle better as he whirled again to face the golem.

The golem advanced, and Malador thought he noticed something familiar about it, just as the demons of the labyrinth had seemed familiar, but the impression was only vague. Kaneloon’s weird sorcery was affecting his mind, he decided.

The creature raised the spikes on its right arm and aimed a swift blow at Malador’s head. He avoided it, putting up his sword as protection. The spikes clashed against the sword and then the left arm pistoned forward, driving at Malador’s stomach. The shield stopped his blow, though the spikes pierced it deeply.

He yanked the buckler off the spikes, slashing at the golem's leg-joints as he did so.

Still staring into the middle-distance, with apparently no real interest in Malador, the golem advanced like a blind man as the earl turned and leapt onto the table, scattering the scrolls. Now he brought his huge sword down upon the golem's skull, and the brass studs sparked and the hood and head beneath it was dented. The golem staggered and then grasped the table, heaving it off the floor so that Malador was forced to leap to the ground. This time he made for the door and tugged at its latch-ring, but the door would not open.



His sword was chipped and blunted. He put his back to the door as the golem reached him and brought its metal hand down on the top edge of the shield. The shield shattered and a dreadful pain shot up Malador's arm. He lunged at the golem, but he was unused to handling the big sword in this manner and the stroke was clumsy.

Malador knew that he was doomed. Force and fighting skill were not enough against the golem's insensate strength. At the golem's next blow he swung aside, but was caught by one of its spike-fingers which ripped through his armour and drew blood, though at that moment he felt no pain.

He scrambled up, shaking away the grip and fragments of wood which remained of the shield, grasping his sword firmly.

*“The soulless demon has no weak spot,” he thought, “and since it has no true intelligence, it cannot be appealed to. What would a golem fear?”*

The answer was simple. The golem would only fear something as strong or stronger than itself.

He must use cunning.

He ran for the upturned table with the golem after him, leapt over the table and wheeled as the golem stumbled but did not, as he'd hoped, fall. However, the golem was slowed by its encounter, and Aubec took advantage of this to rush for the door through which the golem had entered. It opened. He was in a twisting corridor, darkly shadowed, not unlike the labyrinth he had first found in Kaneloon. The door closed, but he could find nothing to bar it with. He ran up the corridor as the golem tore the door open and came lumbering swiftly after him.

The corridor writhed about in all directions and, though he could not always see the golem, he could hear it and had the sickening fear that he would turn a corner at some stage and run straight into it. He did not—but he came to a door and, upon opening it and passing through it, found himself again in the hall of

Castle Kaneloon.

He almost welcomed this familiar sight as he heard the golem, its metal parts screeching, continue to come after him. He needed another shield, but the part of the hall in which he now found himself had no wall-shields—only a large, round mirror of bright, clear-polished metal. It would be too heavy to be much use, but he seized it, tugging it from its hook. It fell with a clang and he hauled it up, dragging it with him as he stumbled away from the golem which had emerged into the room once more.

Using the chains by which the mirror had hung, he gripped it before him and, as the golem's speed increased and the monster rushed upon him, he raised this makeshift shield.

The golem shrieked.

Malador was astounded. The monster stopped dead and cowered away from the mirror. Malador pushed it towards the golem and the thing turned its back and fled, with a metallic howl, through the door it had entered by.

Relieved and puzzled, Malador sat down on the floor and studied the mirror. There was certainly nothing magical about it, though its quality was good. He grinned and said aloud:

“The creature *is* afraid of something. It is afraid of itself!”

He threw back his head and laughed loudly in his relief. Then he frowned. “Now to find the sorcerers who created him and take vengeance on them!” He pushed himself to his feet, twisted the chains of the mirror more securely about his arm and went to another door, concerned lest the golem complete its circuit of the maze and return through the door. This door would not budge, so he lifted his sword and hacked at the latch for a few moments until it gave. He strode into a well-lit passage with what appeared to be another room at its far end—the door open.

A musky scent came to his nostrils as he progressed along the passage—the scent that reminded him of Eloarde and the comforts of Klant.

When he reached the circular chamber, he saw that it was a bedroom—a woman's bedroom full of the perfume he had smelled in the passage. He controlled the direction his mind took, thought of loyalty and Klant, and went to another door which led off from the room. He lugged it open and discovered a stone staircase winding upwards. This he mounted, passing windows that seemed glazed with emerald or ruby, beyond which shadow-shapes flickered so that he knew he was on the side of the castle overlooking Chaos.

The staircase seemed to lead up into a tower, and when he finally reached the small door at its top he was feeling out of breath and paused before entering. Then he pushed the door open and went in.

A huge window was set in one wall, a window of clear glass through which he could see the ominous stuff of Chaos leaping. A woman stood by this window as if awaiting him.

“You are indeed a champion, Earl Aubec,” said she with a smile that might have been ironic.

“How do you know my name?”

“No sorcery gave it me, Earl of Malador—you shouted it loudly enough when you first saw the hall in its true shape.”

“Was not *that*, then, sorcery,” he said ungraciously. “The labyrinth, the demons—even the valley? Was not the golem made by sorcery? Is not this whole cursed castle of a sorcerous nature?”

She shrugged. “Call it so if you’d rather not have the truth. Sorcery, in your mind at least, is a crude thing which only hints at the true powers existing in the multiverse.”

He did not reply, being somewhat impatient of such statements. He had learned, by observing the philosophers of Klant, that mysterious words often disguised commonplace things and ideas. Instead, he looked at her sulkily and over-frankly.

She was fair, with green-blue eyes and a light complexion. Her long robe was of a similar colour to her eyes. She was, in a secret sort of way, very beautiful and, like all the denizens of Kaneloon he’d encountered, a trifle familiar.

“You recognize Kaneloon?” she asked.

He dismissed her question. “Enough of this—take me to the masters of this place!”

“There is none but me, Myshella the Dark Lady—and I am the mistress.”

He was disappointed. “Was it just to meet you that I came through such perils?”

“It was—and greater perils even than you think, Earl Aubec. Those were but the monsters of your own imagination!”

“Taunt me not, lady.”

She laughed. “I speak in good faith. The castle creates its defenses out of your own mind. It is a rare man who can face and defeat his own imagination. Such a one has not found me here for two hundred years. All since have perished by fear—until now.”

She smiled at him. It was a warm smile.

“And what is the prize for so great a feat?” he said gruffly.

She laughed again and gestured towards the window which looked out upon the edge of the world and Chaos beyond. “Out there nothing exists as yet. If you venture into it, you will be confronted again by creatures of your hidden fancy, for there is nothing else to behold.”

She gazed at him admiringly and he coughed in his embarrassment. “Once in a while,” she said, “there comes a man to Kaneloon who can withstand such an ordeal. Then may the frontiers of the world be extended, for when a man stands against Chaos it must recede and new lands spring into being!”

“So that is the fate you have in mind for me, sorceress!”

She glanced at him almost demurely. Her beauty seemed to increase as he looked at her. He clutched at the hilt of his sword, gripping it tight as she moved gracefully towards him and touched him, as if by accident. “There is a reward for your courage.” She looked into his eyes and said no more of the reward,



for it was clear what she offered. “And after—do my bidding and go against Chaos.”

“Lady, know you not that ritual demands of Klant’s Champion that he be the queen’s faithful consort? I would not betray my word and trust!” He gave a hollow laugh. “I came here to remove a menace to my queen’s kingdom—not to be your lover and lackey!”

“There is no menace here.”

“That seems true...”

She stepped back as if appraising him anew. For her this was unprecedented—never before had her offer been refused. She rather liked this solid man who also combined courage and imagination in his character. It was incredible, she thought, how in a few centuries such traditions could grow up—traditions which could bind a man to a woman he probably did not even love. She looked at him as he stood there, his body rigid, his manner nervous.

“Forget Klant,” she said, “think of the power you might have—the power of true creation!”

“Lady, I claim this castle for Klant. That is what I came to do and that is what I do now. If I leave here alive, I shall be judged the conqueror and you must comply.”

She hardly heard him. She was thinking of various plans to convince him that her cause was superior to his. Perhaps she could still seduce him? Or use some drug to bewitch him? No, he was too strong for either; she must think of some other stratagem.

She felt her breasts heaving involuntarily as she looked at him. She would have preferred to have seduced him. It had always been as much her reward as that of the heroes who had earlier won over the dangers of Kaneloon. And then, she thought, she knew what to say.

“Think, Earl Aubec,” she whispered. “Think—new lands for your queen’s empire!”

He frowned.

“Why not extend the empire’s boundaries further?” she continued. “Why not *make* new territories?”

She watched him anxiously as he took off his helm and scratched his heavy, bald head. “You have made a point at last,” he said dubiously.

“Think of the honours you would receive in Klant if you succeeded in winning not merely Kaneloon—but that which lies *beyond*!”

Now he rubbed his chin. “Aye,” he said, “Aye...” His great brows frowned deeply.

“New plains, new mountains, new seas—new populations, even—whole cities full of people fresh-sprung and yet with the memory of generations of ancestors behind them! All this can be done by *you*, Earl of Malador—for Queen Eloarde and Klant!”

He smiled faintly, his imagination fired at last. “Aye! If I can defeat such dangers here—then I can do the same out there! It will be the greatest adventure in history! My name will become a legend—Malador, Master of Chaos!”

She gave him a tender look, though she had half-cheated him.

He swung his sword up onto his shoulder. "I'll try this, lady."

She and he stood together at the window, watching the Chaos-stuff whispering and rolling for eternity before them. To her it had never been wholly familiar, for it changed all the time. Now its tossing colours were predominantly red and black. Tendrils of mauve and orange spiraled out of this and writhed away.

Weird shapes flitted about in it, their outlines never clear, never quite recognizable.

He said to her: "The Lords of Chaos rule this territory. What will they have to say?"

"They can say nothing, do little. Even they have to obey the Law of the Cosmic Balance which ordains that if man can stand against Chaos, then it shall be his to order and make Lawful. Thus the Earth grows, slowly."

"How do I enter it?"

She took the opportunity to grasp his heavily muscled arm and point through the window. "See—there—a causeway leads down from this tower to the cliff." She glanced at him sharply. "Do you see it?"

"Ah—yes—I had not, but now I do. Yes, a causeway."

Standing behind him, she smiled a little to herself. "I will remove the barrier," she said.

He straightened his helm on his head. "For Klant and Eloarde and only those do I embark upon this adventure."

She moved towards the wall and raised the window. He did not look at her as he strode down the causeway into the multicoloured mist.

As she watched him disappear she smiled to herself. How easy it was to beguile the strongest man by pretending to go his way! He might add lands to his empire, but he might find their populations unwilling to accept Eloarde as their empress. In fact, if Aubec did his work well, then he would be creating more of a threat to Klant than ever Kaneloon had been.

Yet she admired him, she was attracted to him, perhaps, because he was not so accessible, a little more than she had been to that earlier hero who had claimed Aubec's own land from Chaos barely two hundred years before. Oh, he had been a man! But he, like most before him, had needed no other persuasion than the promise of her body.

Earl Aubec's weakness had lain in his strength, she thought. By now he had vanished into the heaving mists.

She felt a trifle sad that this time the execution of the task given her by the Lords of Law had not brought her the usual pleasure.

Yet perhaps, she thought, she felt a more subtle pleasure in his steadfastness and the means she had used to convince him.

For centuries had the Lords of Law entrusted her with Kaneloon and its secrets. But the progress was slow, for there were few heroes who could survive Kaneloon's dangers—few who could defeat self-created perils.

Yet, she decided with a slight smile on her lips, the task had its various rewards. She moved into another chamber to prepare for the transition of the castle to the new edge of the world.

Thus were the seeds sown of the Age of the Young Kingdoms, the Age of Men, which was to produce the downfall of Melniboné.

## **PHASE 1**

(written 1965)

### **CHAPTER ONE**

#### **IT WAS RAINING.**

The house was in south-east London, in Blackheath. It stood back from the main road, looming out of its overgrown garden. The gravel drive was weedy, and the house needed painting. It had originally been painted a light mauve. Through the grimy ground-floor windows Jerry Cornelius could glimpse five people seated in the big front room. It was full of dark furniture and poorly lit, the fire giving more light than the standard lamp in one corner. The faces were all shadowed. On the mantelpiece stood a baroque figurine of Diana holding two candlesticks; there were two candles in each stick.

The garage door slammed, and Jerry made no effort to become any less visible, but the bulky, tweed-coated man didn't notice him as he patted water from his heavy black beard, took off his hat, and opened the door. He wiped his feet and went inside. Jerry had recognized him as Mr. Smiles. Mr. Smiles owned the house.

After a moment Jerry went up to the door and took out his key ring. He found the right key and opened the door. He saw Mr. Smiles enter the front room.

The hallway smelled a little damp, in spite of the radiator burning close to the hat rack; and the walls, each painted a different colour (tangerine, red, black, and blue), were all cold as Jerry leaned on first one and then another.

Jerry was dressed in his usual black car coat, dark trousers, and high heels. His hair was wet and did not fall as softly as normal.

He folded his arms and settled down to wait.

"What's the time? My watch has stopped." Mr. Smiles entered the room, shaking rain off his Robin Hood hat and still patting at his beard. He walked to the fire and stood there, turning the hat round and round to dry it.

The five others said nothing. All seemed introspective, hardly aware of his arrival. Then one of them got up and approached Mr. Smiles. His name was Mr. Lucas. He had the decadent good looks of a Roman patrician. He was forty-five and a successful casino owner. Except for Mr. Smiles (who was forty-nine), he was the oldest.

“Twelve-forty, Mr. Smiles. He’s late.”

Mr. Smiles concentrated on drying his hat. “I’ve never known him not to do something he said he’d do, if that’s any comfort,” he said.

“Oh, it is,” said Miss Brunner.

Miss Brunner was sitting nearest to the fire. She was a sharp-faced, attractive young woman with the look of a predator. She sprawled back in her chair with her legs crossed. One foot tapped at the air.

Mr. Smiles turned towards her.

“He’ll come, Miss Brunner.” He gave her a glare. “He’ll come.” His tone was self-assuring.

Mr. Lucas glanced at his watch again.

Miss Brunner’s foot tapped more quickly. “Why are you so certain, Mr. Smiles?”

“I know him—at least, as well as anyone could. He’s reliable, Miss Brunner.”

Miss Brunner was a computer programmer of some experience and power. Seated closest to her was Dimitri, her slave, lover, and sometime unwilling pimp. She wore a straight fawn Courrèges suit and matching buttoned boots. He also wore a Courrèges suit of dark blue and brown tweed. Her hair was red and long, curving outward at the ends. It was nice red hair, but not on her. He was the son of Dimitri Oil, rich, with the fresh, ingenuous appearance of a boy. His disguise was complete.

Behind Miss Brunner and Dimitri, in shadow, sat Mr. Crookshank, the entertainers’ agent. Mr. Crookshank was very fat and tall. He had a heavy gold signet ring on the third finger of his right hand. It gave him the common touch. He wore a silk Ivy League suit.

In the corner, opposite Mr. Crookshank, nearer the fire, sat dark Mr. Powys, hunched in his perpetual neurotic stoop. Mr. Powys, who lived comfortably off the inheritance left him by his mine-owning great-uncle, sipped a glass of Bell’s cream whisky, staring at it as he sipped.

The fire did not heat the room sufficiently. Even Mr. Smiles, who was usually unaffected by cold, rubbed his hands together after he had taken off his coat. Mr. Smiles was a banker, main owner of the Smiles Bank, which had catered to the linen trade since 1832. The bank was not doing well, though Mr. Smiles couldn’t complain personally. Mr. Smiles poured himself a large glass of Teacher’s whisky and moved back to the fire.

None of them was well acquainted, except with Miss Brunner, who had introduced them all. They all knew Miss Brunner.

She uncrossed her legs and smoothed her skirt, smiling up unpleasantly at the bearded man. “It’s unusual to find such confidence these days.” She paused and looked round at the others. “I think...” She opened her handbag and began picking at its contents.

“What do you think?” Mr. Smiles spoke sharply. “When I first put this deal to you, Miss Brunner, you were uncertain about it. Now you’re impatient to get started. What do you think, then, Miss Brunner?”

“I think we shouldn’t include him in our plans. Let’s get going now, while he’s not expecting anything. He could be planning some kind of double-cross. We stand to lose too much by hanging about waiting for Cornelius. I don’t trust him, Mr. Smiles.”

“You don’t trust him because you haven’t met him and given him the Brunner Test, is that it?” Mr. Lucas kicked at a log sticking from the fire. “We couldn’t get into that house without Cornelius’s knowledge of those booby traps of his father’s. If Cornelius doesn’t come, then we’ll have to give up the whole idea.”

Miss Brunner’s sharp teeth showed as she smiled again. “You’re getting old and cautious, Mr. Lucas. And Mr. Smiles, by the sound of it, is getting soft as well. As far as I’m concerned, the risk is part of it.”

“You silly cow!” Dimitri was often rude to Miss Brunner in public, much as he loved to fear her. Public insults; private punishments. “We’re not all in it for the risks; we’re in it for what old Cornelius hid in his house. Without Jerry Cornelius, we’ll never get it. We need him. That’s the truth.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.” Jerry’s voice was sardonic as he entered the room rather theatrically and closed the door behind him.

Miss Brunner looked him over. He was very tall, and that pale face, framed by the hair, resembled the young Swinburne’s. His black eyes did not seem at all kindly. He seemed about twenty-seven and had been, so they said, a Jesuit. He had something of a Church intellectual’s decadent, ascetic appearance. He had possibilities, she thought.

Jerry dropped his head a trifle as he turned and gave Miss Brunner a slightly amused stare, half-chiding. She crossed her legs and began tapping. He walked gracefully towards Mr. Smiles and shook hands with a certain degree of pleasure.

Mr. Smiles sighed. “I’m glad you could make it, Mr. Cornelius. How soon can we start?”

Jerry shrugged. “As soon as you like. I need a day or so to do a few things.”

“Tomorrow?” Miss Brunner’s voice was pitched somewhat higher than usual.

“In three days.” Cornelius pursed his lips. “Sunday.”

Mr. Powys spoke from behind his glass. “Three days is too long, man. The longer we wait, the more chance there is of someone getting to know what we’re planning. Don’t forget that Simons and Harvey both backed out, and Harvey in particular isn’t well known for his tact and diplomacy.”

“Don’t worry about them,” Cornelius said with finality.

“What have you done?” Miss Brunner’s voice was still sharp.

“Nothing much. They’re taking a cruise on a tramp bound for New York. It’ll be a long trip, and they won’t mix with the crew.”

“How did you get them to go?” Mr. Lucas dropped his eyes as Cornelius turned.

“Well,” said Jerry, “there were one or two things they wanted. On condition that they took the trip, I fixed them up.”

“What things?” asked Mr. Crookshank with interest. Jerry ignored him.

“What have you to do that’s so important?” Miss Brunner enquired.

“I want to visit the house before our trip.”

“Why?”

“For my own reasons, Miss Brunner.”

Mr. Powys’s brooding Welsh face didn’t look up. “I’d like to know just why you’re helping us, mind you, Mr. Cornelius.”

“Would you understand if I told you that it was for revenge?”

“Revenge.” Mr. Powys shook his head rapidly. “Oh, yes. We all have these grudges from time to time, don’t we?”

“Then it’s revenge,” Jerry said lightly. “Now, Mr. Smiles has told you my conditions, I think. You must burn the house to the ground when you’ve got what you wanted, and you must leave my brother Francis and my sister Catherine unharmed. There is also an old servant, John. He must not be hurt in any way.”

“The rest of the staff?” Dimitri waved a questioning hand. It was an impolite gesture.

“Do whatever you like. You’ll be taking on some help, I understand?”

“About twenty men. Mr. Smiles has arranged them. He says they’ll be sufficient.” Mr. Lucas glanced at Mr. Smiles, who nodded.

“They should be,” Jerry said thoughtfully. “The house is well guarded, but naturally they won’t call the police. With our special equipment you ought to be all right. Don’t forget to burn the house.”

“Mr. Smiles has already reminded us of that, Mr. Cornelius,” said Dimitri. “As have you. We will do exactly as you say.”

Jerry turned up the wide collar of his coat. “Right. I’ll be off.”

“Take care, Mr. Cornelius,” said Miss Brunner smoothly as he went out.

“Oh, I will, I think,” he said.

The six people didn’t talk much after Cornelius had left. Only Miss Brunner moved to another chair. She seemed out of sorts.

## CHAPTERTWO

Beat music filled the old Duesenberg as Jerry Cornelius drove towards the Kent coast—Zoot Money,

The Who, the Moody Blues, The Beatles, Manfred Mann, and The Animals. Jerry played only the best on his built-in tape machine.

The volume was turned up to full blast. There were three speakers in various parts of the car, and it was impossible for Jerry to hear even the sound of the engine. In the spring clip near the steering wheel the contents of a glass danced to the thud of the bass. From time to time Cornelius would reach for the glass, take a sip, and fix it back in the clip. Once he put his hand inside the glove compartment and brought it out full of pills. He had not slept for the best part of a week, and the pills no longer stopped him from feeling edgy; but he crammed his mouth with them, just the same, washing them down. A little later he took out a half-bottle of Bell's and refilled the glass.

The road ahead was wet, and rain still beat at the windscreen. The two pairs of wipers swished away in time with the music. Though the heater was on, he felt cold.

Just outside Dover he stopped at a filling station while he rolled himself a thin cigarette out of licorice paper and Old Holborn. He paid the man, lit his cigarette, and rode on in the general direction of the coast, turning off onto a side-road and eventually driving down the main street of the harbour village of Southquay, strains of guitars, organs, and high voices drifting in the car's wake. The sea was black under the overcast sky. He drove slowly along the quayside, the car's wheels bumping on cobbles. He switched off the tape machine.

There was a small hotel set back from the road. It was called The Yachtsman. Its sign showed a smiling man in yachting gear. Behind him was a view of the harbour as seen from the hotel. The sign moved a little in the wind. Jerry backed the Duesenberg into the hotel's courtyard, left the keys in the ignition, and got out. He put his hands in the high pockets of his coat and stood stretching his legs by the car for a moment, looking over the black water at the moored boats. One of them was his launch, which he'd had converted from a modern lifeboat.



He glanced back at the hotel, noting that no lights had gone on and that no-one seemed to be stirring. He crossed to the waterside. A metal ladder led down into the sea. He climbed down a few rungs and then jumped from the ladder to the deck of his launch. Pausing for a moment to get his sea legs, he made straight for the well-kept bridge. He didn't switch on the lights but, by finding the instruments by touch, got the motor warming up.

He went out on deck again and cast off.

Soon he was steering his way out of the harbour towards the open sea.

Only the man in the harbourmaster's office saw him leave. Happily for Jerry, the man was quite as corrupt as the six people who had been at the house in Blackheath. He had, as they used to say, his price.

Steering a familiar course, Jerry headed the boat towards the coasts of Normandy, where his late father had built his fake Le Corbusier château. It was an ancient building, built well before the Second World War.

Once outside the three-mile limit, Jerry switched on the radio and got the latest station, Radio K-Nine ("the Station With Bite"). There was some funny stuff on; it sounded like a mixture of Greek and Persian music very badly played. It was probably by one of the new groups the publicity people were still trying in vain to push. They were completely non-musical themselves, so still found it a mystery that one group should be popular and another unpopular, were convinced that a new sound would start things moving for them again. All that was over—for the time being at least, thought Jerry. He changed stations until he got a reasonable one.

The music echoed over the water. Although he was careful not to show any lights, Jerry could be heard half a mile away; but when he saw the faint outline of the coast ahead, he switched off the radio.

After a while his father's fake Le Corbusier château came in sight, a large six-storey building with that quaint, dated appearance that all the "futuristic" buildings of the twenties and thirties had. This château had a dash of German expressionism in its architecture to boot.

To Jerry the house symbolized the very spirit of transience, and he enjoyed the feeling he got from looking at its silhouette, much as he sometimes enjoyed listening to last year's hits. The house stood, in its corny old way, on the very edge of a cliff that curved steeply above the nearest village, some four miles distant. A searchlight was trained on the house, making it look rather like some grotesque war memorial. Jerry knew the house was staffed by a small private army of German mercenaries, men who were as much part of the past as the house and yet intratemporally reflected something of the spirit of the 1970s.

It was November 196—, however, as Jerry cut the engine and drifted on the current he knew would carry him towards the cliff beneath the house.

The cliff was worse than sheer. It sloped outward about a hundred feet up and was loaded with alarm devices. Not even Wolfe could have taken it. The nature of the cliff was to Jerry Cornelius an advantage, for it hid his boat from the TV scanners in the house. The radar did not sweep low enough to find his launch, but the TV cameras were trained on any likely place where someone might attempt a landing. But Jerry's brother Frank didn't know of the secret entrance.

He moored the boat to the cliff by means of the powerful suction cups he'd brought for the purpose. The cups had metal rings in them, and Jerry tied his mooring lines to the rings. He would be away again before the tide went out.

Part of the cliff was made of plastic. Cornelius tapped lightly on it, waiting a couple of moments as it inched inward and a gaunt, anxious face peered out at him. It was the face of a lugubrious Scot, Jerry's old servant and mentor, John Gnatbeelson.

"Ah, sir!"

The face retreated, leaving the entrance clear.



“Is she all right, John?” Jerry asked as he eased himself into the metal-walled cubicle behind the plastic door. John Gnatbeelson stepped backward and then forward to close the door. He was about six feet four, a gangling man with almost non-existent cheekbones and a wisp of chin whiskers. He wore an old Norfolk jacket and corduroy trousers. His bones seemed barely joined together, and he moved loosely like a badly controlled puppet.

“She’s not dead, sir, I think,” Gnatbeelson assured Jerry. “It’s fine to see you, sir. I hope you’ve returned for good this time, sir, to kick that brother of yours out of our house.” He glared into the middle distance. “He has...had...” The old man’s eyes filled with tears.

“Cheer up, John. What’s he been doing now?”

“That’s what I don’t know, sir. I just haven’t been allowed to see Miss Catherine for the past week. *He* says she’s sleeping. Sleeping. What kind of sleep lasts for a week, sir?”

“Could be a number of kinds.” Jerry spoke calmly enough. “Drugs, I expect.”

“God knows he uses enough of them himself, sir. He lives on them. All he ever eats is bars of chocolate.”

“Catherine wouldn’t use sleepers voluntarily, I shouldn’t think.”

“She never would, sir.”

“Is she still in her old rooms?”

“Yes, sir. But there’s a guard on the door.”

“Have you prepared for that?”

“I have, but I am worried.”

“Of course you are. And you’ve switched off the master control for this entrance?”

“It seemed unnecessary, sir, but I have done it.”

“Better safe than sorry, John.”

“I suppose so, aye. But there again, it would only be a matter of time before...”

“It’s all a matter of time, John. Let’s get going. If the control’s dead, we won’t be able to use the lift.”

“No, sir. We must climb.”

“Off we go, then.”

They left the metal chamber and entered a similar, slightly larger one. John lit the way with his torch. A lift cage became visible, the shaft rising above it. Paralleling the cables and running up one side into the darkness was a metal ladder. John tucked the torch into the waistband of his trousers and stepped back. Jerry reached the ladder and began to climb.

They went up in silence for more than fifty feet until they stood at the top of the shaft. Ahead of them were five entrances to corridors. They took the central entrance. The corridor twisted and turned for a long time. It formed part of a complicated maze and, even though the two men were familiar with it, they sometimes hesitated at various turnings and forks.

Eventually, and with some relief, they entered a white, neon-lighted room, which housed a small control console. The Scotsman went to the panel and clicked a switch. A red light above the panel went off and a green one went on. Dials quivered, and several monitor screens focused on various parts of the route they had just taken. Views of the room at the bottom of the shaft, the shaft itself, the corridors in the maze—now brilliantly lit—came and went on the screens. The equipment operated in silence.

On the door leading out of the room was a fairly large ovoid of a milky greenish colour. John pressed his palm against it. Responding to the palm print, which it recognized, the door slid open. They entered a short tunnel, which led them to an identical door. This John opened in the same way.

Now they stood in a dark library. Through a transparent wall to their right they could see the sea, like black marble streaked with veins of grey and white.

Most of the other three walls were covered with shelves of pink fibreglass. They were filled mainly with paperbacks. The half-dozen or so books bound in leather and titled in gold stood out incongruously. John shone his light on them and smiled at Jerry, who was embarrassed.

“They’re still there, sir. He doesn’t often come here; otherwise he might have got rid of them. Not that it would matter that much, for I have another set.”

Jerry winced and looked at the books. One of the titles was *Time-Search Through the Declining West* by Jeremiah Cornelius, MAHS; another was called *Toward the Ultimate Paradox*, and beside it was *The Ethical Simulation*. Jerry felt he was right to be embarrassed.

Part of the library wall, naturally enough, was false. It swung back to show a white metal door and a button. Jerry pressed the button and the door opened.

Another lift cage.

John stooped and picked up a small case before they got in and went up. It was one of the few lifts in the house that, as far as they knew, did not register on one of the many control panels located in the château.

On the sixth floor the lift stopped, and John opened the door and looked cautiously out. The landing was empty. They both left the lift, and the door (a wall-length painting reminiscent of Picasso at his latest and tritest) slid back into place.

The room they wanted was in a passage off the main landing. They walked silently to the corner, glanced round, and ducked back again.

They had seen the guard. He had an automatic rifle crooked in his arm. He was a big, fat German with the appearance of a eunuch. He had looked very wakeful—hoping, perhaps, for an opportunity to use his Belgian gun.

Now John opened the case he’d been carrying. He took out a small steel crossbow, very modern and beautifully made, and handed it to Jerry Cornelius. Jerry held it in one hand, waiting for the moment when

the guard would look completely away from him. Shortly, the man's attention shifted towards the window at the end of the passage.

Jerry stepped out, aimed the crossbow, and pulled the trigger. But the guard had heard him and jumped. The bolt grazed his neck. There was only one bolt.

As the guard began to bring up his gun, Jerry ran towards him and grabbed the fingers of his right hand, hauling them off the gun. One finger snapped. The guard gurgled and his mouth gaped, showing that he was tongueless. He kicked at Jerry as John came in with a knife, missed his neck, and stabbed him through the left eye. The blade went in for almost its entire six inches, driving downward and coming out just below the left ear. As the German's CNS packed it in, his body was momentarily paralyzed.

It softened as Jerry lowered it to the floor; he reached down and slid the knife out of the German's face, handing it to John, who was as limp as the corpse.

"Get away from here, John," Jerry muttered. "If I make it, I'll see you in the cliff room."

As John Gnatbeelson rolled off, Jerry turned the handle of the door. It was of the conventional kind, and the key was in the lock. He turned the key when the door resisted. The door opened. Jerry took the key out of the lock. Inside the room he closed the door quietly and locked it again.

He stood in a woman's bedroom.

The heavy curtains were drawn across the big windows. The place smelled of stale air and misery. He crossed the familiar room and found the bedside lamp, switching it on.

Red light filled the place. A beautiful girl lay in a pale dress on the bed. Her features were delicate and resembled his own. Her black hair was tangled. Her small breasts rose and fell jerkily, and her breathing was shallow. She was not sleeping at all naturally. Jerry looked for hypodermic marks and found them in her upper right arm. Plainly she hadn't used a needle on herself. Frank had done that.

Jerry stroked her bared shoulder. "Catherine." He bent down and kissed her cold, soft lips, caressing her. Anger, self-pity, despair, passion were all there then, flooding up to the surface, and for once he didn't stop them. "Catherine."

She didn't move. Jerry was crying now. His body trembled. He tried to control the trembling and failed. He gripped her hand, and it was like holding hands with a corpse. He tightened his grip, as if hoping pain would wake her. Then he dropped it and stood up.

"The shit!"

He pulled the curtains back from the windows and opened them. The night air blew away the odour in the room.

On her dressing-table there were no cosmetics, only bottles of drugs and several hypodermics.

The labels on the bottles were in Frank's tiny printing. Frank had been experimenting.

Outside, someone shouted and began to bang on the metal door. He stared at it uncomprehendingly for a moment, then crossed to it and shot bolts at top and bottom.

A sharper, colder voice interrupted the yelling.

“What’s the trouble? Has someone been boorish enough to enter Miss Catherine’s room without her permission?”

It was Frank’s voice, and Frank doubtless guessed that his brother Jerry was in the room.

There were confused shouts from the guards, and Frank had to raise his voice. “Whoever you are, you’ll suffer for invading my sister’s privacy. You can’t get out. If she’s harmed or disturbed in any way, you won’t die for a long time, I promise. But you’ll wish you could.”

“As corny as ever, Frank!” Jerry shouted back. “I know you know it’s me—and I know you’re shit-scared. I’ve more right here than you. I own this house!”

“Then you should have stayed and not turned it over to me and Catherine. I meant what I said, Jerry!”

“Send your Krauts off and come in and talk it over. All I want is Catherine.”

“I’m not that naïve. You’ll never know what I fed her, Jerry. Only I can wake her up. It’s like magic, isn’t it? She’s well turned on. If I turned her off now, you wouldn’t be so keen on hopping into bed with her after ten minutes.” Frank laughed. “You’d need a dose of what I’ve got out here before you’d feel up to it—and then you wouldn’t want it any more. You can’t have your fix and make it, Jerry!”

Frank was in high spirits. Jerry wondered what he’d found to pep him up. Frank was always after a new synthesis and, as a good chemist, usually came up with a nice new habit every so often. Was it the same stuff as Catherine had in her veins right now? Probably not.

“Throw in your needle and come in with your veins clear, Frank,” Jerry shouted back, joining in the spirit of the thing. He took something out of his pocket and waited, but Frank didn’t seem willing to rise to this. Bullets began to rattle on the door. They’d soon stop as the ricochets got too much for Frank. They stopped.

Jerry went to the bed and heaved his sister off it. Then he put her down again. It was no good. He wouldn’t have a chance of getting out with her. He’d have to leave her and hope that Frank’s mind didn’t turn to thoughts of murder. It was unlikely. Slow death was the only good kind in Frank’s book.

From the inside pocket of his coat Jerry brought out a flat box like a snuff box. He opened it. There were two small filters there. He packed one into each nostril and clamped his mouth shut, sealing it with some surgical tape from another pocket.

Then he unbolted the door and slowly turned the key. He opened the door slightly. Frank stood some distance away, talking to four of his stormtroopers. Frank’s skin was grey, drawn over his near-fleshless skeleton like a lifeless film of plastic. They hadn’t yet noticed that the door was open.

Jerry tossed the neurade into the passage. They saw it fall. Only Frank recognized the nerve grenade for what it was, and he dashed off down the passage without stopping to give the guards the benefit of his knowledge.

Jerry stepped swiftly out of the room and closed the door tight behind him. The guards tried to aim at him, but the gas was already working. As they jerked like epileptics and fell down to bounce about spasmodically on the floor, Jerry gave them an amused, appreciative glance.

Jerry Cornelius went after Frank Cornelius and saw Frank pushing the button of the lift that went down to the library. When Frank saw Jerry, he swore and ran towards the end of the passage and the stairs. Jerry decided that he didn't want Frank alive any more, and he drew out his needle pistol. The air pistol could hold a magazine of a hundred sliver bullets and was just as effective at short range as any small-calibre pistol—and far more accurate. Neither was it messy. Its only drawback was that it had to be repressured after every volley.

Jerry ran after his brother. Frank was evidently unarmed. He was scuttling down the spiral stairs now. Leaning on the banister, Jerry took aim at Frank's head.

But when he put his arm down, he realized that he'd caught a sniff of the nerve gas himself, for the arm jumped twice and he involuntarily pulled the trigger. The needles went wide, and Frank had left the stairs on the third floor. He was now out of sight.

Jerry heard voices and noisy feet and knew that Frank had called in another section of the militia. He had no more nerve bombs with him. It was time, perhaps, to be leaving.

He ran back down the landing. The lift was waiting for him. Frank might assume that it wasn't working, since he'd had no luck himself. He got into the lift and went down to the library. It was empty. In the library he paused and hauled his books off the shelf. He opened the door in the window and stepped out onto the balcony. Then he flung the books into the sea, re-entered the library, closed the door carefully, and knocked on the other entrance. It slid back. John was there. He still looked pale.

“What happened, sir?”

“Maybe he'll never guess completely, John, so you might get away with it. He's fazed, I think. Now it's up to you. On Sunday you must somehow get Catherine away from the house and into the lodge on the village side of the grounds. There'll probably be enough confusion and you'll be able to do it easily. Don't make a mistake. I want you both at that lodge. And Sunday starts at about 10 p.m., I'd guess.”

“Yes, sir—but...”

“No time for details, John. Do it. Don't bother to see me out.”

Jerry Cornelius went through the control room, and John shut off the equipment again.

Then Jerry was on his way, torch in hand, back to his boat.

Within twenty minutes he was looking up at the house as his launch throbbed towards the English coast. The house was full of light now. It looked as if the residents were having a party.

It was still an hour until dawn. He had a chance of making it back to Southquay before the new man came on watch at the harbourmaster's office.

### CHAPTER THREE

On Sunday morning Miss Brunner and Dimitri left for Blackheath. She locked the door of her Holland Park house and tucked the note for the milkman into an empty bottle on the step. Dimitri had the Lotus

15 ready and running by the time she had put on her gloves and walked daintily down the path.

Later, as they waited for the Knightsbridge traffic to move, Miss Brunner decided that she would drive, and she and Dimitri changed places. They were used to changing places; it held them together in those uncertain times.

“Mr. Cornelius had better be there,” Miss Brunner said obsessively as she drove down Sloane Street, which was less crowded than it would have been on a weekday.

Dimitri sat back and smoked. He’d had a tiring night, and he hadn’t enjoyed himself as much as usual, particularly since Miss Brunner had insisted on calling him Cornelius the whole time.

Let her work it out, he thought. He was rather jealous of Cornelius, all the same; it had taken him two cups of strong coffee when he’d got up to convince himself that he was not in any way Jerry Cornelius. Miss Brunner, on the other hand, had evidently not been so easily convinced, and she was as bad today as she’d been since Thursday.

Well, with luck it would all be over by Monday, and they could begin the next phase of their plan—a much more sophisticated phase that involved thought and little energetic action.

It was a pity that attacking the house was the only way. He hadn’t liked the idea at all when it was first proposed, but since he’d had time to think about it, he was half looking forward to it. The fact disturbed him.

Miss Brunner drove the throbbing Lotus 15 over Westminster Bridge with gusto and entered the maze of streets beyond, then went down the Old Kent Road.

She had decided that she must have Jerry Cornelius, but she knew that this was one situation in which she must act for herself and not rely on Dimitri. A savoury chick, she thought, a nice spicy chick. She began to feel better.

Mr. Crookshank, the entertainers’ agent, kissed Little Miss Dazzle goodbye. Little Miss Dazzle was quite naked and did not appear on stage like that, if for no other reason than that the public would see that she was in fact equipped with the daintiest masculine genitals you ever saw.

It was not yet time, Mr. Crookshank had decided, to reveal that particular secret; not while Miss Dazzle was still smoothing up to the number one spot in the Top Ten Girl Chart within three days to a week with every disc she cut. When number five came to be her ceiling, then a few rumours might start. Then perhaps a marriage, he thought, though he’d hate to lose Miss Dazzle.

Mr. Crookshank’s Rolls, complete with chauffeur, waited downstairs outside the entrance hall to Miss Dazzle’s Bloomsbury flat.

The chauffeur knew the way.

Mr. Crookshank lit a panatella as the car cruised off in the general direction of Blackfriars Bridge. He switched on the radio and, as luck would have it, Little Miss Dazzle’s latest hit on Big Beat Call, the nonstop pop programme, was playing. It was a moving song, and Mr. Crookshank was duly moved. The words seemed to be for him.

I am a part of you, the heart of you,

I want to start with you,

And know...

The beat changed from 4/4 to 3/4, and the guitars tumbled into the minor fifth when she sang:

Just what it is,

Just what it is,

Just what it is,

I want to know.

He looked out of the window as the car went down Farringdon Street towards the bridge. The Sunday workers all seemed to be moving in the same direction, as if the voice of the lemming had been heard in the land. In a philosophical mood, Mr. Crookshank decided that it had been heard indeed, through the whole of Europe.

Mr. Powys was running late, for Sunday was normally his day of rest, and he had got up early only after he had realized that he was due in Blackheath that morning. He left his Hyde Park Gate maisonette with a shaving cut on his face and yesterday's shirt on his back. He got his blue Aston Martin from the garage round the corner and put the top down so that the wet breeze would wake him up as he drove.

He switched on the radio for the same purpose, though he was too late to hear Little Miss Dazzle's "Just What It Is." Instead he came in on the middle of Tall Tom's Tailmen singing "Suckers Deserve It." If Mr. Powys had a destiny, then Tall Tom's Tailmen were singing its tune—not that it occurred to Mr. Powys, but then he was like that. The only thing the song did for him at that moment was to make him feel hungry, though he didn't know why. His thoughts turned to Miss Brunner and Dimitri, both of whom he knew intimately. In fact, it was extremely unlikely that he would have agreed to this venture if he hadn't known them so well.

Miss Brunner and Dimitri had a persuasive manner. Except in moments of extreme sobriety, they were usually mingled together in his mind, Miss Brunner and Dimitri.

Mr. Powys was a baffled, unhappy man.

He drove through the park under the impression that the air was clearer there, turned left, and entered Knightsbridge, London's fabulous thieves' quarter, where every shop doorway (or, to be more accurate, every shop) held a thief of some description. Sloane Street was also his choice, but he went over Battersea Bridge and realized only after he'd reached Clapham Common that he'd made a mistake and was going to be later than ever.

By the time all the cars had crossed the river, Mr. Smiles was having breakfast in his Blackheath house and wondering how he'd got into this in the first place. His knowledge of the information (probably on microfilm) to be found in old Cornelius's house had come from a friend of Frank Cornelius, a successful drug importer who supplied Frank with the rarer chemicals for his experiments. In a high moment Frank had let something slip, and Mr. Harvey, the importer, had later let the same thing slip to Mr. Smiles, also in a high moment.

Only Mr. Smiles had fully realized the significance of the information, if it was correct, for he knew the City better than it knew him. He had told Miss Brunner, and Miss Brunner had organized it from there.

Mr. Smiles had then got in touch with Jerry Cornelius, whom he hadn't seen for some time—not, in fact, since the day he and Jerry had robbed the City United Bank of some two million pounds and, with a million each, split up. The investigation by the police had been very half-hearted, as if they were concentrating on the important crimes of the day, realizing that the inflating pound was no longer worth attempting to protect.

Mr. Smiles could read the signs, for he was something of a visionary. He could see that the entire Western European economy, including Sweden and Switzerland, was soon to collapse. The information Mr. Harvey had kindly passed on to him would probably hasten the collapse, but it would, if used properly, put Mr. Smiles and his colleagues on top. They would hold pretty well nearly all the power there was to hold when anarchy at last set in.

Mr. Smiles toyed with a fried egg, wondering why the yolks always broke these days.

In his permanently booked room in The Yachtsman, Jerry Cornelius had woken up at seven o'clock that morning and dressed himself in a lemon shirt with small ebony cuff-links, a wide black cravat, dark green waistcoat and matching hipster pants, black socks and black handmade boots. He had washed his fine hair, and now he brushed it carefully until it shone.

Then he brushed one of his double-breasted black car coats and put it on.

He pulled on black calf gloves and was ready to face the world as soon as he slipped on his dark glasses.

From the bed, he picked up what appeared to be a dark leather toilet case. He snapped it open to check that his needle gun was pressured. He put the gun back and closed the case.

Holding the case in his left hand, he went downstairs; nodded to the proprietor, who nodded back; and got into the newly polished Duesenberg.

He sat in the car for a moment, looking out over the grey sea. There was still a quarter of a glass of Bell's in the clip on the dashboard. He took it out, wound down the window, and threw the glass to the ground. He reached into the glove compartment and found a wrapped, fresh glass, fixed it in the clip, and filled it half full from his bottle. Then he started the engine, turned the car around, and drove off, switching on the tape machine as soon as he was on Southquay's main street.



John, George, Paul, and Ringo serenaded him with the old standard “Baby’s in Black” from all three speakers.

*“ Oh dear what can I do, baby’s in black and I’m feeling blue...”*

They were still his favourite group.

*“ She thinks of him and so she dresses in black, and though he’ll never come back, she’s dressed in black.”*

Halfway to Blackheath he stopped off at a newsagent’s shop and bought himself two Mars Bars, two cups of strong black coffee, and a pound or two of newsprint labeled NEWSSECTION, BUSINESSSECTION, LEISURESECTION, ARTSSECTION, POPSECTION, CARSECTION, COMICS SUPPLEMENT, COLOURSUPPLEMENT, NOVELSUPPLEMENT and HOLIDAYADVERTISING SUPPLEMENT. The News Section was a single sheet and the news was brief, to the point, uninterpreted. Jerry didn’t read it. In fact, he didn’t read anything except part of the Comic Supplement. There was plenty to look at, though. Communications were taking the form of pictures more and more these days. Jerry was well catered to.

He ate his sweets, drank his coffee, and folded up his sections and left them on the table, by way of a tip. Then he went back to his car to continue the journey to Blackheath.

Apart from his pills and his sweets, Jerry had eaten nothing for almost a week.

He found that he didn’t need to eat much, because he could live off other people’s energy just as well, though it was exhausting for them, of course. He didn’t keep many acquaintances long, and Catherine was the only person off whom he hadn’t fed. Indeed, it had been his delight to feed her with some of his stolen vitality when she was feeling low. She hadn’t liked it much, but she’d need it when he eventually got her away from that house and back to normal again, if he could ever get her back to normal.

He would certainly kill Frank when they raided the house. Frank’s final needle would come from Jerry’s gun. It would give him his final kick—the one he kept looking for.

Only Mr. Lucas hadn’t arrived by two o’clock, and they gave him up, feeling annoyed with him—which wasn’t quite fair, for Mr. Lucas had been stabbed to death in Islington the previous evening and robbed of the best part of his casino’s takings by a much-embittered all-time loser who, by the following Monday, would fall downstairs and kill himself while taking his money to the bank, such being the fate of all-time losers.

Miss Brunner and Dimitri, Mr. Smiles, Mr. Crookshank, and Mr. Powys were all looking at a map, which Mr. Smiles had laid out on the table. Jerry Cornelius stood by the window smoking a thin cigarette and half-listening to them as they talked over the details of the expedition.

Mr. Smiles pointed one of his strong fingers at a cross that had been drawn roughly in the middle of the English Channel between Dover and Normandy. “That’s where the boat will be waiting. The men were all hired by me in Tangier. They answered an advertisement. At first they thought they were going to shoot Africans, but I managed to talk them round. They consist mainly of white South Africans, Belgians, and French. There are a couple of British ex-officers. I put them in charge, of course. Apart from the South Africans, they got keener when I told them that they’d be fighting mainly Germans. Amazing how

some people manage to hang on, isn't it?"

"Isn't it?" Mr. Powys was, as ever, a trifle uncertain. "They'll be anchored here waiting for us, will they?"

"We thought that was best, you know. Actually, coastguard patrols aren't seen about as often as they were. We won't need to worry too much."

Miss Brunner pointed at the village near the Cornelius mansion. "What about this?"

"An advance force of five men will isolate the village communications-wise. They'll be able to see something of what will be going on, of course, but we don't anticipate any bother from them. All outgoing radio and telephone calls will be scrambled."

Miss Brunner looked up at Jerry Cornelius. "Do you expect any trouble before we get into this cliff-opening place, Mr. Cornelius?"

Jerry nodded.

"Boats about as big as your hoverlaunch, plus my own, are almost bound to be spotted. They've got radar. My guess is that my brother will still rely mainly on the traps in the maze and so on. But the house will have some other surprises. As I told you, we'll have to get to the main control room as soon as we can. That's in the centre of the house. Once there, we can shut it down, and it will be straight fighting until we have Frank. I estimate that if you keep him off his junk for a couple of hours, he'll tell you exactly where the microfilm is."

Miss Brunner said quietly, "So we must preserve Frank at all costs."

"Until you have your information, yes. Then I'll deal with him."

"You *do* sound vengeful, Mr. Cornelius." Miss Brunner smiled at him. Jerry shrugged and turned to the window again.

"There seems little else to discuss." Mr. Smiles offered them all his cigarettes. "We have an hour or two to kill."

"Nearly three hours to kill, if we're leaving at five," said Miss Brunner.

"Is it three hours?" Mr. Powys glanced about.

"Three hours," said Mr. Crookshank, nodding and looking at his watch. "Almost."

"What's the exact time?" Mr. Smiles asked. "My watch seems to have stopped."

"I see that lire are thirty cents a million." Mr. Crookshank lit Miss Brunner's cigarette with a large gold gas lighter.

"They should never have backed out of the Common Market," Miss Brunner said pitilessly.

"What else could they do?"

“The mark’s still strong,” said Mr. Powys.

“Ah, the Russo-American mark. They can’t go on supporting it at this rate.” Mr. Smiles smiled a satisfied smile. “No, indeed.”

“I’m still not sure that we were in the right.” Mr. Powys sounded as if he were still not sure of anything. He glanced enquiringly towards the Scotch on the sideboard. Mr. Smiles waved a hostly hand towards it. Mr. Powys got up and poured himself a stiff one. “Refusing to pay back all those European loans, I mean. I think.”

“It wasn’t exactly a refusal,” Dimitri reminded him. “You just asked for an indefinite time limit. Britain certainly is the black sheep of the family today, isn’t she?”

“It can’t be helped, and if we’re lucky tonight, it will all be to our advantage in the long run.” Mr. Smiles rubbed his beard and walked to the sideboard. “Would anyone like a drink?”

“Yes, please,” said Mr. Powys.

The rest accepted, too, except for Jerry, who continued to look out of the window.

“Mr. Cornelius?”

“What?” Dimitri glanced up. “Sorry.” Mr. Powys gave him a baffled look. He held a glass of Scotch in each hand. Miss Brunner glared at Dimitri.

“I’ll have a small one.” Jerry appeared not to have noticed Dimitri’s mistake, though, as he took the glass from Mr. Smiles, he grinned broadly for a moment.

“Oh, we are living in an odd kind of limbo, aren’t we?” Ever since the weary lemming image had occurred to him, Mr. Crookshank had retained his philosophical mood. “Society hovers on the point of collapse, eh? Chaos threatens!”

Mr. Powys had begun trying to pour one full glass of Scotch into the other. Whisky ran onto the carpet.

Cornelius felt that Mr. Powys was overdoing it a bit. He smiled a little as he sat down on the arm of Miss Brunner’s chair. Miss Brunner shifted in the chair, trying to face him and failing.

“Maybe the West has got to the quasar stage—you know, 3C286 or whatever it is.” Miss Brunner spoke rapidly, half angrily, leaning away from Jerry Cornelius.

“What’s that?” Mr. Powys sucked his fingers.

“Yes, what is it?” Mr. Crookshank seemed to dismiss Mr. Powys’s question as he asked his identical one.

“Quasars are stellar objects,” Jerry said, “so massive that they’ve reached the stage of gravitational collapse.”

“What’s that got to do with the West?” Mr. Smiles asked. “Astronomy?”

“The more massive, in terms of population, an area becomes, the more mass it attracts, until the state of

gravitational collapse is reached,” Miss Brunner explained.

“Entropy, I think, Mr. Crookshank, rather than chaos,” Jerry said kindly.

Mr. Crookshank smiled and shook his head. “You’re going a bit beyond me, Mr. Cornelius.” He looked around at the others. “Beyond all of us, I should say.”

“Not beyond me.” Miss Brunner spoke firmly.

“The sciences are becoming curiously interdependent, aren’t they, Mr. Cornelius?” said Dimitri, whose statement seemed to echo one he’d picked up earlier. “History, physics, geography, psychology, anthropology, ontology. A Hindu I met—”

“I’d love to do a programme,” said Miss Brunner.

“I don’t think there’s a computer for the job,” Jerry said.

“I intend to do a programme,” she said, as if she’d made up her mind on the spot.

“You’d have to include the arts, too,” he said. “Not to mention philosophy. It could be just a matter of time, come to think of it, before all the data crystallized into something interesting.”

“Of Time?”

“That, too.”

Miss Brunner smiled up at Jerry. “We have something in common. I hadn’t quite realized what.”

“Oh, only our ambivalence,” Jerry grinned again.

“You’re in a good mood,” said Mr. Powys suddenly to Jerry.

“I’ve got something to do,” Jerry answered, but Mr. Powys was staring at his Scotch again.

Miss Brunner felt extremely satisfied. She returned to the subject. “I’d like more information. You know that this computer could be built. And what would it, in turn, create? Where are we heading?”

“Towards permanent flux perhaps, if you’ll forgive the paradox. Not many would have the intelligence to survive. When Europe’s finally divvied up between the Russians and Americans—not in my lifetime, I hope—what expertise the survivors will have! Won’t they be valuable to their new masters, eh? You should remember that, Miss Brunner, if ever events look like exceeding their present speed.” Jerry tapped her playfully on the shoulder.

She reached up to touch his hand, but it had gone. He got up.

“Can Time exceed  $c$ ?” She laughed. “I’m sliding off, Mr. Cornelius. But we must take up this conversation again.”

“Now or never,” he said. “Tomorrow I’ll be away, and we shan’t meet again.”

“You’re very certain.”

“I have to be.” He no longer grinned as he went back to the window, remembering Catherine and what he must do to Frank.

Behind him, the conversation continued.

Miss Brunner was in a savage, exhilarated mood now.

“And what’s your philosophy for the coming Light Age, Mr. Powys? You know, the *c* age. That’s a better term, on second thoughts.”

“Second thoughts?” Mr. Powys could summon nothing else. He was now on his fifth thought, trying to equate it with his fourth and, as he remembered it, his third.

Mr. Powys was busily disintegrating.

Mr. Smiles kindly filled his glass up, there being some good in all of us.

#### CHAPTERFOUR

Jerry steered the boat towards the light that had suddenly flashed out from a point near his port. Illuminated by the greenish glow from his indicator panel, his face looked stranger than ever to the others who waited on the deck outside his cabin.

Miss Brunner, most prone to that sort of thing, reflected that the conflicting time streams of the second half of the twentieth century were apparently mirrored in him, and it seemed that the mind behind cried forward while the mind in front cried back.

What had Cornelius been getting at? Time disintegrating? She’d never read one of his books, but she’d heard of them. Didn’t some of them talk about cyclical time, like Dunne? The ultimate point in the past would therefore be the ultimate point in the future. But what if something interrupted the cycle? An historical event, perhaps, of such importance that the whole pattern was changed. The nature of time, assuming that it was cyclical, would be disrupted. The circle broken, what might happen? It would certainly make Spengler look silly, she thought, amused.

If she could get her computer built and start her other project as well, she might be the person who could save something from the wreckage. She could consolidate everything left into one big programme—the final programme, she thought. Idea and reality, brought together, unified. The attempt had never succeeded in the past; but now she might have the opportunity to do it, for the time seemed ripe. She would need more power and more money, but with a bit of luck and intelligent exploitation of a shaky world situation she could get both.

Jerry was bringing the boat up alongside the bigger hoverlaunch. He watched as his passengers boarded the vessel, but he didn’t join them, preferring to have his own boat waiting for him when the expedition was over.

The hoverlaunch whispered away towards Normandy, and he began to follow behind it, positioning his boat slightly to one side to avoid the main disturbance of the launch’s wake. The launch belonged to Mr. Smiles, who, like Jerry, had invested his money in tangibles while it had still had some value.

Bit by bit the Normandy coastline became visible. Jerry cut his engine, and the hoverlaunch followed suit. Jerry went out on deck as a line was shot to him from the hoverlaunch. He made it fast. It was a cold night.

The hoverlaunch started up again, with Jerry in tow. It headed towards the cliff where the fake Le Corbusier château stood, a silhouette in the moonlight.

There was a slight chance that the bigger boat wouldn't register on the mansion's radar. Jerry's boat didn't, but it was much lower in the water. The hoverlaunch's central control bridge, a squat tube rising above the passenger disc and power section, was what might just blip on the radar.

Old Cornelius's microfilms were buried deep within the château, in a strongroom that would not resist a high-explosive blast but would, if attacked in this manner, automatically destroy the film.

The information the intrepid band required was probably there, but the only sure-fire means of getting the film was to open the strongroom in the conventional way, and that was why Frank, who knew the various codes and techniques necessary, had to be preserved and questioned and, with luck, made to open the strongroom himself.

The whole house was designed around the strongroom. It had been built to protect the microfilms. Very little in the house was what it seemed to be. It was armed with strange weapons.

As he looked up at it, Jerry thought how strongly the house resembled his father's tricky skull.

Virtually every room, every passage, every alcove had booby traps, which was why Jerry was so valuable to the expedition. He didn't know the strongroom combination, but he knew the rest of the house well, having been brought up there.

If he hadn't gone off after that night when his father had found him with Catherine, he would have inherited the microfilms as his birthright, since he was the elder son, but Frank had got that honour.

The wind was up. It whistled through the trees, groaned among the towers of the château. The clouds ripped across the sky to reveal the moon.

The hoverlaunch rocked.

From the house, searchlights came on. The searchlights were focused mainly on the house itself, lighting it up like some historic monument—which, indeed, it was.

The lights blinked off, and another one came on, a powerful beam, moving across the water. It struck the hoverlaunch.

The other lights came on, concentrated on the house, particularly the roof.

Jerry shouted, "Keep your eyes off the roof! Don't look at the towers! Remember what I told you!"

Water splashed against the sides of the hoverlaunch as they waited.

From the roof three circular towers had risen. They began to rotate in the blue beam of a searchlight. The colour changed to red, then yellow, then lilac. The towers rotated slowly at first. They looked like

big round machine-gun bunkers, with slots located at intervals down their length. Through these oblong slots shone bright lights, geometric shapes in garish primary colours, fizzing like neon. The towers whirled faster. It was almost impossible to take the eye away.

Jerry Cornelius knew what the giant towers were. Michelson's Stroboscope Type 8. The eye was trapped by them and so were the limbs, the will. Pseudo-epilepsy was only one result of watching them for too long.

The wind and the hissing towers produced a high-pitched, ululating whine. Round and round, faster and faster, whirled the towers, with bright metal colours replacing the primaries—silver, bronze, gold, copper, steel.

First the eye and then the mind, thought Jerry.

He saw that one of the mercenaries on the boat stood transfixed; glazed, unblinking eyes staring up at the huge stroboscopes. His limbs were stiff.

A searchlight found him, and, from two concrete emplacements on the cliff, machine-guns smacked a couple of dozen rounds into him.

His bloody body was thrown violently backward; it softened and collapsed. Jerry was still yelling at him to take his eyes away from the stroboscopes.

Jerry stopped yelling. He hadn't expected such a display of violence so soon. Evidently Frank wasn't taking chances. He crouched behind the cabin as the boats drifted towards the cliffs. The overhang offered them some shelter.

Within a minute the towers were no longer visible. They had been designed primarily for use against land attack.

As his boat bumped against the hoverlaunch, Jerry glanced at the body of the dead mercenary. It represented the start of an interesting anarchic process.

He leaned over and got a grip on a handrail, hauling himself aboard the hoverlaunch. He took out his needle gun and held it in his gloved right hand.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Cornelius," said Miss Brunner, her legs astraddle, her hair blowing back from her head.

Jerry walked forward as the hoverlaunch knocked itself against the cliff. Behind him a mercenary jumped to the deck of his boat and made it fast.

Another mercenary—darkly tanned, with oiled, wavy hair—came forward holding a suction mine intended to destroy the door. The man steadied himself and bent to attach it to the spot Jerry indicated. They backed up the deck as the mine exploded, bits of wreckage pattering down.

The door was open.

Jerry led the way forward, put his foot on the handrail, and pushed himself into the opening. He began to walk down the short passage.

The main force of mercenaries, dressed in the lightweight khaki they were never without, followed him with their machine-guns ready. Behind them, not so swiftly, stepped Mr. Smiles, Miss Brunner and Dimitri, Mr. Crookshank, and Mr. Powys. They all carried their big machine pistols awkwardly.

An explosion rocked the cliff. They looked back as fire spread over the water.

“Let’s hope they don’t spend too much time on the boats,” Mr. Smiles said, speaking adenoidally because his nostrils were stuffed with the filters that Jerry had issued to them all.

Jerry reached the inner room and pointed at two places on the walls. The leading mercenary raised his gun and shot out the two cameras. From the control chamber above, the lights were switched off by way of retaliation.

“Frank’s found this entrance, anyway,” Jerry said. It was really only what he’d expected.

The mercenaries now unhooked heavy helmets from their belts and fitted them on their heads. The helmets were equipped with miners’ lamps. One mercenary had a long coil of nylon rope over his shoulder.

“Perhaps the lift’s still working?” Mr. Powys suggested as Jerry set foot on the ladder.

“Probably.” Jerry began to climb. “But we’d look great if they switched the power off when we were halfway up.”

They all started to climb. Miss Brunner went last. As she put her foot on the first rung, she said thoughtfully, “Silly. They forgot to electrify the ladder.”

Jerry heard some sounds above. He looked up as a light went on in the shaft, making him blink. A hard-faced German was looking down at him, sighting along his automatic rifle.

Jerry snapped up his needle gun and shot the German full of steel. He paused, arm curled around the ladder, to repressure the gun, shouting, “Look out!” as the guard rolled off the edge and fell down the shaft.

As the guard’s body thumped to the bottom, Jerry reached the top, his needle gun ready, but no-one was there. Frank had spared only one guard here, being sure that the maze would serve him best.

Everyone else scrambled up, and they all stood at the entrance to the maze while the soldier with the rope paid it out to them. They roped up.

Knotting her bit of the rope around her waist, Miss Brunner looked uncomfortable.

“I don’t like this sort of thing,” she said.

Jerry ignored her, leading them into the maze.

“Keep your mouths tightly shut,” he reminded them. “And whatever happens, keep your attention on following me.”

Their helmet lights lit the way as Jerry walked cautiously ahead, pointing out television cameras to the mercenaries, who shot them as they passed.



Then the first wave of gas hissed into the passageways. It was LSD gas, refined by old Cornelius. The nose filters, sophisticated by his son, could cope with it if they got through it fast enough. Old Cornelius had invented or modified all the hallucinatory protective devices in the house. Frank had added the guns and guards.

Hallucinogenic gases had been old Cornelius's speciality, though an offshoot had been his hallucinomats such as the rooftop stroboscopic towers.

Old Cornelius had exhausted and killed himself searching for the ultimate hallucinogenic device ("total dissociation in under one second" had been his aim, his war-cry), just as his son Frank was destroying himself fairly slowly by looking for the ultimate kick in the veins.

Someone began to giggle, and Jerry looked back.

It was Mr. Powys.

Mr. Powys had his arms high and was shaking all over, just as if someone were tickling his armpits. Every so often he would stretch out his arms in front of him and make pushing motions at wisps of gas.

Then he began to skip about.

Mouths thin and firm now that they had seen the example of Mr. Powys, Mr. Smiles and Mr. Crookshank stepped in, striving to hold him still.

Jerry signed for the expedition to stop, unhooked the rope from his belt, and went back to hit Mr. Powys on the back of the neck with his pistol barrel.

Mr. Powys relaxed, and Mr. Smiles and Mr. Crookshank hefted him up between them.

In silence they walked on through the faintly yellowish gas that clouded the air of the maze. Those who had absorbed a little of it thought they saw shapes in the writhing stuff: malevolent faces, grotesque figures, beautiful designs. Everyone was sweating, particularly Mr. Smiles and Mr. Crookshank, who carried Mr. Powys who would soon have breathed enough LSD to kill him.

At a junction Jerry hesitated, his judgment slightly impaired. Then he was off again, taking the gang down the tunnel that branched off to the right.

They moved on, the silence sometimes interrupted by the sound of a rifle shooting out a camera.

It was a little ironic, he thought, that his father should have become so obsessed with the problem of increasing incidence of neurotic disorders in the world that he himself had gone round the bend towards the end.

Now Jerry rounded the last bend and the door of the control chamber was ahead of him. He was quite surprised that so far there had been only two casualties and only one of those actually dead.

About fifteen yards before they got to the door Jerry gave a signal, and a bazooka was passed down the line to him. Leaving Jerry and his loader, the remainder of the party retreated down the passage a short way and stood in a disorderly knot waiting.

Jerry got the bazooka comfortably onto his shoulder and pulled the trigger. The rocket bomb whooshed straight through the door and exploded in the control room itself.

A booted foot came sailing out and hit Jerry in the face. He kicked it to one side, his mouth still tightly shut, and waved the others on.

The explosion had wrecked the control panel, but the opposite door was still intact. Since it would open only to the thermal code of someone it knew, they could either blast through into the library or wait for someone to blast through to them. Jerry knew that armed men would definitely be waiting in the library.

The other members of the expedition were unhooking their ropes and dropping them to the floor. It was unlikely they would be leaving by the same route, and therefore they wouldn't need the ropes again. Jerry pondered the problem as Miss Brunner squeezed into the room and studied the wreckage of the panel.

Her big eyes looked up at him quizzically. "A nice little board; and this is only a minor control panel?"

"Yes. There's a large roomful in the cellars—the main console. That's got to be our objective, as I told you."

"You did. What now?"

Jerry smoothed the hair at the side of his face. "There's an alternative to waiting for them. We could try the bazooka. But there's another door behind this one, and I doubt if a rocket would go through them both. If it didn't, we'd get the worst of the explosion. They must be waiting there—probably with a grenade thrower or a big Bren or something. It's stalemate for the moment."

"You should have anticipated this." Miss Brunner frowned.

"I know."

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't think of it," Jerry said with a sigh.

"Someone else should have." She turned to look accusingly at the others.

Dimitri was kneeling beside Mr. Powys, trying to revive him.

"Not for Mr. Powys," said Mr. Crookshank, unable to restrain a slight smile. "The LSD always gets you in the end, eh?"

"You, too," he said. "Looks as if poor old Mr. Powys has had it."

"I thought it had been too easy," said Mr. Smiles.

"I've got it." Jerry looked up. Over the door was a metal panel, secured by wing nuts. He pointed to it. "Air conditioning. A grenade thrower, a single neurade and a good eye should do the trick if the grille at the other end isn't closed."

He put his hand on the arm of a big South African. "You'll do. I'll stand on your shoulders. Hang on to my legs when the recoil comes. Who's got a grenade attachment?"

One of the Belgians handed him the attachment. He fitted it to the automatic rifle and detached the ammunition clip. The Belgian handed him a different clip. He fitted this to the rifle, too. Then he took a neurade out of his pocket and popped it into the thrower's basket.

"Someone give me a hand up," he said. One of the British mercenaries helped him climb onto the South African's broad shoulders. He pushed back the metal panel and began to bash in the wire grille with the gun butt. He could see down the pipe to where the lights of the library shone. He heard muted voices.

Shoving the rifle into the pipe, he put it to his shoulder. The space between the fan blades was just big enough. Now if the neurade wasn't deflected by the grille at the other end, which wasn't likely, they'd have a chance of getting the guards there in silence and have time to blast open the doors with small charges of explosive before anyone realized that the detachment in the library was out of action.

He squeezed the trigger. The neurade shot down the pipe, was missed by the fan blades, and burst through the grille.

He smiled as voices at the other end shouted in surprise. He heard dull thumps and knew that the neurade had exploded. Then he started to lose his footing on the South African; half-jumped, half-fell to the ground; and handed the Belgian's gun back to him.

"Okay, let's get these doors open. Hurry. And keep your mouths closed again."

The charges burst both locks, and they were through. On the floor of the library beside an overturned machine-gun three Germans jerked limply, mouths in rictus grins, eyes full of tears, muscles and limbs contorted as the gas worked on their nerves. It seemed a mercy to bayonet them; so they did.

They tumbled out of the library and into the ground-floor hall as the ceiling suddenly rose and the walls widened out, light glaring like magnesium, blinding them for a moment. Jerry fished goggles from his pocket and put them on, noticing that the others were doing the same.

They could now see shapes flickering around them, like a colour-film negative. Traceries of deep red and luminous blue veined the walls.

Then the lights went out and they were in pitch blackness.

One wall became transparent all at once. Behind it a huge black-and-white disc began to whirl, and a rhythmic boom swam up the decibel scale, almost to pain level. It seemed that the enlarged room swayed like a ship as they staggered after Jerry, who was none too steady on his pins himself, heading straight for the disc.

Jerry grabbed a gun from one of the dazed, mesmerized mercenaries, switched it to full automatic, and fired an entire magazine into the wall. Plastic cracked, but the disc continued to whirl. As he turned to take another gun, Jerry saw that all of them were now transfixed by the disc.

Another burst and the plastic shattered. The bullets struck the disc, and it began to slow down.

Behind them the far wall slid upwards, and half a dozen of Frank's guards stood there.

Jerry ignored them as he kicked a larger hole in the wall and smashed at the big disc with his gun butt until it crumpled.

“Throw down your arms!” ordered the chief guard.

Jerry flung himself through the hole. Aiming between Miss Brunner and Dimitri, who were beginning to blink back into wakefulness, he killed the chief guard.

The shot seemed to be enough to bring the others round quickly. Almost before Jerry knew it Miss Brunner had jumped through the hole, her high heels catching him on his buttocks.

Firing broke out generally, but Mr. Smiles, Dimitri and Mr. Crookshank all got through safely, although several of the mercenaries, including the big South African, died.

They fought back until they had killed all Frank’s guards. It was fairly easy from their cover.

They were in a small room, now bathed in a soft red light, a sound like the swish of the sea in their ears.

Something dropped from the ceiling and bounced on the floor until its sides opened up.

“Nerve bomb!” Jerry yelled. “Cover your mouths!”

He knew there was an exit somewhere to the right of the smashed disc. He edged in that direction and found it, using his gun to prise it open. If they didn’t get out shortly, their nose filters wouldn’t help them.

He went through the doorway, and they followed him.

The next room was yellow, full of soothing murmurs. A remote-control camera panned around close to the ceiling. One of the mercenaries shot it. A normal door, unlocked, opened onto a flight of stairs leading upward.

There wasn’t another door. They ascended the stairs. At the top three men waited for them.

“Frank’s spreading his guards thin,” said Jerry.

Their first burst missed him but shot the head of one of the Belgians to bits. Feeling panicky, Jerry hugged the wall, raising his needle gun and shooting a guard in the throat.

Behind him the leading mercenaries opened up. One guard fell at once, blood spurting from his stomach. The second fired down the stairwell and got two more mercenaries, including one of the Britons.

Jerry, rapidly repressuring his gun, shot him, too.

On the first-floor landing everything was silent, and Jerry relaxed his pursed lips. The mercenaries, with the civilians behind them, moved up onto the landing and looked at him questioningly.

“My brother’s almost certainly in the main control room,” Jerry said. “That’s two floors down now, and there’ll be extra guards turning up at any moment.” Jerry pointed at a television camera near the ceiling. “Don’t shoot it. He isn’t using it at the moment for some reason, and if we put it out he’ll know we’re here.”

“He must have guessed, surely,” said Miss Brunner.

“You’d think so. Also, he would have sent some reinforcements here by now. He could have a trap waiting somewhere for us—wants us to relax a little. This landing’s equipped with a Schizomat in a panel in that wall. My father’s crowning achievement, he always thought.”

“And Frank isn’t using it.” Miss Brunner tidied her long red hair.

“I had to leave Mr. Powys behind, I’m afraid.” Dimitri leaned on a wall. “This house certainly is full of colourful surprises, Mr. Cornelius.”

“He’ll be dead by now,” said Jerry.

“What could your brother be planning?” Miss Brunner asked.

“Something funny. He’s got a rich sense of humour. He may have cooked up a new ploy, but it’s not like Frank to be subtle at a time like this. It’s just possible that he’s run away.”

“And all our efforts have been wasted,” she said sourly. “I hope not.”

“Oh, so do I, Miss Brunner.”

He walked along the landing, with them following him. Jerry led them through the quiet house until they reached a point where they looked down, through what was evidently a two-way mirror, into the partitioned hall where the nerve bomb had exploded. Stairs led down alongside the far wall.

“These stairs normally lead to the basement,” Jerry told them. “We might as well go back the way we came now. There’s no obvious danger as far as I can see.”

They began to descend.

“There are steel gates farther down,” he said. “They can shut off any part of the stairs. Remember what I told you: use your guns to wedge them, stop them fully closing.”

“No rifle’s going to stop steel,” Mr. Crookshank said doubtfully.

“True—but the door mechanism’s delicate. It’ll work.”

They passed openings in the walls where the steel gates were housed, but none of them closed.

They reached the ground floor and entered a curiously narrow passage, obviously created by the widening of the hall walls earlier. At the far end Mr. Powys suddenly appeared and came staggering towards them.

“He should be dead!” exclaimed Mr. Smiles, offended.

“It’s haunted! It’s haunted!” moaned Mr. Powys.

Jerry couldn’t work out how he’d got there. Neither could he guess how Mr. Powys had survived the LSD, not to mention everything else.

“It’s haunted! It’s haunted!” Mr. Powys repeated.

Jerry grabbed him. “Mr. Powys! Pull yourself together.”

Mr. Powys gave Jerry an intelligent look that was suddenly sardonic. He raised his thick eyebrows. “Too late for that, I’m afraid, Mr. Cornelius. This house—it’s like a giant head. Do you know what I mean? Or is it *my* skull? If it is, what am I?”

“I know whose bloody head this house is,” Jerry said, shaking him. “I know, you bastard.”

“Mine!”

“No!”

“What’s the matter, Mr. Powys?” Dimitri slid up. “Can I help?”

“It’s haunted. It’s my mind haunted by me, I think. That can’t really be right, Dimitri. You are Dimitri. I’d always thought. . . It must be my mind haunting me. That must be it. Oh, dear!” He rocked his poor head in his hands.

Dimitri looked at Jerry Cornelius. “What do we do with him?”

“He needs a converter.” Jerry Cornelius smiled at Mr. Powys, raised his gun, and shot him in the eye.

The party stopped.

## CHAPTERFIVE

“It was for the best,” Jerry said. “His brain was already badly damaged, and we couldn’t have him running around.”

“Aren’t you being exceptionally ruthless, Mr. Cornelius?” Mr. Smiles took a very deep breath.

“Oh, now, now, Mr. Smiles.”

They pressed on until they reached a big metal door in the basement. “This is where he should be,” said Jerry. “But I can’t help thinking he’s cooked up a big surprise.” He signaled to the surviving Briton and a couple of Belgians. They saluted smartly.

“Have a go at that door, will you?”

“Any particular method, sir?” asked the Briton.

“No. Just get it down. We’ll be round the corner.”

They retreated while the soldiers got to work affixing things to the door.

There came a loud and unexpectedly violent explosion (obviously far bigger than the soldiers had planned). When the smoke cleared, Jerry saw blood all over the walls, but very little recognizable of the soldiers.

“Great lads,” he laughed. “What a good thing, their thing about orders.” And then they were all stumbling backward as a sub-machine-gun began to bang rapidly from within the room.

Peering through the smoke from behind the cover of a South African, Jerry saw that Frank was in there, apparently alone, with the machine-gun cradled in his arms, firing steadily.

Mr. Crookshank got in the path of one of the bursts, making a ludicrous attempt to duck the bullets even as they danced into his chest. Two soldiers collapsed on top of him.

Frank chuckled away as he fired.

“I think he’s gone barmy,” said Mr. Smiles. “This poses a problem, Mr. Cornelius.”

Jerry nodded. “Stop this nonsense, Frank!” he shouted, trying to make his tone firm. “What about a truce?”

“Jerry!

“Jerry!

“Jerry!” sang Frank from the room, firing more sporadically. “What do you want, Jerry? A Time Fix?

“Tempodex is my remedy for everyone. It’ll turn you on lovely, sport—can’t you feel those millions of years just waiting in your spine—waiting to move up into your back-brain—”

The gun stopped altogether and they began to move cautiously forward. Then Frank stooped to pick up an identical, fully loaded weapon. He began emptying it.

“—your mid-brain, your fore-brain—all your many brains, Jerry—when the tempodex starts opening them up?”

“He is in a jolly mood,” said Miss Brunner from somewhere well behind the front line.

Jerry just didn’t feel like doing anything except duck bullets at that moment. He felt very tired. Another couple of mercenaries piled themselves up neatly. They were running out of help, Jerry thought.

“Can’t we throw something at him? Isn’t there any more gas?” Miss Brunner sounded vexed.

“Well, look here, he’s got to run out of bullets sooner or later.” Mr. Smiles believed that if you waited long enough, the right situation always presented itself. A thought struck him, and he turned angrily to the mercenaries. “Why aren’t you retaliating?”

They began retaliating.

Mr. Smiles quickly realized his mistake and shouted: “Stop! We want him alive!”

They stopped.

Frank sang and kept his finger on the trigger.

“He’ll get an overheated barrel if he’s not careful,” said Mr. Smiles, remembering his mythology. “I hope he doesn’t blow himself up.”

Miss Brunner was picking her nose. She discarded the filters. "I don't care if there is any more gas," she said. "I'm not having the filthy things up there any longer."

"Well, look," said Jerry, "I've got one neurade left, but it could kill him, the state he's in."

"It wouldn't do *me* much good now. You might have warned me." Miss Brunner scanned the floor.

Another mercenary groaned and went down.

The sub-machine-gun stopped. The last bullet ricocheted off the wall. There came the sound of sobbing.

Jerry peered round the corner. Among his guns, Frank sat weeping with his head in his hands.

"He's all yours." Jerry walked towards the stairs.

"Where are you going?" Miss Brunner took a step after him.

"I've done my bit of group effort, Miss Brunner. Now there's something else I've got to do. Goodbye."

Jerry went up to the ground floor and found the front door. He still felt nervous and realized that not all Frank's guards had been accounted for. He opened the door and peered out of the house. There didn't seem to be anyone about.

Gun still in his hand, he walked down the sloping drive towards the lodge where John ought to be with Catherine.

The lights were out in the lodge, but he didn't think it strange in the circumstances. He looked down the hill towards the village. All the lights were out there, too. Mr. Smiles had paid someone to fuse the power supply. Jerry found the lodge door open and walked in.

In a corner, a bag of bones gave him a welcoming groan.

"John! Where's Catherine?"

"I got her here, sir. I—"

"But where is she now? Upstairs?"

"You said after ten, sir. I was here by eleven. Everything went smoothly. She was a weight. I'm dying, sir, I think."

"What happened?"

"He must have followed me." John spoke with increasing faintness. "I got her here... Then he came in with a couple of the men. He shot me, sir."

"And took her back to the house?"

"I'm sorry, sir..."

"So you should be. Did you hear where he was taking her?"



“He—said—putting her—back to—bed, sir...”

Jerry left the lodge and began to run up the drive. It was odd how normal the house looked from the outside. He re-entered it.

On the ground floor he found the lift and discovered that it was still operating. He got in and went up to the sixth. He got out and ran to Catherine’s bedroom. The door was locked. He kicked at it, but it wouldn’t budge. He reached into his top pocket and fished out something that looked like a cigarette. Two thin wires were attached to it, leading to another object the size of a matchbox. He uncoiled the wires. He put the slim object into the keyhole of the door and walked backward a yard or so with the box in his hand.

It was actually a tiny detonator. He touched the wires to the detonator, and the explosive at the other end burst the lock with a flash.

He pushed at the wrecked door and walked in to find Frank already there.

Frank did not look at all well. In his right hand was a needle gun, twin to Jerry’s. There were only two such guns; their father had had them made and given them one each.

“How did you get away?” Jerry asked Frank.

Frank’s answer was not a direct one. He put his head on one side and stared at Jerry unblinkingly, looking like an old, sick vulture.

“Well, actually I was hoping to get *you*, Jerry. As it was I got all your military friends, though I think I missed some of the others. They’re still wandering about, I think. I’m not sure why I bothered with the shooting—probably just because I enjoyed it. I feel much better now. But if you’d crossed into the room you’d have found that a couple—ha, ha—of my men were on either side of the door waiting for you. I was the bait, the bait to the trap.”

Frank’s head seemed to be sinking deeper and deeper into his shoulders as he talked, his whole body screwed up in a neurotic stoop. “You certainly made a good try at getting our sister, didn’t you? Look—I’ve woken the sleeping beauty up.”

Catherine, looking dazed, was propped on pillows.

She smiled when she saw Jerry. It was a sweet smile, but it wasn’t all that confident. Her skin was more than naturally pale, and her dark hair was still tangled.

Jerry’s gun hand rose a trifle, and Frank grinned. “Let’s get ready, then,” he said.

He began to back around the bed in order to get on the other side of Catherine. She was now between them, looking slowly from one to the other, her smile fading very gradually.

Jerry was trembling. “You bastard.”

Frank giggled. “That’s something we all have in common.”

Frank’s junkie’s face was immobile. The only movement in it came when the light caught his bright,

beady eyes. Jerry didn't realize that Frank had pulled the trigger of his gun until he felt the sting in his shoulder. Frank's hand wasn't as steady as it had seemed.

Frank didn't repressure his gun at once. Jerry raised his arm to shoot Frank.

Then Catherine moved. She reached out towards Frank, her fingers clutching at his coat. "Stop it!"

"Shut up," said Frank. He moved his left hand towards the pressure lever of his needle gun.

Catherine tried to stand up on the bed and fell forward in a kneeling position. Her face was full of wild fear.

"Jerry!" she screamed.

Jerry took a step towards her.

"That needle could work into your heart, Jerry," smiled Frank.

"So I'll need a magnet."

Jerry fired and ran towards the window as a needle grazed his face. He repressured and turned. Frank ducked; Catherine rose, and Jerry's needle caught her. She collapsed, Jerry repressured and discharged another needle at the same time as Frank. They both missed again.

Jerry began to feel puzzled. This was going on far too long. He jumped towards Frank and grabbed at his body. Frank's weak fists struck him on the head and back. He punched Frank in the stomach, and Frank groaned. They stepped apart. Jerry felt dizzy; saw Frank grin and wheel.

"You had something in those needles..."

"Find out," grinned Frank, and he sprang from the room.

Jerry sat himself down on the edge of the bed.

He was riding a black ferris wheel of emotions. His brain and body exploded in a torrent of mingled ecstasy and pain. Regret. Guilt. Relief. Waves of pale light flickered. He fell down a never-ending slope of obsidian rock surrounded by clouds of green, purple, yellow, black. The rock vanished, but he continued to fall. World of phosphorescence drifting like golden spheres into the black night. Green, blue, red explosions. Flickering world of phosphorescent tears falling into timeless, spaceless wastes. World of Guilt. Guilt—guilt—guilt... Another wave flowed up his spine. No-mind, no-body, no-where. Dying waves of light danced out of his eyes and away through the dark world. Everything was dying. Cells, sinews, nerves, synapses—all crumbling. Tears of light, fading, fading. Brilliant rockets streaking into the sky and exploding all together and sending their multicoloured globes of light—balls on an Xmas tree—x-mass—drifting slowly. Black mist swirled across a bleak, horizonless nightscape. Catherine. As he approached her she fell away, fell down like a cardboard dummy. Just before his mind cleared, he thought he saw a creature bending over them both—a creature without a navel, hermaphrodite and sweetly smiling...

He felt weaker as his head cleared, and he realized that some time must have passed. Catherine lay on the bed in much the same position in which he'd seen her earlier. There was a spot of blood on her white dress, over the left breast.

He put his hand on it and noticed that the heart wasn't beating.

He had killed her.

In agony, he began to caress her stiff.

Meanwhile, Frank was also in agony, for he had been trapped by Miss Brunner and she was giving his genitals a cruel squeeze. They were in one of the rooms on the second floor. Dimitri and Mr. Smiles stood at his left and right, holding his arms.

Miss Brunner knelt on one knee in front of him. She squeezed again, and Frank grimaced.

"Look here," he said. "I've got to get myself fixed up."

"You get the fix when we get the microfilm," snarled Miss Brunner, hoping he wouldn't give in right away.

Smiles got the joke and laughed. Dimitri joined in, somewhat vacantly.

"This is serious," said Miss Brunner, and she gave Frank another squeeze.

"I'll tell you as soon as I'm fixed up."

"Mr. Cornelius, we can't allow that," said Mr. Smiles. "Come along, let's have the information."

Mr. Smiles hit Frank clumsily on the face. Discovering a taste for it, he did it several more times. Frank didn't seem to mind. He had other things to worry about.

"Pain doesn't have much effect," Miss Brunner said thoughtfully. "We'll just have to wait and hope he doesn't become too incoherent."

"Look, he's slavering." Dimitri pointed in disgust. He let go of Frank's arm.

Eyes unblinking, Frank wiped his grey mouth. A great shudder brought his body briefly to life. Then he was still again.

After a moment, while they watched in curiosity, he shuddered again.

"You know the microfilm is in the strongroom?" Frank said between shudders.

"He's coming through!" Mr. Smiles smacked his leg.

Dimitri frowned.

"Only you can open the strongroom; is that right, Mr. Cornelius?" Miss Brunner sighed rather disappointedly.

"That's right."

“Will you take us there and open the strongroom? Then we will let you go and you can get your fix.”

“Yes, I will.”

Mr. Smiles bent Frank’s arm behind his back. “Lead the way,” he said firmly.

When they had reached the strongroom and Frank had opened it for them, Miss Brunner looked at the ranks of metal files lining the walls and said, “You can go now, Mr. Cornelius. We’ll find what we want.”

Frank skipped off, out of the littered room behind the strongroom and up the stairs.

“I think I’ll just pop after him and check he hasn’t got something up his sleeve,” Mr. Smiles said eagerly.

“We’ll be waiting.”

Dimitri helped Miss Brunner lift the files from their shelves and cart them into the room. When Mr. Smiles had disappeared, Miss Brunner began to stroke Dimitri. “We’ve done it, Dimitri!”

Dimitri had soon forgotten the boxes and had become totally absorbed in Miss Brunner.

Mr. Smiles came back a short time later, looking upset. “I was right,” he said. “He’s left the house and is talking to his guards. We should have kept him as a hostage. We’re not behaving very rationally, Miss Brunner.”

“This isn’t the time or place for that sort of thing,” she said as she searched through the box files.

“Where’s Mr. Cornelius?”

“Jerry Cornelius?” she murmured abstractedly.

“Yes.”

“We should have asked Frank. Silly of me.”

“Where’s Dimitri?”

“He gave up.”

“Gave himself up?” Mr. Smiles looked bemused. He glanced round the strongroom. On the floor, in a dark corner, lay a neatly folded Courrèges suit, a shirt, underpants, socks, shoes, tie, valuables.

“Well, he must have gone for an early-morning swim,” said Mr. Smiles, trembling and noticing how healthy Miss Brunner’s skin looked.

It was dawn as Jerry walked down the stairs. On the second floor he found Miss Brunner and Mr. Smiles going through the big metal box files. They were sitting on the carpet with the files between them, studying the papers and microfilm they had removed.

“I assumed you were dead,” said Miss Brunner. “We’re the only survivors, I’m afraid.”

“Where is Frank?”

“We let him go after he’d opened the strongroom for us. It was a mistake.” She looked petulantly at Mr. Smiles. “They aren’t here, are they?”

Mr. Smiles shook his head. “It doesn’t look like it, Miss Brunner. We’ve been fooled by young Frank. At the rate he was trembling and drooling, you’d have thought he was telling the truth. He’s more cunning than we guessed.”

“Instinctive,” said Miss Brunner, her lips pursed.

“What happened to Dimitri?” Jerry looked at Miss Brunner. For a moment, in the dawn light, he had half-mistaken her for the Greek.

“He disappeared,” said Mr. Smiles. “After I went to check on Frank. I didn’t realize the strength of character your brother had, Mr. Cornelius.”

“You shouldn’t have let him go.” Jerry kicked at the papers.

“You told us we mustn’t harm him.”

“Did I?” Jerry spoke listlessly now.

“I’m not sure he *was* lying,” said Miss Brunner to Mr. Smiles. She got up, dusting off her skirt as best she could. “He might really have believed the stuff was in there. Do you think it exists any more?”

“I was convinced. Convinced.” Mr. Smiles sighed. “A lot of time, energy, and money has been wasted, and we’re not even likely to survive now. This is a great disappointment.”

“Why not?” Jerry asked. “Likely to survive?”

“Outside, Mr. Cornelius, is the remainder of your brother’s private army. They’ve ringed the place and are ready to shoot us. Your brother commands them.”

“I must get to a doctor,” said Jerry.

“What’s the matter?” Miss Brunner’s voice wasn’t sympathetic.

“I’m wounded in a couple of places. One in the shoulder—not sure where the other one went in, but I think it must be very bad.”

“What about your sister?”

“My sister’s dead. I shot her.”

“Really, then you must—”

“I want to live!” Jerry stumbled towards the window and looked out into the cold morning. Men were waiting there, though Frank couldn’t be seen. The grey bushes seemed made of delicately carved granite, and grey gulls wheeled in a grey sky.

“By Christ, I want you to live, too!” Miss Brunner grasped him. “Can you think of a way we can all get out?”

“There is a chance.” He began to speak calmly. “The main control chamber wasn’t destroyed, was it?”

“No—perhaps we should have...”

“Let’s get down there. Come on, Mr. Smiles.”

Jerry sat limply in the chair by the control board. He checked first that the power was on; then he activated the monitors so that they had a view all round the house. He locked the monitors on the armed men who were waiting outside.

His hand reached for another bank of switches and flipped them over. “We’ll try the towers,” he said.

Green, red, and yellow lights went on above the board. “They’re working, anyway.” He stared carefully at the monitors. He felt very sick.

“Towers are spinning,” he said. “Look!”

The armed men were all gaping at the roof. They could not have had any sleep all night, which would help the process. They stood transfixed.

“Get going,” Jerry said as he got up and leaned on Mr. Smiles, pushing him towards the door. “But once out of the house, don’t look back or you’ll be turned into a pillar of salt.”

They helped him up the stairs. He was almost fainting now. Cautiously, they opened the front door.

“Go, tiger!” he said weakly as they began to run, still supporting him.

“How are we going to get down to the boats?” asked Miss Brunner when they had helped him round the side of the house facing the cliff edge.

Jerry didn’t care. “I suppose we’ll have to jump,” he murmured. “Hope the tide hasn’t dropped too low.”

“It’s a long way down, and I’m not so sure I can swim.” Mr. Smiles slowed his pace.

“You’ll have to try,” said Miss Brunner.

They stumbled across the rough turf and got to the edge. Far below, water still washed the cliff. Behind them a strong-minded guard had spotted them. They could tell this because his bullets had begun to whine past them.

“Are you fit enough, Mr. Cornelius?”

“I hope so, Miss Brunner.”

They jumped together and fell together towards the sea.

Mr. Smiles didn't follow them. He looked back, saw the stroboscopes, and could not turn away again. A smile appeared on his lips. Mr. Smiles died smiling, at the hand of the strong-minded guard.

Jerry, now unaware of who or where he was, felt himself being dragged from the sea. Someone slapped his face. What, he wondered, was the nature of reality after all? Could all this be the result of mankind's will—even his natural surroundings, the shape of the hand that slapped his face?

“You're going to have to steer, I'm afraid, Mr. Cornelius. I can't.”

He smiled. “Steer? Okay.” But what sort of place would he steer into? The world he had left? This world? Or another altogether. A world, perhaps, where killer girls roved metropolitan streets in bands, working for faceless tycoons who bought and sold hydrogen bombs on an international level, supplying the entire market with H—Hydrogen, Heroin, Heroines. . .

“Catherine,” he murmured. Miss Brunner was kindly helping him to the cabin, he realized.

Tired but happy, unconvinced by the reality of his hallucination, he started the boat and swung out to sea.

Hi-Fi, Holiness, a hope in hell. . .

He would never have a memory of what happened until he cried “Catherine!” and woke to find that he was in a very comfortable hospital bed.

“If you don't mind my asking,” he said politely to the lemon-faced woman in uniform who entered after a while, “where would I be?”

“You're in the Sunnydales Nursing Home, Mr. Cornelius, and you are much better. On the way to recovery, they say. A friend brought you here after your accident at that French funfair.”

“You know about that?”

“I know very little about it. Some trick gun went off the wrong way and shot you, I believe.”

“Is that what happened? Are all nursing homes called Sunnydales?”

“Most of them.”

“Am I receiving the very best medical attention?”

“You have had three specialists at your friend's expense.”

“Who’s the friend?”

“I don’t know the name. The doctor might. A lady, I think.”

“Miss Brunner?”

“The name’s familiar.”

“Will there be any complications? When will I be fit enough to leave?”

“I don’t think any complications are expected. You will not leave until you are fit enough to do so.”

“You have my word of honour—I shan’t leave until I’m fit enough. My life’s all I’ve got.”

“Very wise. If there are any business matters you need arranging—any relatives?”

“I’m self-employed,” he said self-consciously.

The nurse said, “Try getting some sleep.”

“I don’t need any sleep.”

“You don’t, but it’s easier to run a hospital with all the patients sleeping. They’re less demanding. Now you can do me a favour. Groan, beg for medical details, complain about the lack of attention we give you and the inferior way we run the hospital, but don’t try to make me laugh.”

“I don’t think I could, could I?” said Jerry.

“It’s a waste of time,” she agreed.

“Then I wouldn’t dream of it.”

He felt fresh and relaxed and he wondered why he should, considering his recent activities. He’d probably have plenty of time in which to work it out. He knew he’d be fighting trauma on all fronts, and the long coma had equipped him to fight well.

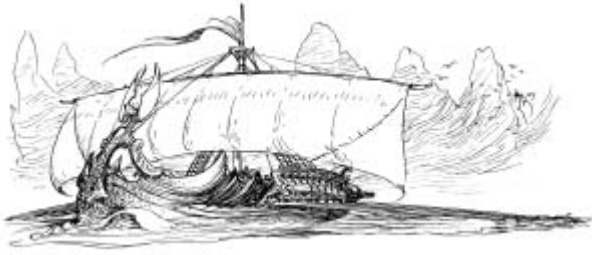
As best he could, he began putting his mind in order. During the weeks in the hospital, all he asked for was a tape recorder, tape, and an earbead so that there would be no trouble when he turned up the sound in moments of heavy concentration.

## **THE SINGING CITADEL**

(1967)

### **CHAPTER ONE**





THE TURQUOISE SEA was peaceful in the golden light of early evening, and the two men at the rail of the ship stood in silence, looking north to the misty horizon. One was tall and slim, wrapped in a heavy black cloak, its cowl flung back to reveal his long, milk-white hair; the other was short and red-headed.

“She was a fine woman and she loved you,” said the short man at length. “Why did you leave her so abruptly?”

“She was a fine woman,” the tall one replied, “but she would have loved me to her cost. Let her seek her own land and stay there. I have already slain one woman whom I loved, Moonglum. I would not slay another.”

Moonglum shrugged. “I sometimes wonder, Elric, if this grim destiny of yours is the figment of your own guilt-ridden mood.”

“Perhaps,” Elric replied carelessly. “But I do not care to test the theory. Let’s speak no more of this.”

The sea foamed and rushed by as the oars disrupted the surface, driving the ship swiftly towards the port of Dhakos, capital of Jharkor, one of the most powerful of the Young Kingdoms. Less than two years previously Jharkor’s king, Dharmit, had died in the ill-fated raid on Imrryr, and Elric had heard that the men of Jharkor blamed him for the king’s death, though this was not the case. He cared little whether they blamed him or not, for he was still disdainful of the greater part of mankind.

“Another hour will see nightfall, and it’s unlikely we’ll sail at night,” Moonglum said. “I’ll to bed, I think.”

Elric was about to reply when he was interrupted by a high-pitched shout from the crow’s nest.

“*Sail on larboard stern!*”

The lookout must have been half asleep, for the ship bearing down on them could easily be made out from the deck. Elric stepped aside as the captain, a dark-faced Tarkeshite, came running along the deck.

“What’s the ship, captain?” called Moonglum.

“A Pan Tang trireme—a warship. They’re on ramming course.” The captain ran on, yelling orders to the helm to turn the ship aside.

Elric and Moonglum crossed the deck to see the trireme better. She was a black-sailed ship, painted black and heavily gilded, with three rowers to an oar as against their two. She was big and yet elegant, with a high curving stern and a low prow. Now they could see the waters broken by her big, brass-sheathed ram. She had two lateen-rigged sails, and the wind was in her favour.

The rowers were in a panic as they sweated to turn the ship according to the helmsman's orders. Oars rose and fell in confusion and Moonglum turned to Elric with a half-smile.

"They'll never do it. Best ready your blade, friend."

Pan Tang was an isle of sorcerers, fully human, who sought to emulate the old power of Melniboné. Their fleets were among the best in the Young Kingdoms and raided with little discrimination. The Theocrat of Pan Tang, chief of the priest-aristocracy, was Jagreen Lern, who was reputed to have a pact with the powers of Chaos and a plan to rule the world.

Elric regarded the men of Pan Tang as upstarts who could never hope to mirror the glory of his ancestors, but even he had to admit that this ship was impressive and would easily win a fight with the Tarkeshite galley.

Soon the great trireme was bearing down on them and captain and helmsman fell silent as they realized they could not evade the ram. With a harsh sound of crushed timbers, the ram connected with the stern, holing the galley beneath the waterline.

Elric stood immobile, watching as the trireme's grappling irons hurtled towards their galley's deck. Somewhat half-heartedly, knowing they were no match for the well-trained and well-armoured Pan Tang crew, the Tarkeshites ran towards the stern, preparing to resist the boarders.

Moonglum cried urgently: "Elric—we must help!"

Reluctantly Elric nodded. He was loath to draw the runesword from its scabbard at his side. Of late its power seemed to have increased.

Now the scarlet-armoured warriors were swinging towards the waiting Tarkeshites. The first wave, armed with broadswords and battle-axes, hit the sailors, driving them back.

Now Elric's hand fell to the hilt of Stormbringer. As he gripped it and drew it, the blade gave an odd, disturbing moan, as if of anticipation, and a weird black radiance flickered along its length. Now it throbbed in Elric's hand like something alive as the albino ran forward to aid the Tarkeshite sailors.

Already half the defenders had been hewed down and as the rest retreated, Elric, with Moonglum at his heels, moved forward. The scarlet-armoured warriors' expressions changed from grim triumph to startlement as Elric's great black blade shrieked up and down and clove through a man's armour from shoulder to lower ribs.

Evidently they recognized him and the sword, for both were legendary. Though Moonglum was a skilled swordsman, they all but ignored him as they realized that they must concentrate all their strength on bringing Elric down if they were to survive.

The old, wild killing-lust of his ancestors now dominated Elric as the blade reaped souls. He and the sword became one and it was the sword, not Elric, that was in control. Men fell on all sides, screaming more in horror than in pain as they realized what the sword had drawn from them. Four came at him with axes whistling. He sliced off one's head, cut a deep gash in another's midriff, lopped off an arm, and drove the blade point first into the heart of the last. Now the Tarkeshites were cheering, following after Elric and Moonglum as they cleared the sinking galley's decks of attackers.

Howling like a wolf, Elric grabbed a rope—part of the black and golden trireme's rigging—and swung

towards the enemy's decks.

"Follow him!" Moonglum yelled. "This is our only chance—this ship's doomed!"

The trireme had raised decks fore and aft. On the foredeck stood the captain, splendid in scarlet and blue, his face aghast at this turn of events. He had expected to get his prize effortlessly; now it seemed *he* was to be the prize!

Stormbringer sang a wailing song as Elric pressed towards the foredeck, a song that was at once triumphant and ecstatic. The remaining warriors no longer rushed at him, and concentrated on Moonglum, who was leading the Tarkeshite crew, leaving Elric's path to the captain clear.

The captain, a member of the theocracy, would be harder to vanquish than his men. As Elric moved towards him, he noted that the man's armour had a peculiar glow to it—it had been sorcerously treated.

The captain was typical of his kind—stocky, heavily-bearded, with malicious black eyes over a strong, hooked nose. His lips were thick and red and he was smiling a little as, with axe in one hand and sword in the other, he prepared to meet Elric, who was running up the steps.

Elric gripped Stormbringer in both hands and lunged for the captain's stomach, but the man stepped sideways and parried with his sword, swinging the axe left-handed at Elric's unprotected head. The albino had to sway to one side, staggered, and fell to the deck, rolling as the broadsword thudded into the deck, just missing his shoulder. Stormbringer seemed to rise of its own accord to block a further axe blow and then chopped upwards to shear off the head near the handle. The captain cursed and discarded the handle, gripped his broadsword in both hands and raised it. Again Stormbringer acted a fraction sooner than Elric's own reactions. He drove the blade up towards the man's heart. The magic-treated armour stopped it for a second; but then Stormbringer shrilled a chilling, wailing song, shuddered as if summoning more strength, slipped on the armour again. And then the magic armour split like a nutshell, leaving Elric's opponent bare-chested, his arms still raised for the strike. His eyes widened. He backed away, his sword forgotten, his gaze fixed on the evil runeblade as it struck him under the breastbone and drove in. He grimaced, whimpered, and dropped his sword, clutching instead at the blade, which was sucking out his soul.

"By Chardros—not—not—aahhh!"

He died knowing that even his soul was not safe from the hellblade borne by the wolf-faced albino.

Elric wrenched Stormbringer from the corpse, feeling his own vitality increase as the sword passed on its stolen energy, refusing to consider the knowledge that the more he used the sword, the more he needed it.

On the deck of the trireme, only the galley-slaves were left alive. But the deck was tilting badly, for the trireme's ram and grapples still tied it to the sinking Tarkeshite ship.

"Cut the grappling ropes and back water—quickly!" Elric yelled. Sailors, realizing what was happening, leapt forward to do as he ordered. The slaves backed water, and the ram came out with a groan of split wood. The grapples were cut and the doomed galley set adrift.

Elric counted the survivors. Less than half the crew were alive, and their captain had died in the first onslaught. He addressed the slaves.

“If you’d have your freedom, row well towards Dhakos,” he called. The sun was setting, but now that he was in command he decided to sail through the night by the stars.

Moonglum shouted incredulously: “Why offer them their freedom? We could sell them in Dhakos and thus be paid for today’s exertion!”

Elric shrugged. “I offer them freedom because I choose to, Moonglum.”

The redhead sighed and turned to supervise the throwing of the dead and wounded overboard. He would never understand the albino, he decided. It was probably for the best.

And that was how Elric came to enter Dhakos in some style, when he had originally intended to slip into the city without being recognized.

Leaving Moonglum to negotiate the sale of the trireme and divide the money between the crew and himself, Elric drew his hood over his head and pushed through the crowd which had collected, making for an inn he knew of by the west gate of the city.

## CHAPTERTWO

Later that night, when Moonglum had gone to bed, Elric sat in the tavern room drinking. Even the most enthusiastic of the night’s roisterers had left when they had noticed with whom they shared the room; and now Elric sat alone, the only light coming from a guttering reed torch over the outside door.

Now the door opened and a richly dressed youth stood there, staring in.

“I seek the White Wolf,” he said, his head at a questioning angle. He could not see Elric clearly.

“I’m sometimes called that name in these parts,” Elric said calmly. “Do you seek Elric of Melniboné?”

“Aye. I have a message.” The youth came in, keeping his cloak wrapped about him, for the room was cold though Elric did not notice it.

“I am Count Yolán, deputy-commander of the city guard,” the youth said arrogantly, coming up to the table at which Elric sat and studying the albino rudely. “You are brave to come here so openly. Do you think the folk of Jharkor have such short memories they can forget that you led their king into a trap scarce two years since?”

Elric sipped his wine, then said from behind the rim of his cup: “This is rhetoric, Count Yolán. What is your message?”

Yolán’s assured manner left him; he made a rather weak gesture. “Rhetoric to you, perhaps—but I for one feel strongly on the matter. Would not King Dharmít be here today if you had not fled from the battle that broke the power of the sea-lords and your own folk? Did you not use your sorcery to aid you in your flight, instead of using it to aid the men who thought they were your comrades?”

Elric sighed. “I know your purpose here was not to bait me in this manner. Dharmít died on board his flagship during the first attack on Imrryn’s sea-maze, not in the subsequent battle.”

“You sneer at my questions and then proffer lame lies to cover your own cowardly deed,” Yolán said bitterly. “If I had my way you’d be fed to your hellblade there—I’ve heard what happened earlier.”

Elric rose slowly. “Your taunts tire me. When you feel ready to deliver your message, give it to the inn-keeper.”

He walked around the table, moving towards the stairs, but stopped as Yolan turned and plucked at his sleeve.

Elric’s corpse-white face stared down at the young noble. His crimson eyes flickered with a dangerous emotion. “I’m not used to such familiarity, young man.”

Yolan’s hand fell away. “Forgive me. I was self-indulgent and should not have let my emotions override diplomacy. I came on a matter of discretion—a message from Queen Yishana. She seeks your help.”

“I’m as disinclined to help others as I am to explain my actions,” Elric spoke impatiently. “In the past my help has not always been to the advantage of those who’ve sought it. Dharmit, your queen’s half-brother, discovered that.”

Yolan said sullenly: “You echo my own warnings to the queen, sir. For all that, she desires to see you in private—tonight. . .” he scowled and looked away. “I would point out that I could have you arrested should you refuse.”

“Perhaps.” Elric moved again towards the steps. “Tell Yishana that I stay the night here and move on at dawn. She may visit me if her request is so urgent.” He climbed the stairs, leaving a gape-mouthed Yolan sitting alone in the quiet of the tavern.

Theleb K’arna scowled. For all his skill in the black arts, he was a fool in love; and Yishana, sprawled on her fur-rich bed, knew it. It pleased her to have power over a man who could destroy her with a simple incantation if it were not for his love-weakness. Though Theleb K’arna stood high in the hierarchy of Pan Tang, it was clear to her that she was in no danger from the sorcerer. Indeed, her intuition informed her that this man who loved to dominate others also needed to be dominated. She filled this need for him—with relish.

Theleb K’arna continued to scowl at her. “How can that decadent spell-singer help you where I cannot?” he muttered, sitting down on the bed and stroking her bejeweled foot.

Yishana was not a young woman, neither was she pretty. Yet there was an hypnotic quality about her tall, full body, her lush black hair, and her wholly sensuous face. Few of the men she had singled out for her pleasure had been able to resist her.

Neither was she sweet-natured, just, wise, nor self-sacrificing. The historians would append no noble soubriquet to her name. Still, there was something so self-sufficient about her, something denying the usual standards by which a person was judged, that all who knew her admired her, and she was well-loved by those she ruled—loved rather as a willful child is loved, yet loved with firm loyalty.

Now she laughed quietly, mockingly at her sorcerer lover.

“You’re probably right, Theleb K’arna, but Elric is a legend—the most spoken-of, least-known man in the world. This is my opportunity to discover what others have only speculated on—his true character.”

Theleb K'aarna made a pettish gesture. He stroked his long black beard and got up, walking to a table bearing fruit and wine. He poured wine for them both. "If you seek to make me jealous again, you are succeeding, of course. I hold little hope for your ambition. Elric's ancestors were half-demons—his race is not human and cannot be judged by our yardsticks. To us, sorcery is learned after years of study and sacrifice—to Elric's kind, sorcery is intuitive—natural. You may not live to learn his secrets. Cymoril, his beloved cousin, died on his blade—and she was his betrothed!"

"Your concern is touching." She lazily accepted the goblet he handed to her. "But I'll continue with my plan, nonetheless. After all, you can hardly claim to have had much success in discovering the nature of this citadel!"

"There are subtleties I have not properly plumbed as yet!"

"Then perhaps Elric's intuition will provide answers where you fail," she smiled. Then she got up and looked through the window where the full moon hung in a clear sky over the spires of Dhakos. "Yolan is late. If all went properly, he should have brought Elric here by now."

"Yolan was a mistake. You should not have sent such a close friend of Dharmit's. For all we know, he's challenged Elric and killed him!"

Again she couldn't resist laughter. "Oh, you wish too hard—it clouds your reason. I sent Yolan because I knew he would be rude to the albino and perhaps weaken his usual insouciance—arouse his curiosity. Yolan was a kind of bait to bring Elric to us!"

"Then possibly Elric sensed this?"

"I am not overly intelligent, my love—but I think my instincts rarely betray me. We shall see soon."

A little later there was a discreet scratch at the door and a handmaiden entered.

"Your Highness, Count Yolan has returned."

"Only Count Yolan?" There was a smile on Theleb K'aarna's face. It was to disappear in a short while as Yishana left the room, garbed for the street.

"You are a fool!" he snarled as the door slammed. He flung down his goblet. Already he had been unsuccessful in the matter of the citadel and, if Elric displaced him, he could lose everything. He began to think very deeply, very carefully.

### CHAPTER THREE

Though he claimed lack of conscience, Elric's tormented eyes belied the claim as he sat at his window, drinking strong wine and thinking on the past. Since the sack of Imrryr, he had quested the world, seeking some purpose to his existence, some meaning to his life.

He had failed to find the answer in the Dead Gods' Book. He had failed to love Shaarilla, the wingless woman of Myyrrhn, failed to forget Cymoril, who still inhabited his nightmares. And there were memories of other dreams—of a fate he dare not think upon.

Peace, he thought, was all he sought. Yet even peace in death was denied him. It was in this mood that he continued to brood until his reverie was broken by a soft scratching at the door.

Immediately his expression hardened. His crimson eyes took on a guarded look, his shoulders lifted so that when he stood up he was all cool arrogance. He placed the cup on the table and said lightly:

“Enter!”

A woman entered, swathed in a dark red cloak, unrecognizable in the gloom of the room. She closed the door behind her and stood there, motionless and unspeaking.

When at length she spoke, her voice was almost hesitant, though there was some irony in it, too.

“You sit in darkness, Lord Elric, I had thought to find you asleep...”

“Sleep, madam, is the occupation that bores me most. But I will light a torch if you find the darkness unattractive.” He went to the table and removed the cover from the small bowl of charcoal which lay there. He reached for a thin wooden spill and placed one end in the bowl, blowing gently. Soon the charcoal glowed, and the taper caught, and he touched it to a reed torch that hung in a bracket on the wall above the table.

The torch flared and sent shadows skipping around the small chamber. The woman drew back her cowl and the light caught her dark, heavy features and the masses of black hair which framed them. She contrasted strongly with the slender, aesthetic albino who stood a head taller, looking at her impassively.

She was unused to impassive looks and the novelty pleased her.

“You sent for me, Lord Elric—and you see I am here.” She made a mock curtsy.

“Queen Yishana,” he acknowledged the curtsy with a slight bow. Now that she confronted him, she sensed his power—a power that perhaps attracted even more strongly than her own. And yet, he gave no hint that he responded to her. She reflected that a situation she had expected to be interesting might, ironically, become frustrating. Even this amused her.

Elric, in turn, was intrigued by this woman in spite of himself. His jaded emotions hinted that Yishana might restore their edge. This excited him and perturbed him at once.

He relaxed a little and shrugged. “I have heard of you, Queen Yishana, in other lands than Jharkor. Sit down if you wish.” He indicated a bench and seated himself on the edge of the bed.

“You are more courteous than your summons suggested,” she smiled as she sat down, crossed her legs, and folded her arms in front of her. “Does this mean that you will listen to a proposition I have?”

He smiled back. It was a rare smile for him, a little grim, but without the usual bitterness. “I think so. You are an unusual woman, Queen Yishana. Indeed, I would suspect that you had Melnibonéan blood if I did not know better.”

“Not all your Young Kingdom ‘upstarts’ are quite as unsophisticated as you believe, my lord.”

“Perhaps.”

“Now that I see you at last, face to face, I find your dark legend a little hard to credit in parts—and yet, on the other hand,” she put her head on one side and regarded him frankly, “it would seem that the

legends speak of a less subtle man than the one I see before me.”

“That is the way with legends.”

“Ah,” she half-whispered, “what a force we could be together, you and I...”

“Speculation of that sort irritates me, Queen Yishana. What is your purpose in coming here?”

“Very well, I did not expect you to listen, even.”

“I’ll listen—but expect nothing more.”

“Then listen. I think the story will be appreciated, even by you.”

Elric listened and, as Yishana had suspected, the tale she told began to catch his interest...

Several months ago, Yishana told Elric, peasants in the Gharavian province of Jharkor began to talk of some mysterious riders who were carrying off young men and women from the villages.

Suspecting bandits, Yishana had sent a detachment of her White Leopards, Jharkor’s finest fighting men, to the province to put down the brigands.

None of the White Leopards had returned. A second expedition had found no trace of them but, in a valley close to the town of Thokora, they had come upon a strange citadel. Descriptions of the citadel were confused. Suspecting that the White Leopards had attacked and been defeated, the officer in charge had used discretion, left a few men to watch the citadel and report anything they saw, and returned at once to Dhakos. One thing was certain—the citadel had not been in the valley a few months before.

Yishana and Theleb K’aarna had led a large force to the valley. The men left behind had disappeared but, as soon as he saw the citadel, Theleb K’aarna had warned Yishana not to attack.

“It was a marvelous sight, Lord Elric,” Yishana continued. “The citadel scintillated with shining, rainbow colours—colours that were constantly altering, changing. The whole building looked unreal—sometimes it stood out sharply; sometimes it seemed misty, as if about to vanish. Theleb K’aarna said its nature was sorcerous, and we did not doubt him. Something from the Realm of Chaos, he said, and that seemed likely.” She got up.

She spread her hands. “We are not used to large-scale manifestations of sorcery in these parts. Theleb K’aarna was familiar enough with sorcery—he comes from the City of Screaming Statues on Pan Tang, and such things are seen frequently—but even he was taken aback.”

“So you withdrew,” Elric prompted impatiently.

“We were about to—in fact Theleb K’aarna and myself were already riding back at the head of the army when the music came... It was sweet, beautiful, unearthly, painful—Theleb K’aarna shouted to me to ride as swiftly as I could away from it. I dallied, attracted by the music, but he slapped the rump of my horse and we rode, fast as dragons in flight, away from there. Those nearest us also escaped—but we saw the rest turn and move back towards the citadel, drawn by the music. Nearly two hundred men went



back—and vanished.”

“What did you do then?” Elric asked as Yishana crossed the floor and sat down beside him. He moved to give her more room.

“Theleb K’arna has been trying to investigate the nature of the citadel—its purpose and its controller. So far, his divinations have told him little more than he guessed: that the Realm of Chaos has sent the citadel to the Realm of Earth and is slowly extending its range. More and more of our young men and women are being abducted by the minions of Chaos.”

“And these minions?” Yishana had moved a little closer, and this time Elric did not move away.

“None who has sought to stop them has succeeded—few have lived.”

“And what do you seek of me?”

“Help.” She looked closely into his face and reached out a hand to touch him. “You have knowledge of both Chaos and Law—old knowledge, instinctive knowledge if Theleb K’arna is right. Why, your very gods are Lords of Chaos.”

“That is exactly true, Yishana—and because our patron gods are of Chaos, it is not in my interest to fight against any one of them.”

Now he moved towards her and he was smiling, looking into her eyes. Suddenly, he took her in his arms. “Perhaps you will be strong enough,” he said enigmatically, just before their lips met. “And as for the other matter—we can discuss that later.”



\* \* \*

In the deep greenness of a dark mirror, Theleb K'aarna saw something of the scene in Elric's room and he glowered impotently. He tugged at his beard as the scene faded for the tenth time in a minute. None of his mutterings could restore it. He sat back in his chair of serpent skulls and planned vengeance. That vengeance could take time maturing, he decided; for, if Elric could be useful in the matter of the citadel, there was no point in destroying him yet...

#### CHAPTERFOUR

Next afternoon, three riders set off for the town of Thokora. Elric and Yishana rode close together; but the third rider, Theleb K'aarna, kept a frowning distance. If Elric was at all embarrassed by this display on the part of the man he had ousted in Yishana's affections, he did not show it.

Elric, finding Yishana more than attractive in spite of himself, had agreed at least to inspect the citadel and suggest what it might be and how it might be fought. He had exchanged a few words with Moonglum before setting off.

They rode across the beautiful grasslands of Jharkor, golden beneath a hot sun. It was two days' ride to Thokora, and Elric intended to enjoy it.

Feeling less than miserable, he galloped along with Yishana, laughing with her in her enjoyment. Yet,

buried deeper than it would normally have been, there was a deep foreboding in his heart as they neared the mysterious citadel, and he noted that Theleb K'aarna occasionally looked satisfied when he should have looked disgruntled.

Sometimes Elric would shout to the sorcerer. "Ho, old spell-maker, do you feel no joyful release from the cares of the court out here amidst the beauties of nature? Your face is long, Theleb K'aarna—breathe in the untainted air and laugh with us!" Then Theleb K'aarna would scowl and mutter, and Yishana would laugh at him and glance brightly at Elric.

So they came to Thokora and found it a smouldering pit that stank like a midden of hell.

Elric sniffed. "This is Chaos work. You were right enough there, Theleb K'aarna. Whatever fire destroyed such a large town, it was not natural fire. Whoever is responsible for this is evidently increasing his power. As you know, sorcerer, the Lords of Law and Chaos are usually in perfect balance, neither tampering directly with our earth. Evidently the balance has tipped a little way to one side, as it sometimes does, favouring the Lords of Disorder—allowing them access to our realm. Normally it is possible for an earthly sorcerer to summon aid from Chaos or Law for a short time, but it is rare for either side to establish itself so firmly as our friend in the citadel evidently has. What is more disturbing—for you of the Young Kingdoms, at least—is that, once such power is gained, it is possible to increase it, and the Lords of Chaos could in time conquer the Realm of Earth by gradual increase of their strength here."

"A terrible possibility," muttered the sorcerer, genuinely afraid. Even though he could sometimes summon help from Chaos, it was in no human being's interest to have Chaos ruling over him.

Elric climbed back into his saddle. "We'd best make speed to the valley," he said.

"Are you sure it is wise, after witnessing this?" Theleb K'aarna was nervous.

Elric laughed. "What? And you a sorcerer from Pan Tang—that isle that claims to know as much of sorcery as my ancestors, the Bright Emperors! No, no—besides, I'm not in a cautious mood today!"

"Nor am I," cried Yishana, clapping her steed's sides. "Come, gentlemen—to the Citadel of Chaos!"

By late afternoon, they had topped the range of hills surrounding the valley and looked down at the mysterious citadel.

Yishana had described it well—but not perfectly. Elric's eyes ached as he looked at it, for it seemed to extend beyond the Realm of Earth into a different plane, perhaps several.

It shimmered and glittered and all earthly colours were there, as well as many which Elric recognized as belonging to other planes. Even the basic outline of the citadel was uncertain. In contrast, the surrounding valley was a sea of dark ash, which sometimes seemed to eddy, to undulate and send up spurting geysers of dust, as if the basic elements of nature had been disturbed, and warped by the presence of the supernatural citadel.

"Well?" Theleb K'aarna tried to calm his nervous horse as it backed away from the citadel. "Have you seen the like in the world before?"

Elric shook his head. "Not in this world, certainly; but I've seen it before. During my final initiation into the arts of Melniboné, my father took me with him in astral form to the Realm of Chaos, there to receive

the audience of my patron the Lord Arioch of the Seven Darks...”

Theleb K’aarna shuddered. “You have been to Chaos? It is Arioch’s citadel, then?”

Elric laughed in disdain. “That! No, it is a hovel compared to the palaces of the Lords of Chaos.”

Impatiently, Yishana said: “Then who dwells *there*?”

“As I remember, the one who dwelt in the citadel when I passed through the Chaos realm in my youth—he was no Lord of Chaos, but a kind of servant to the lords. Yet,” he frowned, “not exactly a servant...”

“*Ach!* You speak in riddles.” Theleb K’aarna turned his horse to ride down the hills, away from the citadel. “I know you Melnibonéans! Starving, you’d rather have a paradox than food!”

Elric and Yishana followed him some distance, then Elric stopped and pointed behind him.

“The one who dwells yonder is a paradoxical sort of fellow. He’s a kind of Jester to the Court of Chaos. The Lords of Chaos respect him—perhaps fear him slightly—even though he entertains them. He delights them with cosmic riddles, with farcical satires purporting to explain the nature of the Cosmic Hand that holds Chaos and Law in balance, he juggles enigmas like baubles, laughs at what Chaos holds dear, takes seriously that which they mock at...” He paused and shrugged. “So I have heard, at least.”

“Why should he be here?”

“Why should he be anywhere? I could guess at the motives of Chaos or Law and probably be right. But not even the Lords of the Higher Worlds can understand the motives of Balo the Jester. It is said that he is the only one allowed to move between the Realms of Chaos and Law at will, though I have never heard of him coming to the Realm of Earth before. Neither, for that matter, have I ever heard him credited with such acts of destruction as that which we’ve witnessed. It is a puzzle to me—one which would no doubt please him if he knew.”

“There would be one way of discovering the purpose of his visit,” Theleb K’aarna said with a faint smile. “If someone entered the citadel...”

“Come now, sorcerer,” Elric mocked. “I’ve little love for life, to be sure, but there are some things of value to me—my soul, for one!”

Theleb K’aarna began to ride on down the hill, but Elric remained thoughtfully where he was, Yishana beside him.

“You seem more troubled by this than you should be, Elric,” she said.

“It *is* disturbing. There is a hint here that, if we investigate the citadel further, we should become embroiled in some dispute between Balo and his masters—perhaps even the Lords of Law, too. To become so involved could easily mean our destruction, since the forces at work are more dangerous and powerful than anything we are familiar with on Earth.”

“But we cannot simply watch this Balo laying our cities waste, carrying off our fairest, threatening to rule Jharkor himself within a short time!”

Elric sighed, but did not reply.

“Have you no sorcery, Elric, to send Balo back to Chaos where he belongs, to seal the breach he has made in our realm?”

“Even Melnibonéans cannot match the power of the Lords of the Higher Worlds—and my forefathers knew much more of sorcery than do I. My best allies serve neither Chaos nor Law, they are elementals: Lords of Fire, Earth, Air, and Water, entities with affinities with beasts and plants. Good allies in an earthly battle—but of no great use when matched against one such as Balo. I must think... At least, if I opposed Balo it would not necessarily incur the wrath of my patron lords. Something, I suppose...”

The hills rolled green and lush to the grasslands at their feet, the sun beat down from a clear sky on the infinity of grass stretching to the horizon. Above them a large predatory bird wheeled; and Theleb K’aarna was a tiny figure, turning in the saddle to call to them in a thin voice, but his words could not be heard.

Yishana seemed dispirited. Her shoulders slightly slumped, and she did not look at Elric as she began to guide her horse slowly down towards the sorcerer of Pan Tang. Elric followed, conscious of his own indecision, yet half-careless of it. What did it matter to him if...?

The music began, faintly at first, but beginning to swell with an attractive, poignant sweetness, evoking nostalgic memories, offering peace and giving life a sharp meaning, all at once. If the music came from instruments, then they were not earthly. It produced in him a yearning to turn about and discover its source, but he resisted it. Yishana, on the other hand, was evidently not finding the music so easily resisted. She had wheeled completely round, her face radiant, her lips trembling and tears shining in her eyes.

Elric, in his wanderings in unearthly realms, had heard music like it before—it echoed many of the bizarre symphonies of old Melniboné—and it did not draw him as it drew Yishana. He recognized swiftly that she was in danger, and as she came past him, spurring her horse, he reached out to grab her bridle.

Her whip slashed at his hand and, cursing with unexpected pain, he dropped the bridle. She went past him, galloping up to the crest of the hill and vanishing over it in an instant.

“Yishana!” He shouted at her desperately, but his voice would not carry over the pulsing music. He looked back, hoping that Theleb K’aarna would lend help, but the sorcerer was riding rapidly away. Evidently, on hearing the music, he had come to a swift decision.

Elric raced after Yishana, screaming for her to turn back. His own horse reached the top of the hill and he saw her bent over her steed’s neck as she goaded it towards the shining citadel.

“*Yishana! You go to your doom!*”

Now she had reached the outer limits of the citadel, and her horse’s feet seemed to strike off shimmering waves of colour as they touched the Chaos-disturbed ground surrounding the place. Although he knew it was too late to stop her, Elric continued to speed after her, hoping to reach her before she entered the citadel itself.

But, even as he entered the rainbow swirl, he saw what appeared to be a dozen Yishanas going through a dozen gateways into the citadel. Oddly refracted light created the illusion and made it impossible to tell which was the real Yishana.

With Yishana's disappearance the music stopped and Elric thought he heard a faint whisper of laughter following it. His horse was by this time becoming increasingly difficult to control, and he did not trust himself to it. He dismounted, his legs wreathed in radiant mist, and let the horse go. It galloped off, snorting its terror.

Elric's hand moved to the hilt of his runesword, but he hesitated to draw it. Once pulled from its scabbard, the blade would demand souls before it allowed itself to be resheathed. Yet it was his only weapon. He withdrew his hand, and the blade seemed to quiver angrily at his side.

"Not yet, Stormbringer. There may be forces within who are stronger even than you!"

He began to wade through the faintly resisting light swirls. He was half-blinded by the scintillating colours around him, which sometimes shone dark blue, silver, and red; sometimes gold, light green, amber. He also felt the sickening lack of any sort of orientation—distance, depth, breadth, were meaningless. He recognized what he had only experienced in an astral form—the odd, timeless, spaceless quality that marked a realm of the Higher Worlds.

He drifted, pushing his body in the direction in which he guessed Yishana had gone, for by now he had lost sight of the gateway or any of its mirage images.

He realized that, unless he was doomed to drift here until he starved, he must draw Stormbringer, for the runeblade could resist the influence of Chaos.

This time, when he gripped the sword's hilt, he felt a shock run up his arm and infuse his body with vitality. The sword came free from the scabbard. From the huge blade, carved with strange old runes, a black radiance poured, meeting the shifting colours of Chaos and dispersing them.

Now Elric shrieked the age-old battle-ululation of his folk and pressed on into the citadel, slashing at the intangible images that swirled on all sides. The gateway was ahead, and Elric knew it now, for his sword had shown him which were the mirages. It was open as Elric reached the portal. He paused for a moment, his lips moving as he remembered an invocation that he might need later. Arioeh, Lord of Chaos, patron god-demon of his ancestors, was a negligent power and whimsical—he could not rely on Arioeh to aid him here, unless...

In slow graceful strides, a golden beast with eyes of ruby-fire was loping down the passage that led from the portal. Bright though the eyes were, they seemed blind, and its huge, doglike muzzle was closed. Yet its path could only lead it to Elric and, as it neared him, the mouth suddenly gaped showing coral fangs. In silence it came to a halt, the blind eyes never once settling on the albino, and then sprang!

Elric staggered back, raising the sword in defense. He was flung to the ground by the beast's weight and felt its body cover him. It was cold, cold, and it made no attempt to savage him—just lay on top of him and let the cold permeate his body.

Elric began to shiver as he pushed at the chilling body of the beast. Stormbringer moaned and murmured in his hand, and then it pierced some part of the beast's body, and a horrible cold strength began to fill the albino. Reinforced by the beast's own life-force, he heaved upwards. The beast continued to smother him, though now a thin, barely audible sound was coming from it. Elric guessed that Stormbringer's small wound was hurting the creature.

Desperately, for he was shaking and aching with cold, he moved the sword and stabbed again. Again

the thin sound from the beast; again cold energy flooded through him, and again he heaved. This time the beast was flung off and crawled back towards the portal. Elric sprang up, raised Stormbringer high, and brought the sword down on the golden creature's skull. The skull shattered as ice might shatter.

Elric ran forward into the passage and, once he was within, the place became filled with roars and shrieks that echoed and were magnified. It was as if the voice that the cold beast had lacked outside was shouting its death-agonies here.

Now the floor rose until he was running up a spiral ramp. Looking down, he shuddered, for he looked into an infinite pit of subtle, dangerous colours that swam about in such a way that he could hardly take his eyes from them. He even felt his body begin to leave the ramp and go towards the pit, but he strengthened his grip on the sword and disciplined himself to climb on.

Upwards, as he looked, was the same as downwards. Only the ramp had any kind of constancy, and this began to take on the appearance of a thinly cut jewel, through which he could see the pit and in which it was reflected.

Greens and blues and yellows predominated, but there were also traces of dark red, black, and orange, and many other colours not in an ordinary human spectrum.

Elric knew he was in some province of the Higher Worlds and guessed that it would not be long before the ramp led him to new danger.

Danger did not seem to await him when at last he came to the end of the ramp and stepped on to a bridge of similar stuff, which led over the scintillating pit to an archway that shone with a steady blue light.

He crossed the bridge cautiously and as cautiously entered the arch. Everything was blue-tinged here, even himself; and he trod on, the blue becoming deeper and deeper as he progressed.

Then Stormbringer began to murmur and, either warned by the sword or by some sixth sense of his own, Elric wheeled to his right. Another archway had appeared there and from this there began to shine a light as deep red as the other was blue. Where the two met was a purple of fantastic richness and Elric stared at this, experiencing a similar hypnotic pull as he had felt when climbing the ramp. Again his mind was stronger, and he forced himself to enter the red arch. At once another arch appeared to his left, sending a beam of green light to merge with the red, and another to his left brought yellow light, one ahead brought mauve until he seemed trapped within the criss-cross of beams. He slashed at them with Stormbringer, and the black radiance reduced the beams for a moment to streamers of light, which re-formed again. Elric continued to move forward.

Now, looming through the confusion of colour, a shape appeared and Elric thought it was that of a man.

Man it was in shape—but not in size it seemed. Yet, when it drew closer, it was no giant—less than Elric's height. Still it gave the *impression* of vast proportions, rather as if it *were* a giant and Elric had grown to its size.

It blundered towards Elric and went *through* him. It was not that the man was intangible—it was Elric who felt the ghost. The creature's mass seemed of incredible density. The creature was turning, its huge hands reaching out, its face a mocking grimace. Elric struck at it with Stormbringer and was astonished as the runesword was halted, making no impression on the creature's bulk.

Yet when it grasped Elric, its hands went through him. Elric backed away, grinning now in relief. Then he

saw with some terror that the light was gleaming through him. He had been right— *hewas* the ghost!

The creature reached out for him again, grabbed him again, failed to hold him.

Elric, conscious that he was in no physical danger from the monster, yet also highly conscious that his sanity was about to be permanently impaired, turned and fled.

Quite suddenly he was in a hall, the walls of which were of the same unstable, shifting colours as the rest of the place. But sitting on a stool in the centre of the hall, holding in his hands some tiny creatures that seemed to be running about on his palm, was a small figure who looked up at Elric and grinned merrily.

“Welcome, King of Melniboné. And how fares the last ruler of my favourite earthly race?”

The figure was dressed in shimmering motley. On his head was a tall, spiked crown—a travesty of and a comment upon the crowns of the mighty. His face was angular and his mouth wide.

“Greetings, Lord Balo,” Elric made a mock bow. “Strange hospitality you offer in your welcome.”

“Ahaha—it did not amuse you, eh? Men are so much harder to please than gods—you would not think it, would you?”

“Men’s pleasures are rarely so elaborate. Where is Queen Yishana?”

“Allow me my pleasure also, mortal. Here she is, I think.” Balo plucked at one of the tiny creatures on his palm. Elric stepped forward and saw that Yishana was indeed there, as were many of the lost soldiers. Balo looked up at him and winked. “They are so much easier to handle in this size.”

“I do not doubt it, though I wonder if it is not we who are larger rather than they who are smaller. . .”

“You are astute, mortal. But can you guess how this came to be?”

“Your creature back there—your pits and colours and archways—somehow they warp—what?”

“ *Mass*, King Elric. But you would not understand such concepts. Even the Lords of Melniboné, most godlike and intelligent of mortals, only learned how to manipulate the elements in ritual invocation and spell, but never understood what they manipulated—that is where the Lords of the Higher Worlds score, whatever their differences.”





“But I survived without need for spells. I survived by disciplining my mind!”

“That helped, for certain—but you forget your greatest asset—that disturbing blade there. You use it in your petty problems to aid you, and you never realize that it is like making use of a mighty war galley to catch a sprat. That sword represents power in *any* realm, King Elric!”

“Aye, so it might. This does not interest me. Why are you here, Lord Balo?”

Balo chuckled, his laughter rich and musical. “Oho, I am in disgrace. I quarreled with my masters, who took exception to a joke of mine about their insignificance and egotism, about their destiny and their pride. Bad taste to them, king, is any hint of their own oblivion. I made a joke in bad taste. I fled from the Higher Worlds to Earth, where, unless invoked, the Lords of Law or Chaos can rarely interfere. You will like my intention, Elric, as would any Melnibonéan—I intend to establish my own realm on Earth—the Realm of Paradox. A little from Law, a little from Chaos—a realm of opposites, of curiosities and jokes.”

“I’m thinking we already have such a world as you describe, Lord Balo, with no need for you to create it!”

“Earnest irony, King Elric, for an insouciant man of Melniboné.”

“Ah, that it may be. I am a boor on occasions such as these. Will you release Yishana and myself?”

“But you and I are giants—I have given you the status and appearance of a god. You and I could be partners in this enterprise of mine!”

“Unfortunately, Lord Balo, I do not possess your range of humour and am unfitted for such an exalted role. Besides,” Elric grinned suddenly, “it is in my mind that the Lords of the Higher Worlds will not easily let drop the matter of your ambition, since it appears to conflict so strongly with theirs.”

Balo laughed but said nothing.

Elric also smiled, but it was an attempt to hide his racing thoughts. “What do you intend to do if I refuse?”

“Why, Elric, you would not refuse! I can think of many subtle pranks that I could play on you...”

“Indeed? And the Black Swords?”

“Ah, yes...”

“Balo, in your mirth and obsessions you have not considered everything thoroughly. You should have exerted more effort to vanquish me before I came here.”

Now Elric’s eyes gleamed hot and he lifted the sword, crying:

*“Arioch! Master! I invoke thee, Lord of Chaos!”*

Balo started. “Cease that, King Elric!”

*“Arioch—here is a soul for you to claim!”*

“Quiet, I say!”

*“Arioch! Hear me!”* Elric’s voice was loud and desperate.

Balo let his tiny playthings fall and rose hurriedly, skipping towards Elric.

“Your invocation is unheeded!” He laughed, reaching out for Elric. But Stormbringer moaned and shuddered in Elric’s hand and Balo withdrew his hand. His face became serious and frowning.

*“Arioch of the Seven Darks—your servant calls you!”*

The walls of flame trembled and began to fade. Balo’s eyes widened and jerked this way and that.

*“Oh, Lord Arioch—come reclaim your straying Balo!”*

“You cannot!” Balo scampered across the room where one section of the flame had faded entirely, revealing darkness beyond.

“Sadly for you, little jester, he can...” The voice was sardonic and yet beautiful. From the darkness stepped a tall figure, no longer the shapeless gibbering thing that had, of late, been Arioch’s favoured manifestation when visiting the Realm of Earth. Yet the great beauty of the newcomer, filled as it was with a kind of compassion mingled with pride, cruelty, and sadness, showed at once that he could not be human. He was clad in doublet of pulsing scarlet, hose of ever-changing hue, a long golden sword at his hips. His eyes were large, but slanted high, his hair was long and as golden as the sword, his lips were full and his chin pointed like his ears.

“Arioch!” Balo stumbled backwards as the Lord of Chaos advanced.

“It was your mistake, Balo,” Elric said from behind the jester. “Did you not realize only the Kings of Melniboné may invoke Arioch and bring him to the Realm of Earth? It has been their age-old privilege.”

“And much have they abused it,” said Arioch, smiling faintly as Balo groveled. “However, this service you have done us, Elric, will make up for past misuses. I was not amused by the matter of the Mist Giant...”

Even Elric was awed by the incredibly powerful presence of the Chaos Lord. He also felt much relieved,

for he had not been sure that Arioch could be summoned in this way.

Now Arioch stretched an arm down towards Balo and lifted the jester by his collar so that he jerked and struggled in the air, his face writhing in fear and consternation.

Arioch took hold of Balo's head and squeezed it. Elric looked on in amazement as the head began to shrink. Arioch took Balo's legs and bent them in, folding Balo up and kneading him in his slender, inhuman hands until he was a small, solid ball. Arioch then popped the ball into his mouth and swallowed it.

"I have not eaten him, Elric," he said with another faint smile. "It is merely the easiest way of transporting him back to the realms from which he came. He has transgressed and will be punished. All this"—he waved an arm to indicate the citadel—"is unfortunate and contradicts the plans we of Chaos have for Earth—plans which will involve you, our servant, and make you mighty."

Elric bowed to his master. "I'm honoured, Lord Arioch, though I seek no favours."

Arioch's silvery voice lost some of its beauty and his face seemed to cloud for a second. "You are pledged to serve Chaos, Elric, as were your ancestors. You *will* serve Chaos! The time draws near when both Law and Chaos will battle for the Realm of Earth—and Chaos shall win! Earth will be incorporated into our realm and you will join the hierarchy of Chaos, become immortal as we are!"

"Immortality offers little to me, my lord."

"Ah, Elric, have the men of Melniboné become as the half-apes who now dominate Earth with their puny 'civilizations'? Are you no better than those Young Kingdom upstarts? Think what we offer!"

"I shall, my lord, when the time you mention comes." Elric's head was still lowered.

"You shall indeed." Arioch raised his arms. "Now to transport this toy of Balo's to its proper realm, and redress the trouble he has caused, lest some hint reaches our opponents before the proper time."

Arioch's voice swelled like the singing of a million brazen bells and Elric sheathed his sword and clapped his hands over his ears to stop the pain.

Then Elric felt his body seem to *shred* apart, swell and stretch until it became like smoke drifting on air. Then, faster, the smoke began to be drawn together, becoming denser and denser and he seemed to be shrinking now. All around him were rolling banks of colour, flashes and indescribable noises. Then came a vast blackness and he closed his eyes against the images that seemed reflected in the blackness.

When he opened them he stood in the valley and the singing citadel was gone. Only Yishana and a few surprised-looking soldiers stood there. Yishana ran towards him.

"Elric—was it you who saved us?"

"I must claim only part of the credit," he said.

"Not all my soldiers are here," she said, inspecting the men. "Where are the rest—and the villagers abducted earlier?"

"If Balo's tastes are like his masters', then I fear they now have the honour of being part of a demigod.

The Lords of Chaos are not flesh-eaters, of course, being of the Higher Worlds, but there is something they savour in men which satisfies them. . . .”

Yishana hugged her body as if in cold. “He was huge—I cannot believe that his citadel could contain his bulk!”

“The citadel was more than a dwelling-place, that was obvious. Somehow it changed size, shape—and other things I cannot describe. Arioch of Chaos transported it and Balo back to where they belong.”

“Arioch! But he is one of the Greatest Six! How did he come to Earth?”

“An old pact with my remote ancestors. By calling him they allow him to spend a short time in our realm, and he repays them with some favour. This was done.”

“Come, Elric,” she took his arm. “Let’s away from the valley.”

Elric was weak and enfeebled by the efforts of summoning Arioch, and the experiences he had had before and since the episode. He could hardly walk; and soon it was Yishana who supported him as they made slow progress, the dazed warriors following in their wake, towards the nearest village, where they could obtain rest and horses to take them back to Dhakos.

## CHAPTER FIVE

As they staggered past the blasted ruins of Thokora, Yishana pointed suddenly at the sky.

“What is that?”

A great shape was winging its way towards them. It had the appearance of a butterfly, but a butterfly with wings so huge they blotted out the sun.

“Can it be some creature of Balo’s left behind?” she speculated.

“Hardly likely,” he replied. “This has the appearance of a monster conjured by a human sorcerer.”

“Theleb K’aarna!”

“He has surpassed himself,” Elric said wryly. “I did not think him capable.”

“It is his vengeance on us, Elric!”

“That seems reasonable. But I am weak, Yishana—and Stormbringer needs souls if it is to replenish my strength.” He turned a calculating eye on the warriors behind him who were gaping up at the creature as it came nearer. Now they could see it had a man’s body, covered with hairs or feathers hued like a peacock’s.

The air whistled as it descended, its fifty-foot wings dwarfing the seven feet of head and body. From its head grew two curling horns, and its arms terminated in long talons.

“We are doomed, Elric!” cried Yishana. She saw that the warriors were fleeing and she cried after them to come back. Elric stood there passively, knowing that alone he could not defeat the butterfly-creature.

“Best go with them, Yishana,” he murmured. “I think it will be satisfied with me.”

“No!”

He ignored her and stepped towards the creature as it landed and began to glide over the ground in his direction. He drew a quiescent Stormbringer, which felt heavy in his hand. A little strength flowed into him, but not enough. His only hope was to strike a good blow at the creature’s vitals and draw some of its own life-force into himself.

The creature’s voice shrilled at him, and the strange, insane face twisted as he approached. Elric realized that this was no true supernatural denizen of the nether worlds, but a once-human creature warped by Theleb K’aarna’s sorcery. At least it was mortal, and he had only physical strength to contend with. In better condition it would have been easy for him—but now...

The wings beat at the air as the taloned hands grasped at him. He took Stormbringer in both hands and swung the runeblade at the thing’s neck. Swiftly the wings folded in to protect its neck and Stormbringer became entangled in the strange, sticky flesh. A talon caught Elric’s arm, ripping it to the bone. He yelled in pain and yanked the sword from the enfolding wing.

He tried to steady himself for another blow, but the monster grabbed his wounded arm and began drawing him towards its now lowered head—and the horns that curled from it.

He struggled, hacking at the thing’s arms with the extra strength that came with the threat of death.

Then he heard a cry from behind him and saw a figure from the corner of his eye, a figure that leapt forward with two blades gleaming in either hand. The swords slashed at the talons and with a shriek the creature turned on Elric’s would-be rescuer.

It was Moonglum. Elric fell backwards, breathing hard, as he watched his little red-headed friend engage the monster.

But Moonglum would not survive for long, unless aided.

Elric racked his brain for some spell that would help; but he was too weak, even if he could think of one, to raise the energy necessary to summon supernatural help.

And then it came to him! Yishana! She was not as exhausted as he. But could she do it?

He turned as the air moaned to the beating of the creature’s wings. Moonglum was only just managing to hold it off, his two swords flashing rapidly as he parried every effort to grasp him.

“Yishana!” croaked the albino.

She came up to him and placed a hand on his. “We could leave, Elric—perhaps hide from that thing.”

“No. I must help Moonglum. Listen—you realize how desperate our position is, do you not? Then keep that in mind while you recite this rune with me. Perhaps together we may succeed. There are many kinds of lizards in these parts, are there not?”

“Aye—many.”

“Then this is what you must say—and remember that we shall all perish by Theleb K’aarna’s servant if you are not successful.”

In the half worlds, where dwelt the master-types of all creatures other than Man, an entity stirred, hearing its name. The entity was called Haaashaastaak; and it was scaly and cold, with no true intellect, such as men and gods possessed, but an *awareness* which served it as well if not better. It was brother, on this plane, to such entities as Meerclar, Lord of the Cats, Roofdrak, Lord of the Dogs, Nuru-ah, Lord of the Cattle, and many, many others. This was Haaashaastaak, Lord of the Lizards. It did not really hear words in the exact sense, but it heard rhythms which meant much to it, even though it did not know why. The rhythms were being repeated over and over again, but seemed too faint to be worth much attention. It stirred and yawned, but did nothing...

“Haaashaastaak, Lord of Lizards,

Your children were fathers of men,

Haaashaastaak, Prince of Reptiles,

Come aid a grandchild now!

“Haaashaastaak, Father of Scales,

Cold-blooded bringer of life...”

It was a bizarre scene, with Elric and Yishana desperately chanting the rune over and over again as Moonglum fought on, slowly losing strength.

Haaashaastaak quivered and became more curious. The rhythms were no stronger, yet they seemed more insistent. He would travel, he decided, to that place where those he watched over dwelt. He knew that if he answered the rhythms, he would have to obey whatever source they had. He was not, of course, aware that such decisions had been implanted into him in a far distant age—the time before the creation of Earth, when the Lords of Law and Chaos, then inhabitants of a single realm and known by another name, had watched over the forming of things and laid down the manner and logic in which things should behave, following their great edict from the voice of the Cosmic Balance—the voice which had never spoken since.

Haaashaastaak betook himself, a little slothfully, to Earth.

Elric and Yishana were still chanting hoarsely, as Haaashaastaak made his sudden appearance. He had the look of a huge iguana, and his eyes were many-coloured, many-faceted jewels, his scales seeming of gold, silver, and other rich metals. A slightly hazy outline surrounded him, as if he had brought part of his own environment with him.

Yishana gasped and Elric breathed a deep sigh. As a child he had learned the languages of all

animal-masters, and now he must recall the simple language of the lizard-master, Haaashaastaak.

His need fired his brain, and the words came suddenly.

“*Haaashaastaak*,” he cried pointing at the butterfly-creature, “*mokik ankkuh!*”

The lizard lord turned its jeweled eyes on the creature and its great tongue suddenly shot out towards it, curling around the monster. It shrilled in terror as it was drawn towards the lizard lord’s great maw. Legs and arms kicked as the mouth closed on it. Several gulps and Haaashaastaak had swallowed Theleb K’aarna’s prize creation. Then it turned its head uncertainly about for a few moments and vanished.

Pain began to throb now through Elric’s torn arm as Moonglum staggered towards him, grinning in relief.

“I followed behind you at a distance as you requested,” he said, “since you suspected treachery from Theleb K’aarna. But then I spied the sorcerer coming this way and followed him to a cave in yonder hills,” he pointed. “But when the deceased,” he laughed shakily, “emerged from the cave, I decided that it would be best to chase *that*, for I had the feeling it was going in your direction.”

“I am glad you were so astute,” Elric said.

“It was your doing, really,” Moonglum replied. “For, if you hadn’t anticipated treachery from Theleb K’aarna, I might not have been here at the right moment.” Moonglum suddenly sank to the grass, leaned back, grinned, and fainted.

Elric felt very dazed himself. “I do not think we need fear anything more from your sorcerer just yet, Yishana,” he said. “Let us rest here and refresh ourselves. Perhaps then your cowardly soldiers will have returned, and we can send them to a village to get us some horses.”

They stretched out on the grass and, lying in each other’s arms, went to sleep.

Elric was astonished to wake in a bed, a soft bed. He opened his eyes and saw Yishana and Moonglum smiling down at him.

“How long have I been here?”

“More than two days. You did not wake when the horses came, so we had the warriors construct a stretcher to bear you to Dhakos. You are in my palace.”

Elric cautiously moved his stiff, bandaged arm. It was still painful. “Are my belongings still at the inn?”

“Perhaps, if they have not been stolen. Why?”

“I have a pouch of herbs there, which will heal this arm quickly and also supply me with a little strength, which I need badly.”

“I will go and see if they are still there,” Moonglum said and walked from the chamber.

Yishana stroked Elric’s milk-white hair. “I have much to thank you for, wolf,” said she. “You have saved my kingdom—perhaps all the Young Kingdoms. In my eyes you are redeemed for my brother’s death.”

“Oh, I thank you, madam,” said Elric with a mocking tone.

She laughed. “You are still a Melnibonéan.”

“Still that, aye.”

“A strange mixture, however. Sensitive and cruel, sardonic and loyal to your little friend Moonglum. I look forward to knowing you better, my lord.”

“As to that, I am not sure if you will have the opportunity.”

She gave him a hard look. “Why?”

“Your résumé of my character was incomplete, Queen Yishana—you should have added ‘careless of the world—and yet vengeful’. I wish to be revenged on your pet wizard.”

“But he is spent, surely—you said so yourself.”

“I am, as you remarked, still a Melnibonéan! My arrogant blood calls vengeance on an upstart!”

“Forget Theleb K’aarna. I will have him hunted by my White Leopards. Even his sorcery will not win against such savages as they are!”

“Forget him? Oh, no!”

“Elric, Elric—I will give you my kingdom, declare you ruler of Jharkor, if you will let me be your consort.”

He reached out and stroked her bare arm with his good hand.

“You are unrealistic, queen. To take such an action would bring wholesale rebellion in your land. To your folk, I am still the Traitor of Imrryr.”

“Not now—now you are the Hero of Jharkor.”

“How so? They did not know of their peril and thus will feel no gratitude. It were best that I settled my debt with your wizard and went on my way. The streets must already be full of rumours that you have taken your brother’s murderer to your bed. Your popularity with your subjects must be at its lowest, madam.”

“I do not care.”

“You will if your nobles lead the people in insurrection and crucify you naked in the city square.”

“You are familiar with our customs.”

“We Melnibonéans are a learned folk, queen.”

“Well versed in all the arts.”



“All of them.” Again he felt his blood race as she rose and barred the door. At that moment he felt no need for the herbs which Moonglum had gone to find.

When he tiptoed from the room that night, he found Moonglum waiting patiently in the ante-chamber. Moonglum proffered the pouch with a wink. But Elric’s mood was not light. He took bunches of herbs from the pouch and selected what he needed.

Moonglum grimaced as he watched Elric chew and swallow the stuff. Then together they stole from the palace.

Armed with Stormbringer and mounted, Elric rode slightly behind his friend as Moonglum led the way towards the hills beyond Dhakos.

“If I know the sorcerers of Pan Tang,” murmured the albino, “then Theleb K’aarna will be more exhausted than was I. With luck we will come upon him sleeping.”

“I shall wait outside the cave in that case,” said Moonglum, for he now had some experience of Elric’s vengeance-taking and did not relish watching Theleb K’aarna’s slow death.

They galloped speedily until the hills were reached and Moonglum showed Elric the cave mouth.

Leaving his horse, the albino went soft-footed into the cave, his runesword ready.

Moonglum waited nervously for Theleb K’aarna’s first shrieks, but none came. He waited until dawn began to bring the first faint light and then Elric, face frozen with anger, emerged from the cave.

Savagely he grasped his horse’s reins and swung himself into the saddle.

“Are you satisfied?” Moonglum asked tentatively.

“Satisfied, no! The dog has vanished!”

“Gone—but...”

“He was more cunning than I thought. There are several caves and I sought him in all of them. In the farthest I discovered traces of sorcerous runes on the walls and floor. He has transported himself somewhere and I could not discover where, in spite of deciphering most of the runes! Perhaps he went to Pan Tang.”

“Ah, then our quest has been futile. Let us return to Dhakos and enjoy a little more of Yishana’s hospitality.”

“No—we go to Pan Tang.”

“But, Elric, Theleb K’aarna’s brother sorcerers dwell there in strength; and Jagreen Lern, the theocrat, forbids visitors!”

“No matter. I wish to finish my business with Theleb K’aarna.”

“You have no proof that he is there!”

“*No matter!*”

And then Elric was spurring his horse away, riding like a man possessed or fleeing from dreadful peril—and perhaps he was both possessed and fleeing. Moonglum did not follow at once but thoughtfully watched his friend gallop off. Not normally introspective, he wondered if Yishana had perhaps affected the albino more strongly than he would have wished. He did not think that vengeance on Theleb K’aarna was Elric’s prime desire in refusing to return to Dhakos.

Then he shrugged and slapped his heels to his steed’s flanks, racing to catch up with Elric as the cold dawn rose, wondering if they would continue towards Pan Tang once Dhakos was far enough behind.

But Elric’s head contained no thoughts, only emotion flooded him—emotion he did not wish to analyze. His white hair streaming behind him, his dead-white, handsome face set, his slender hands tightly clutching the stallion’s reins, he rode. And only his strange, crimson eyes reflected the misery and conflict within him.

In Dhakos that morning, other eyes held misery, but not for too long. Yishana was a pragmatic queen.

## THE JADE MAN’S EYES

(1973)

...Now there was a certain sorcerer of Pan Tang called Theleb K’aarna. Elric, whose vengeful emotions had already brought much grief to himself and others, bore a grudge against the sorcerer and spent three years in pursuit of him until he was at last tracked to Bakshaan, a city rich enough to make all the other cities of the North East seem poor, where, in a melancholy adventure, he was slain at last.

...Short-statured Moonglum, of the red-hair and wide grin, wanted to head south-east for the peaceful lands of Ilmiora, but Elric was drawn back to the Southern Continent where he spent the winter squandering his treasure in the cities of Argimiliar, seeking an impossible consolation...

—*The Chronicle of the Black Sword*

## CHAPTER ONE

OF ALL THE cities of the Young Kingdoms the city named Chalal was deemed the most beautiful. Some said that it ranked with Imrryr, the Dreaming City of Melniboné, but those who had seen both said that Chalal’s beauty was more humane.

Chalal had been built on both banks of the river Cha which ran through the country of Pikarayd, laid out by a line of artist kings according to the original conception of Mornir the First. Its broad avenues were overlooked by monuments, statues and widely spaced buildings of singularly delicate architecture. White marble, polished granite and alabaster shone in the clear, bright air and there were fine lawns, gardens

and evergreens, fountains and mazes, all designed by the greatest artists of the Young Kingdoms through many generations. Chalal was Pikarayd's greatest treasure and for a long while the country had been pauperized to create it.

It happened that one springtime two strange men came to Chalal. They rode their weary Shazarian horses along the quays of marble and lapis lazuli beside the fast-flowing river. One was very tall, with a bone-white skin, crimson eyes and hair the colour of milk and he carried a huge, scabbarded broadsword at his side. The other was short with red hair and a sardonic expression on his face. He bore two swords, one of which was long and curved while its mate was scarcely bigger than a dagger.

Both the men had evidently been traveling for some time, for their clothes were dusty and their features grimed. They might have been unsuccessful merchants or mercenaries who were between wars. But some who saw them enter Chalal recognized the tall man and guessed who his companion was. Those who did recognize the newcomers did not greet their arrival with any pleasure for Elric of Melniboné was known as a murderer, a traitor and a killer of his own kin who brought horror and destruction wherever he went.

Moonglum of Elwher grinned as they passed a glowering face near one of the many lovely bridges which crossed the Cha.

"I do not think we are welcome here, Elric."

Elric shrugged and gave a half smile. "Who can blame them for not wanting us here to disturb the tranquility of their city?"

Moonglum grinned through his mask of dust. "Mayhap they are willing to pay us to go elsewhere? Our purses sag like the stomachs of starved cows thanks to your extravagance. Chalal is said to be an expensive city. Every traveler must pay a tax towards the upkeep of all this beauty."

"They'll have trouble obtaining that tax from us. Come, let's cross this bridge and seek a hostelry we can afford."

They turned their horses and began to trot over a bridge of carved granite decorated with statues of Pikarayd's mythical heroes.

They were almost halfway across when Moonglum pointed ahead. A company of horsemen were riding at great speed towards the bridge. They were clad in gilded armour and heavy white cloaks drifted out behind them. Their leader had a full helm with a crest of scarlet plumes. His visor was shut and completely hid his face. Politely, Moonglum and Elric drew their own horses aside to let the cavalry pass. The leader acknowledged this action with a salute as he went by and then jerked his helm round to regard Elric as if in recognition. Then the horsemen had ridden past and continued up a broad avenue between chestnut trees whose leaves had just begun to open.

"That knight must have seen you before," Moonglum said. "By the style of his arms he was not of Chalal. I pray he's not one of those who bears a grudge against you."

"There are many such," Elric said carelessly, "but none has ever managed to satisfy his vengeance."

"They would be fools to try while you bear the Black Sword."

"Aye." Elric sighed and pretended to take an interest in the workmanship of an archway under which

they now rode.

They spent the next several hours in searching for an inn but could not find one they could afford for even one night. There were no poor quarters in Chahal, no hostelries which catered for those with little money. Their enquiries revealed that the nearest township was a good two days' ride away.

Night fell and Moonglum's expression grew increasingly downcast.

"We must find an income, friend Elric," he said. "Could you not magic us a treasure?"

"I have no skill in such conjurings," Elric replied absently.

"Then we must seek employment. Merchants come and go from here. Perhaps they would pay us to protect their caravans. If we want to quarter where the traders stay we might..."



"Do what you will, Moonglum." Elric dismounted from his horse and led it towards a great marble monument that had been erected upon a lawn of small, white flowers. The horse began to crop at the flowers and Elric settled himself with his back at the base of the monument. "I'll sleep here. The night is warm enough." He wrapped his weather-stained cloak about him and closed his eyes.

Moonglum knew that it was impossible to talk to his friend when he sank into one of these moods. He hesitated for a moment, and then rode off towards the river.

The night grew colder and Elric awoke shivering from a dark dream. Clouds had covered the moon and it was hard to see more than a few feet in any direction. He got up and stretched his arms. Then he saw the lights. There were about a dozen of them bobbing along the road towards him. He leaned against the monument and watched them with curiosity. He soon saw that the lights were lanterns carried by horsemen dressed in leather caps and jerkins, bearing oval shields, swords and staves. When they saw Elric they dismounted and approached him in a body, opening their lanterns so that light fell upon him.

The leader peered at Elric whose face was hidden in the cowl of his cloak.

“What do you here, stranger?”

“I was attempting to sleep,” Elric replied. “But you and your weather have prevented that between you.”

“Why do you not sleep in one of the hostelries yonder?”

“Because I cannot afford their prices,” Elric said reasonably.

“Have you paid the Traveler’s Tax?”

“I have not.”

The leader had a red, belligerent face and now it frowned deeply. “Then you have broken two of Chalal’s few laws already and doubtless there are others you have broken which we shall yet discover.”

“Doubtless. Now be about your business, friend, and I will attempt to continue my sleep.”

“You are addressing an official of the Watch,” said the man pursing his lips. “It is my duty to collect the Traveler’s Tax and to arrest vagrants who offend the eye of those who come to look upon Chalal’s beauty.”

“I would advise you to forget your duty in this instance,” Elric said softly. “I care nothing for the laws of mankind and these laws of yours seem of even smaller importance than most. Begone!”

“By Valsaq, you’re impertinent! I’m a tolerant man. I might even have had mercy on you if you had agreed to leave at once. But now...”

Elric pushed back his cloak and put his hand on Stormbringer’s hilt. The sword stirred slightly. “I tell you to go,” he said grimly. “You will surely die if I draw this blade!”

The captain of the Watch smiled and indicated the dozen men behind him. “Do not be foolish, stranger. Your penalty will be light if you suffer us to arrest you without resort to our swords. But if you should kill one of us you will be imprisoned for life, working in the masons’ yards dragging great stones hither and yon with a whip to make you work harder...”

“I will kill all of you if this sword’s unsheathed,” Elric promised. “Know you that I am Prince Elric of Melniboné and I bear the Black Sword!”

The captain's red face blanched. Then he straightened his shoulders. "Nonetheless I must perform my duty. Men—"

"What is this undignified altercation? Captain, are you aware that you address my friend, Prince Elric?"

The captain turned, evidently in relief to stare at the newcomer who had just ridden up. He was a man of about forty with a square, handsome face, dressed in gilded armour over which was arranged a white cloak. A helm crested with scarlet feathers was on his head. It was the man who had recognized Elric earlier that day. But Elric had never seen him before.

"He cannot pay the Traveler's Tax, my lord," the captain said weakly. "I had no choice but to..."

The horseman drew a small purse from his belt and flung it to land at the captain's feet. "There is the tax—and more."

The captain of the Watch bent and picked up the purse. He opened it and peered inside. "Thank you, my lord. Come, men." Hastily he backed away and returned to where he had left his horse. The Watch rode off leaving Elric looking at the man in gilded armour who smiled at the albino's surprise.

"I thank you, sir," said Elric. "I had no wish to kill them. But..."

The knight gestured towards Elric's horse. "Will you mount and ride with me? I would be honoured if you would be my guest for this night."

"I am not one who seeks charity, sir."

"I know that, my lord. It is I who seek your aid. I have been searching for you for several months."

"What is the nature of the aid you desire?"

"Perhaps you will allow me to explain that over a meal at the house I have taken in Chalal. It is not too far distant."

Elric liked the look of the man and responded to his courtesy. "Thank you," he said. "I would be grateful." He went to his horse and mounted it. Then they rode off together down the avenue until they came at last to a house with a low wall that was covered in vines of several different hues. They passed through a gate and in the courtyard a groom took their steeds. They entered a door, walked along a short passage and came to a warm, well-lit room where a table had been laid for a meal. Somewhere food was cooking and the smell made Elric realize how little he had eaten recently. At the table one man was already seated. He grinned when he saw Elric and he got up.

"Moonglum!"

"Greetings, Elric. Our host's men sought me out as I haggled with a merchant who seemed unaware of the danger his caravan would face if unprotected by us. I told him where I thought he might find you. I am glad he discovered you so swiftly. I have been waiting to eat for an hour!"

The knight handed his helmet to a servant and other servants began to divest him of his breastplate and greaves, handing him a loose, brocade robe which he put on.

As they seated themselves he said, "I am Duke Avan Astran of Old Hrolmar in Vilmir."

"I have heard of you, my lord." Elric helped himself to the salad offered him by a servant. Duke Avan Astran was known as a great adventurer whose journeyings across the world had made his city rich. "You are famous for your travels."

Duke Avan smiled. "Aye. I have explored most of the world. I have been to your own Melniboné and I have ventured east, to Master Moonglum's lands—to Elwher and the Unknown Kingdoms. I have been to Myyrrhn, where the Winged Folk live. I have traveled as far as World's Edge and hope one day to go beyond. But I have never crossed the Boiling Sea and I know only a small stretch of coast along the Western Continent that has no name. You have been there, I believe?"

"I was there once, when the sea-lords made their fateful massing, but I have not been there since."

"Would you go there?"

"There is nothing to make me wish to do so."

From across the table Elric glanced at Moonglum's face which had suddenly become alert, almost worried. He looked at Duke Avan's expression and tried to decipher it. He returned his attention to his food.

"You have never explored the interior of the Western Continent?" Duke Avan continued.

"No."

"And yet you know there is some evidence that your own ancestors originally came from that mainland?"

"Evidence? A few legends, that is all."

"One of those legends speaks of a city older than dreaming Imrryr. A city that still exists in the deep jungles of the West."

"You mean R'lin K'ren A'a?" Elric pretended a lack of interest he no longer felt.

"Aye. A strange name. You pronounce it more fluently than could I."

"It means simply 'Where the High Ones Meet' in the ancient speech of Melniboné."

"So I have read."

"And," Elric cut into veal in a rich, sweet sauce, "it does not exist."

"It is marked on a map I have."

Deliberately, Elric chewed his meat and swallowed it. "The map is doubtless a forgery."

"Perhaps. Do you recall anything else of the legend of R'lin K'ren A'a?"

"There is the story of the Creature Doomed to Live." Elric pushed the food aside and poured wine for himself. "The city is said to have received its name because the Lords of the Higher Worlds once met

there to decide the rules of the Cosmic Struggle. They were overheard by the one inhabitant of the city who had not flown when they came. When they discovered him, they doomed him to remain alive for ever, carrying the frightful knowledge in his head. . . .”

“I have heard that story, too. But the one that interests me is that the inhabitants of R’lin K’ren A’a never returned to their city. Instead they struck northward and crossed the sea. Some reached an island we now call Sorcerers’ Isle while others went further—blown by a great storm—and came at length to a large island inhabited by dragons whose venom caused all it touched to burn. . . .to Melniboné, in fact.”

“And you wish to test the truth of that story. Your interest is that of a scholar?”

Duke Avan laughed. “Partly. But my main interest in R’lin K’ren A’a is more materialistic. For your ancestors left a great treasure behind them when they fled their city. Particularly they abandoned an image of Arioeh, the Lord of Chaos—a monstrous image, carved in jade, whose eyes were two huge, identical gems of a kind unknown anywhere else in all the lands of the Earth. Jewels from another plane of existence. Jewels which could reveal all the secrets of the Higher Worlds, of the past and the future, of the myriad planes of the cosmos. . . .”

“All cultures have similar legends. Wishful thinking, Duke Avan, that is all. . . .”

“But the Melnibonéans had a culture unlike any others. The Melnibonéans are not true men, as you well know. Their powers are superior, their knowledge far greater. . . .”

“It was once thus,” Elric said. “But that great power and knowledge is not mine. I have only a fragment of it. . . .”

“I did not seek you in Bakshaan and later in Jadmar because I believed you could verify what I have heard. I did not cross the sea to Filkhar, then to Argimiliar and at last to Pikarayd because I thought you would instantly confirm all that I have spoken of—I sought you because I think you the only man who would wish to accompany me on a voyage which would give us the truth or falsehood to these legends once and for all.”

Elric tilted his head and drained his wine-cup.

“Cannot you do that for yourself? Why should you desire my company on the expedition? From what I have heard of you, Duke Avan, you are not one who needs support in his venturings. . . .”

Duke Avan laughed. “I went alone to Elwher when my men deserted me in the Weeping Waste. It is not in my nature to know physical fear. But I have survived my travels this long because I have shown proper foresight and caution before setting off. Now it seems I must face dangers I cannot anticipate—sorcery, perhaps. It struck me, therefore, that I needed an ally who had some experience of fighting sorcery. And since I would have no truck with the ordinary kind of wizard such as Pan Tang spawns, you were my only choice. You are a wanderer, Prince Elric, just as I am. You were a wanderer before Imrryr fell as well as after. Indeed, if it had not been for your yearning to travel, your cousin would never have usurped the Ruby Throne of Melniboné while you were absent. . . .”

“Enough of that,” Elric said bitterly. “Let’s talk of this expedition. Where is the map?”

“You will accompany me?”

“Show me the map.”



Duke Avan drew a scroll from his pouch. "Here it is."

"Where did you find it?"

"On Melniboné."

"You have been there recently?" Elric felt anger rise in him.

Duke Avan raised a hand. "Many have come and gone amongst the ruins of Imrryr since she fell, my lord. Most sought treasure. I sought, in that particular case, knowledge. I found a casket which had been sealed, it seemed, for an eternity. Within that casket was this map." He spread out the scroll on the table. Elric recognized the style and the script—the old High Speech of Melniboné. It was a map of part of the Western Continent—more than he had ever seen on any other map. It showed a great river winding into the interior for a hundred miles or more. The river appeared to flow through a jungle and then divide into two rivers which later rejoined. The "island" of land thus formed had a black circle marked on it. Against this circle, in the involved writing of ancient Melniboné, was the name R'lin K'ren A'a. Elric inspected the scroll carefully. It did not seem to be a forgery.

"Is this all you found?" he asked.

"The scroll was sealed and this was embedded in the seal," Duke Avan said, handing something to Elric.

Elric held the object in his palm. It was a tiny ruby of a red so deep as to seem black at first, but when he turned it into the light he saw an image at the centre of the ruby and he recognized that image. He frowned, then he said, "I will agree to your proposal, Duke Avan. Will you let me keep this?"

"Do you know what it is?"

"No. But I should like to find out. There is a memory somewhere in my mind..."

"Very well, take it. I will keep the map."

"When did you have it in mind to set off?"

"We'll ride to the coast tomorrow. My ship awaits us. From there we sail round the southern coast to the Boiling Sea."

"There are few who have returned from that ocean," Elric murmured sardonically. He glanced across the table and saw that Moonglum was imploring with his eyes for Elric not to have any part of Duke Avan's scheme. Elric smiled at his friend. "The adventure is to my taste."

Miserably, Moonglum shrugged.

## CHAPTERTWO

The coast of Lormyr disappeared in warm mist and the Vilmirian schooner dipped its graceful prow towards the west and the Boiling Sea.

Only once before had Elric ventured into this sea and then he had flown high above it on a bird of gold and silver and brass, seeking the bleak island on which stood the magical palace of

Ashaneloon—Myshella’s palace. Standing on the poop deck Elric stared ahead into the writhing mist and tried not to think of Myshella and the dreams and emotions she had awakened within him. He wiped sweat from his face and turned to see Moonglum’s worried countenance.

“You still keep patience with me, Master Moonglum. Your warnings are always well-founded and yet I never heed them. I wonder why that is.”

Moonglum raised his gloomy eyes to regard the taut sails of the schooner. “Because you desire danger as other men desire love-making or drinking—for in danger you find forgetfulness.”

“Do I? Few of the dangers we have faced together have helped me forget. Rather they have strengthened my memories, improved the quality of my sorrow...” Elric drew a deep, melancholy breath. “I go where danger is because I think that an answer might lie there—some reason for all this tragedy and paradox. Yet I know I shall never find it.”

“Yet that is why you sail to R’lin K’ren A’a, is it not? You hope that your remote ancestors had the answer you want?”

“R’lin K’ren A’a is a myth. Even should the map prove genuine what shall we find but a few ruins? Imrryr has stood for ten thousand years and she was built at least two centuries after my people settled on Melniboné. Time will have taken R’lin K’ren A’a away.”

“And the Jade Man?”

“If the statue ever existed, it could have been looted at any time in the past hundred centuries.”

“And the Creature Doomed to Live?”

“A myth.”

“But you hope that it is all as Duke Avan says...?”

“No, Moonglum. I *fear* that it is all as he says.”

The wind blew whimsically and the schooner’s passage was slow as the heat grew greater and the crew sweated and murmured fearfully. And upon each face was a stricken look. Only Duke Avan seemed to retain his confidence. He called to his men to take heart, that they should all be rich soon and he gave orders for the oars to be unshipped and the men stripped down to man them, revealing skins as red as those of a cooked lobster. Duke Avan made a joke of that. The Vilmirians did not laugh.

Around the ship the sea bubbled and roared, and they navigated by their crude instruments alone, for the steam obscured everything. Once a green thing erupted from the sea and glared at them before disappearing.

They ate and slept little and Elric rarely left the poop deck. Moonglum bore the heat silently and Duke Avan went about the ship encouraging his men, seemingly oblivious of the discomfort.

“After all,” he pointed out to Moonglum, “we are only crossing the outer reaches of the sea. Think what it must be like at the middle.”

“I would rather not. I fear I’ll be boiled to death before another day has passed.”

“Nonsense, friend Moonglum, the steam is good for you. There is nothing healthier!” Duke Avan stretched seemingly with pleasure. “It cleans all the poisons from the system.”

Moonglum offered him a withering look and Avan laughed. “Be of better cheer, Master Moonglum. According to my charts—such as they are—a couple of days will see us nearing the coasts of the Western Continent.”

“The thought fails to raise my spirits very greatly,” Moonglum said and went to find his cabin.

But shortly thereafter the sea grew slowly less frenetic and the steam began to disperse and the heat became more tolerable until at last they emerged into a calm ocean beneath a blue sky in which hung the golden sun. The spirits of the crew rose and they buried the three men who had succumbed on a little yellow island where they found fruit and a spring of fresh water. While they lay at anchor off the island Duke Avan called Elric to his cabin and showed him the ancient map.

“See! This island is marked there. The map’s scale seems reasonably accurate. Another three days and we shall be at the mouth of the river.”

Elric nodded. “But it would be wise to rest here for a while until our strength is fully restored and the morale of the crew is raised higher. There are reasons, after all, why men have avoided the jungles of the West over the centuries.”

“Certainly there are savages there—some say they are not even human—but I’m confident we can deal with those dangers. I have much experience of strange territories, Prince Elric.”

“But you said yourself you feared other dangers.”

“True. Very well, we’ll do as you suggest.”

On the fourth day a strong wind began to blow from the east and they raised anchor. The schooner leaped over the waves under only half her canvas and the crew saw this as a good omen.

“They are mindless fools,” Moonglum said as they stood clinging to the rigging in the prow. “The time will come when they will wish they were suffering the cleaner hardships of the Boiling Sea. This journey, Elric, will benefit none of us, even if the riches of R’lin K’ren A’a are still there.”

But Elric did not answer. He was lost in strange thoughts, unusual thoughts for him, for he was remembering his childhood, the mother he had never known and his father. They had been the last true rulers of the Bright Empire—proud, insouciant, cruel. They had expected him—perhaps because of his strange albinism—to restore the glories of Melniboné. Instead he had destroyed what was left of that glory. They, like himself, had had no real place in this new age of the Young Kingdoms, but had refused to acknowledge it. This journey to the Western Continent, to the land of his ancestors, had a peculiar attraction for him. Here no new nations had emerged. The continent had, as far as he knew, remained the same since R’lin K’ren A’a had been abandoned. The jungles would be the jungles his folk had known,

the land would be the land that had given birth to his peculiar race, moulded the character of its people with their sombre pleasures, their melancholy arts and their dark delights. Had his ancestors felt this agony of knowledge, this impotence in the face of the understanding that existence had no point, no purpose, no hope? Was this why they had built their civilization in that particular pattern, why they had disdained the more placid, spiritual values of mankind's philosophers? He knew that many of the intellectuals of the Young Kingdoms pitied the powerful folk of Melniboné as mad. But if they had been mad and if they had imposed a madness upon the world that had lasted a hundred centuries, what had made them so? Perhaps the secret did lie in R'lin K'ren A'a—not in any tangible form but in the ambiance created by the dark jungles and the deep, old rivers. Perhaps here, at last, he would be able to feel at one with himself.

He ran his fingers through his milk-white hair and there was a kind of innocent anguish in his crimson eyes. He was the last of his kind and yet he was unlike his kind. Moonglum had been wrong. Elric knew that everything that existed had its opposite. In danger he might find peace. And yet, of course, in peace there was danger. Being an imperfect creature in an imperfect world he would always know paradox. And that was why in paradox there was always a kind of truth. That was why philosophers and soothsayers flourished. In a perfect world there would be no place for them. In an imperfect world the mysteries were always without solution and that was why there was always a great choice of solutions.

It was on the morning of the third day that the coast was sighted and the schooner steered her way through the sandbanks of the great delta and anchored, at last, at the mouth of the dark and nameless river.

### CHAPTER THREE

Evening came and the sun began to set over the black outlines of the massive trees. A rich, ancient smell came from the jungle and through the twilight echoed the cries of strange birds and beasts. Elric was impatient to begin the quest up the river. Sleep—never welcome—was now impossible to achieve. He stood unmoving on the deck, his eyes hardly blinking, his brain barely active, as if expecting something to happen to him. The rays of the sun stained his face and threw black shadows over the deck and then it was dark and still under the moon and the stars. He wanted the jungle to absorb him. He wanted to be one with the trees and the shrubs and the creeping beasts. He wanted thought to disappear. He drew the heavily scented air into his lungs as if that alone would make him become what at that moment he desired to be. The drone of insects became a murmuring voice that called him into the heart of the old, old forest. And yet he could not move—could not answer. And at length Moonglum came up on deck and touched his shoulder and said something and passively he went below to his bunk and wrapped himself in his cloak and lay there, still listening to the voice of the jungle.

Even Duke Avan seemed in a more introspective mood than usual when they upped anchor the next morning and began to row against the sluggish current. There were few gaps in the foliage above their heads and they had the impression that they were entering a huge, gloomy tunnel, leaving the sunlight behind with the sea. Bright plants twined among the vines that hung from the leafy canopy and caught in the ship's masts as they moved. Ratlike animals with long arms swung through the branches and peered at them with bright, knowing eyes. The river turned and the sea was no longer in sight. Shafts of sunlight filtered down to the deck and the light had a greenish tinge to it. Elric became more alert than he had ever been since he agreed to accompany Duke Avan. He took a keen interest in every detail of the jungle and the black river over which moved schools of insects like agitated clouds of mist and in which blossoms drifted like drops of blood in ink. Everywhere were rustlings, sudden squawks, barks and wet noises made by fish or river animals as they hunted the prey disturbed by the ship's oars which cut into the great

clumps of weed and sent the things that hid there scurrying. The others began to complain of insect bites, but Elric was not troubled by them, perhaps because no insect could desire his deficient blood.

Duke Avan passed him on the deck. The Vilmirian slapped at his forehead. "You seem more cheerful, Prince Elric."

Elric smiled absently. "Perhaps I am."

"I must admit I personally find all this a bit oppressive. I'll be glad when we reach the city."

"You are still convinced you'll find it?"

"I'll be convinced otherwise when I've explored every inch of the island we're bound for."

So absorbed had he become in the atmosphere of the jungle that Elric was hardly aware of the ship or his companions. The ship beat very slowly up the river, moving at little more than walking speed.

A few days passed, but Elric scarcely noticed, for the jungle did not change—and then the river widened and the canopy parted and the wide, hot sky was suddenly full of huge birds crowding upwards as the ship disturbed them. All but Elric were pleased to be under the open sky again and spirits rose. Elric went below.

The attack on the ship came almost immediately. There was a whistling noise and a scream and a sailor writhed and fell over clutching at a grey, thin semi-circle of something which had buried itself in his stomach. An upper yard came crashing to the deck, bringing sail and rigging with it. A headless body took four paces towards the poop deck before collapsing, the blood pumping from the obscene hole that was its neck. And everywhere was the thin whistling noise. Elric heard the sounds from below and came back instantly, buckling on his sword. The first face he saw was Moonglum's. The red-haired man looked terrified and was crouching against a rail on the starboard side. Elric had the impression of grey blurs whistling past, slashing into flesh and rigging, wood and canvas. Some fell on the deck and he saw that they were thin discs of crystalline rock, about a foot in diameter. They were being hurled from both banks of the river and there was no protection against them.

He tried to see who was throwing the discs and glimpsed something moving in the trees along the right bank. Then the discs ceased suddenly and there was a pause before some of the sailors dashed across the deck to seek better cover. Duke Avan suddenly appeared in the stern. He had unsheathed his sword.

"Get below. Get your bucklers and any armour you can find. Bring bows. Arm yourselves, men, or you're finished."

And as he spoke their attackers broke from the trees and began to wade into the water. No more discs came and it seemed likely they had exhausted their supply.

"By Chardros!" Avan gasped. "Are these real creatures or some sorcerer's conjurings?"

The things were essentially reptilian but with feathery crests and neck wattles, though their faces were almost human. Their forelegs were like the arms and hands of men, but their hindlegs were incredibly long and storklike. Balanced on these legs, their bodies towered over the water. They carried great clubs in which slits had been cut and doubtless these were what they used to hurl the crystalline discs. Staring at their faces, Elric was horrified. In some subtle way they reminded him of the characteristic faces of his own folk—the folk of Melniboné. Were these creatures his cousins? Or were they a species from which

his people had evolved? He stopped asking the questions as an intense hatred for the creatures filled him. They were obscene: sight of them brought bile into his throat. Without thinking, he drew Stormbringer from its sheath.

The Black Sword began to howl and the familiar black radiance spilled from it. The runes carved into its blade pulsed a vivid scarlet which turned slowly to a deep purple and then to black once more.

The creatures were wading through the water on their stiltlike legs and they paused when they saw the sword, glancing at one another. And they were not the only ones unnerved by the sight, for Duke Avan and his men paled, too.

“Gods!” Avan yelled. “I know not which I prefer the look of—those who attack us or that which defends us!”

“Stay well away from that sword,” Moonglum warned. “It has the habit of killing those its master likes best.”

And now the reptilian savages were upon them, clutching at the ship’s rails as the armed sailors rushed back on deck to meet the attack.

Clubs came at Elric from all sides, but Stormbringer shrieked and parried each blow. He held the sword in both hands, whirling it this way and that, ploughing great gashes in the scaly bodies.

The creatures hissed and opened red mouths in agony and rage while their thick, black blood sank into the waters of the river. Although from the legs upward they were only slightly larger than a tall, well-built man, they had more vitality than any human and the deepest cuts hardly seemed to affect them, even when administered by Stormbringer. Elric was astonished at this resistance to the sword’s power. Often a nick was enough for the sword to draw a man’s soul from him. These things seemed immune. Perhaps they had no souls...

He fought on, his hatred giving him strength.

But elsewhere on the ship the sailors were being routed. Rails were torn off and the great clubs crushed planks and brought down more rigging. The savages were intent on destroying the ship as well as the crew. And there was little doubt, now, that they would be successful.

Avan shouted to Elric, “By the names of all the gods, Prince Elric, can you not summon some further sorcery? We are doomed else!”

Elric knew Avan spoke truth. All around him the ship was being gradually pulled apart by the hissing reptilian creatures. Most of them had sustained horrible wounds from the defenders, but only one or two had collapsed. Elric began to suspect that they did, in fact, fight supernatural enemies.

He backed away and sought shelter beneath a half-crushed doorway as he tried to concentrate on a method of calling upon supernatural aid.

He was panting with exhaustion and he clung to a beam as the ship rocked back and forth in the water. He fought to clear his head.

And then the incantation came to him. He was not sure if it was appropriate, but it was the only one he could recall. His ancestors had made pacts, thousands of years before, with all the elementals who

controlled the animal world. In the past he had summoned help from various of these spirits but never from the one he now sought to call. From his mouth began to issue the ancient, beautiful and convoluted words of Melniboné's High Speech.

“King with Wings! Lord of all that work and are not seen, upon whose labours all else depends! Nnuuurrrr’c’c of the Insect Folk, I summon thee!”

Save for the motion of the ship, Elric ceased to be aware of all else happening around him. The sounds of the fight dimmed and were heard no more as he sent his voice out beyond his plane of the Earth into another—the plane dominated by King Nnuuurrrr’c’c of the Insects, paramount lord of his people.

In his ears now Elric heard a buzzing and gradually the buzzing formed itself in words.

“Who art thou, mortal? What right hast thee to summon me?”

“I am Elric, last ruler of Melniboné. My ancestors aided thee, Nnuuurrrr’c’c.”

“Aye—but long ago.”

“And it is long ago that they last called on thee for thine aid!”

“True. What aid dost thou now require, Elric of Melniboné?”

“Look upon my plane. Thou wilt see that I am in danger. Canst thou abolish this danger, friend of the Insects?”

Now a filmy shape formed and could be seen as if through several layers of cloudy silk. Elric tried to keep his eyes upon it, but it kept leaving his field of vision and then returning for a few moments. He knew that he looked into another plane of the Earth.

“Canst thou help me, Nnuuurrrr’c’c?”

“Hast thou no patron of thine own species? Some Lord of Chaos who can aid thee?”

“My patron is Arioeh and he is a temperamental demon at best. These days he aids me little.”

“Then I must send thee allies, mortal. But call upon me no more when this is done.”

“I shall not summon thee again, Nnuuurrrr’c’c.”

The layers of film disappeared and with them the shape.

The noise of the battle crashed once again on Elric's consciousness and he heard with sharper clarity than before the screams of the sailors and the hissing of the reptilian savages and when he looked out from his shelter he saw that at least half the crew were dead.

As he came on deck Moonglum rushed up. “I thought you slain, Elric! What became of you?” He was plainly relieved to see his friend still lived.

“I sought aid from another plane—but it does not seem to have materialized.”

“I’m thinking we’re doomed and had best try to swim downstream away from here and seek a hiding place in the jungle,” Moonglum said.

“What of Duke Avan? Is he dead?”

“He lives. But those creatures are all but impervious to our weapons. This ship will sink ere long.” Moonglum lurched as the deck tilted and he reached out to grab a trailing rope, letting his long sword dangle by its wrist-thong. “They are not attacking the stern at present. We can slip into the water there...”

“I made a bargain with Duke Avan,” Elric reminded the Eastlander. “I cannot desert him.”

“Then we’ll all perish!”

“What’s that?” Elric bent his head, listening intently.

“I hear nothing.”

It was a whine which deepened in tone until it became a drone. Now Moonglum heard it also and looked about him, seeking the source of the sound. And suddenly he gasped, pointing upward. “Is that the aid you sought?”



There was a vast cloud of them, black against the blue of the sky. Every so often the sun would flash on a colour—a rich blue, green, or red. They came spiraling down towards the ship and now both sides fell silent, staring skyward.

The flying things were like huge dragonflies and the brightness and richness of their colouring was breathtaking. It was their wings which made the droning sound which now began to increase in loudness and heighten in pitch as the huge insects sped nearer.

Realizing that they were the object of the attack the reptile men stumbled backwards on their long legs, trying to reach the shore before the gigantic insects were upon them.



But it was too late for flight.

The dragonflies settled on the savages until nothing could be seen of their bodies. The hissing increased and sounded almost pitiful as the insects bore their victims down to the surface and then inflicted on them whatever terrible death it was. Perhaps they stung with their tails—it was not possible for the watchers to see.

Sometimes a storklike leg would emerge from the water and thrash in the air for a moment. But soon, just as the reptiles were covered by the insect bodies, so were their cries drowned by the strange and blood-chilling humming that arose on all sides.

A sweating Duke Avan, sword still in hand, ran up the deck. “Is this your doing, Prince Elric?”

Elric looked on with satisfaction, but the others were plainly disgusted. “It was,” he said.

“Then I thank you for your aid. This ship is holed in a dozen places and is letting in water at a terrible rate. It’s a wonder we have not yet sunk. I’ve given orders to begin rowing and I hope we make it to the island in time.” He pointed upstream. “There, you can just see it.”

“What if there are more of those savages there?” Moonglum asked.

Avan smiled grimly, indicating the further shore. “Look.” On their peculiar legs a dozen or more of the reptiles were fleeing into the jungle, having witnessed the fate of their comrades. “They’ll be reluctant to attack us again, I think.”

Now the huge dragonflies were rising into the air again and Avan turned away as he glimpsed what they had left behind. “By the gods, you work fierce sorcery, Prince Elric! Ugh!”

Elric smiled and shrugged. “It is effective, Duke Avan.” He sheathed his runesword. It seemed reluctant to enter the scabbard and it moaned as if in resentment.

Moonglum glanced at it. “That blade will want to feast soon, Elric, whether you desire it or not.”

“Doubtless it will find something to feed on in the forest,” said the albino. He stepped over a piece of broken mast and went below.

Moonglum looked at the new scum on the surface of the water and he shuddered.

## CHAPTERFOUR

The wrecked schooner was almost awash when the crew clambered overboard with lines and began the task of dragging it up the mud that formed the banks of the island. Before them was a wall of foliage that seemed impenetrable. Moonglum followed Elric, lowering himself into the shallows. They began to wade ashore.

As they left the water and set foot on the hard, baked earth, Moonglum stared at the forest. No wind moved the trees and a peculiar silence had descended. No birds called from the trees, no insects buzzed, there were none of the barks and cries of animals they had heard on their journey upriver.

“Those supernatural friends of yours seem to have frightened more than the savages away,” Moonglum murmured. “This place seems lifeless.”

Elric nodded. "It is strange."

Duke Avan joined them. He had discarded his finery—ruined in the fight, anyway—and now wore a padded leather jerkin and doeskin breeks. His sword was at his side. "We'll have to leave most of our men behind with the ship," he said regretfully. "They'll make what repairs they can while we press on to find R'lin K'ren A'a." He drew his light cloak about him. "Is it my imagination, or is there an odd atmosphere?"

"We have already remarked on it," Moonglum said. "Life seems to have fled the island."

Duke Avan grinned. "If all we face is as timid, we have nothing further to fear. I must admit, Prince Elric, that if I had wished you harm and then seen you conjure those monsters from thin air, I'd think twice about getting too close to you! Thank you, by the way, for what you did. We should have perished by now if it had not been for you."

"It was for my aid that you asked me to accompany you," Elric said wearily. "Let's eat and rest and then continue with our expedition."

A shadow passed over Duke Avan's face then. Something in Elric's manner had disturbed him.

Entering the jungle was no easy matter. Armed with axes the six members of the crew (all that could be spared) began to hack at the undergrowth. And still the unnatural silence prevailed...

By nightfall they were less than half a mile into the forest and completely exhausted. The forest was so thick that there was barely room to pitch their tent. The only light in the camp came from the small, sputtering fire outside the tent. The crewmen slept where they could in the open.

Elric could not sleep, but now it was not the jungle which kept him awake. He was puzzled by the silence, for he was sure that it was not their presence which had driven all life away. There was not a single small rodent, bird or insect anywhere to be seen. There were no traces of animal life. The island had been deserted by all but vegetation for a long while—perhaps for centuries or tens of centuries. He remembered another part of the old legend of R'lin K'ren A'a. It had been said that when the gods came to meet there not only the citizens fled, but also all the wildlife. Nothing had dared see the High Lords or listen to their conversation. Elric shivered, turning his white head this way and that on the rolled cloak that supported it, his crimson eyes tortured. If there were dangers on this island, they would be subtler dangers than those they had faced on the river.

The noise of their passage through the forest was the only sound to be heard on the island as they forced their way on the next morning.

With lodestone in one hand and map in the other, Duke Avan Astran sought to guide them, directing his men where to cut their path. But the going became even slower and it was obvious that no creatures had come this way for many ages.

By the fourth day they had reached a natural clearing of flat volcanic rock and found a spring there. Gratefully they made camp. Elric began to wash his face in the cool water when he heard a yell behind him. He sprang up. One of the crewmen was reaching for an arrow and fitting it to his bow.

“What is it?” Duke Avan called.

“I saw something, my lord!”

“Nonsense, there are no—”

“Look!” The man drew back the string and let fly into the upper terraces of the forest. Something did seem to stir then and Elric thought he saw a flash of grey among the trees.

“Did you see what kind of creature it was?” Moonglum asked the man.

“No, master. I feared at first it was those reptiles again.”

“They’re too frightened to follow us onto this island,” Duke Avan reassured him.

“I hope you’re right,” Moonglum said nervously.

“Then what could it have been?” Elric wondered.

“I—I thought it was a man, master,” the crewman stuttered.

Elric stared thoughtfully into the trees. “A man?”

Moonglum knew his friend well. “You were hoping for this, Elric?”

“I am not sure...”

Duke Avan shrugged. “More likely the shadow of a cloud passing over the trees. According to my calculations we should have reached the city by now.”

“You think, after all, that it does not exist?” Elric said.

“I am beginning not to care, Prince Elric.” The duke leaned against the bole of a huge tree, brushing aside a vine which touched his face. “Still there’s naught else to do. The ship won’t be ready to sail yet.” He looked up into the branches. “I did not think I should miss those damned insects that plagued us on our way here...”

The crewman who had shot the arrow suddenly shouted again. “There! I saw him! It is a man!”

While the others stared but failed to discern anything Duke Avan continued to lean against the tree. “You saw nothing. There is nothing here to see.”

Elric turned towards him. “Give me the map and the lodestone, Duke Avan. I have a feeling I can find the way.”

The Vilmirian shrugged, an expression of doubt on his square, handsome face. He handed the things over to Elric.

They rested the night and in the morning they continued, with Elric leading the way.

And at noon they broke out of the forest and saw the ruins of R’lin K’rea.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Nothing grew among the ruins of the city. The streets were broken and the walls of the houses had fallen, but there were no weeds flowering in the cracks and it seemed that the city had but recently been brought down by an earthquake. Only one thing still stood intact, towering over the ruins. It was a gigantic statue of white, grey and green jade—the statue of a naked youth with a face of almost feminine beauty that turned sightless eyes towards the north.

“The eyes!” Duke Avan Astran said. “They’re gone!”

The others said nothing as they stared at the statue and the ruins surrounding it. The area was relatively small and the buildings had had little decoration. The inhabitants seemed to have been a simple, well-to-do folk—totally unlike the Melnibonéans of the Bright Empire. Elric could not believe that the people of R’lin K’rea had been his ancestors. They had been too sane.

“The statue’s already been looted,” Duke Avan continued. “Our damned journey’s been in vain!”

Elric laughed. “Did you really think you would be able to prise the Jade Man’s eyes from their sockets, my lord?”

The statue was as tall as any tower of the Dreaming City and the head alone must have been the size of a reasonably large building. Duke Avan pursed his lips and refused to listen to Elric’s mocking voice. “We may yet find the journey worth our while,” he said. “There were other treasures in R’lin K’rea. Come...”

He led the way into the city.

Very few of the buildings were even partially standing, but they were nonetheless fascinating if only for the peculiar nature of their building materials, which were of a kind the travelers had never seen before.

The colours were many, but faded by time—soft reds and yellows and blues—and they flowed together to make almost infinite combinations.

Elric reached out to touch one wall and was surprised at the cool feel of the smooth material. It was neither stone nor wood nor metal. Perhaps it had been brought here from another plane?

He tried to visualize the city as it had been before it was deserted. The streets had been wide, there had been no surrounding wall, the houses had been low and built around large courtyards. If this was, indeed, the original home of his people, what had happened to change them from the peaceful citizens of R’lin K’rea to the insane builders of Imrryr’s bizarre and dreaming towers? Elric had thought he might find a solution to a mystery here, but instead he had found another mystery. It was his fate, he thought, shrugging to himself.

And then the first crystal disc hummed past his head and smashed against a collapsing wall.

The next disc split the skull of a crewman and a third nicked Moonglum’s ear before they had thrown themselves flat amongst the rubble.

“They’re vengeful, those creatures,” Avan said with a hard smile. “They’ll risk much to pay us back for their comrades’ deaths!”

Terror was on the face of each surviving crewman and fear had begun to creep into Avan's eyes.

More discs clattered nearby, but it was plain that the party was temporarily out of sight of the reptiles. Moonglum coughed as white dust rose from the rubble and caught in his throat.

"You'd best summon those monstrous allies of yours again, Elric."

Elric shook his head. "I cannot. My ally said he would not serve me a second time." He looked to his left where the four walls of a small house still stood. There seemed to be no door, only a window.

"Then call Arioeh," Moonglum said urgently. "Anything."

"Arioeh? I am not sure..."

Then Elric rolled over and sprang for the shelter, flinging himself through the window to land on a pile of masonry which grazed his hands and knees.

He staggered upright. In the distance he could see the huge blind statue of the god dominating the city. This was said to be an image of Arioeh—though it resembled no image of Arioeh Elric had ever seen manifested. Did that image protect R'lin K'ren A'a—or did it threaten it? Someone screamed. He glanced through the opening and saw that a disc had landed and chopped through a man's forearm.

He drew Stormbringer and raised it, facing the jade statue.

"Arioeh!" he cried. "Arioeh—aid me!"

Black light burst from the blade and it began to sing, as if joining in Elric's incantation.

"Arioeh!"

Would the demon come? Of late the patron of the kings of Melniboné refused to materialize, claiming that more urgent business called him—business concerning the eternal struggle between Law and Chaos.

"Arioeh!"

Sword and man were now wreathed in a palpitating black mist and Elric's white face was flung back, seeming to writhe as the mist writhed.

"Arioeh! I beg thee to aid me! It is Elric who calls thee!"

And then a voice reached his ears. It was a soft, purring, reasonable voice. It was a tender voice.

"Elric, I am fondest of thee. I love thee more than any other mortal—but aid thee I cannot—not yet."

Elric cried desperately: "Then we are doomed to perish here!"

"Thou canst escape this danger. Flee alone into the forest. Leave the others while thou hast time. Thou hast a destiny to fulfill elsewhere and elsewhere..."

"I will not desert them."

“Thou art foolish, sweet Elric.”

“Arioch—since Melniboné’s founding thou hast aided her kings. Aid her last king this day!”

“I cannot dissipate my energies. A great struggle looms. And it would cost me much to return to R’lin K’ren A’a. Flee now. Thou shalt be saved. Only the others will die.”

And then the Duke of Hell had gone. Elric sensed the passing of his presence. He frowned, fingering his belt pouch, trying to recall something he had once heard. Slowly, he resheathed the reluctant sword. Then there was a thump and Moonglum stood panting before him.

“Well, is aid on the way?”

“I fear not.” Elric shook his head in despair. “Once again Arioch refuses me. Once again he speaks of a greater destiny—a need to conserve his strength.”

“Your ancestors could have picked a more tractable demon as their patron. Our reptilian friends are closing in. Look...” Moonglum pointed to the outskirts of the city. A band of about a dozen stilt-legged creatures were advancing, their huge clubs at the ready.

There was a scuffling noise from the rubble on the other side of the wall and Avan appeared, leading his men through the opening. He was cursing.

“No extra aid is coming, I fear,” Elric told him.

The Vilmirian smiled grimly. “Then the monsters out there knew more than did we!”

“It seems so.”

“We’ll have to try to hide from them,” Moonglum said without much conviction. “We’d not survive a fight.”

The little party left the ruined house and began to inch its way through what cover it could find, moving gradually nearer to the centre of the city and the statue of the Jade Man.

A sharp hiss from behind them told them that the reptile warriors had sighted them again and another Vilmirian fell with a crystal disc protruding from his back. They broke into a panicky run.

Ahead now was a red building of several storeys which still had its roof.

“In there!” Duke Avan shouted.

With some relief they dashed unhesitatingly up worn steps and through a series of dusty passages until they paused to catch their breath in a great, gloomy hall.

The hall was completely empty and a little light filtered through cracks in the wall.

“This place has lasted better than the others,” Duke Avan said. “I wonder what its function was. A fortress, perhaps.”

“They seem not to have been a warlike race,” Moonglum pointed out. “I suspect the building had some other function.”

The three surviving crewmen were looking fearfully about them. They looked as if they would have preferred to have faced the reptile warriors outside.

Elric began to cross the floor and then paused as he saw something painted on the far wall.

Moonglum saw it too. “What’s that, friend Elric?”

Elric recognized the symbols as the written High Speech of old Melniboné, but it was subtly different and it took him a short time to decipher its meaning.

“Know you what it says, Elric?” Duke Avan murmured, joining them.

“Aye—but it’s cryptic enough. It says: ‘If thou hast come to slay me, then thou art welcome. If thou hast come without the means to awaken the Jade Man, then begone...’”

“Is it addressed to us, I wonder,” Avan mused, “or has it been there for a long while?”

Elric shrugged. “It could have been inscribed at any time during the past ten thousand years...”

Moonglum walked up to the wall and reached out to touch it. “I would say it was fairly recent,” he said. “The paint is still wet.”

Elric frowned. “Then there are inhabitants here still. Why do they not reveal themselves?”

“Could those reptiles out there be the denizens of R’lin K’ren A’a?” Avan said. “There is nothing in the legends that says they were humans who fled this place...”

Elric’s face clouded and he was about to make an angry reply when Moonglum interrupted.

“Perhaps there is just one inhabitant. Is that what you are thinking, Elric? The Creature Doomed to Live? Those sentiments could be his...”

Elric put his hands to his face and made no reply.

“Come,” Avan said. “We’ve no time to debate on legends.” He strode across the floor and entered another doorway, beginning to descend steps. As he reached the bottom they heard him gasp.

The others joined him and saw that he stood on the threshold of another hall. But this one was ankle-deep in fragments of stuff that had been thin leaves of a metallic material which had the flexibility of parchment. Around the walls were thousands of small holes, rank upon rank, each with a character painted over it.

“What is it?” Moonglum asked.

Elric stooped and picked up one of the fragments. This had half a Melnibonéan character engraved on it. There had even been an attempt to obliterate this.

“It was a library,” he said softly. “The library of my ancestors. Someone has tried to destroy it. These

scrolls must have been virtually indestructible, yet a great deal of effort has gone into making them indecipherable.” He kicked at the fragments. “Plainly our friend—or friends—is a consistent hater of learning.”

“Plainly,” Avan said bitterly. “Oh, the *value* of those scrolls to the scholar! All destroyed!”

Elric shrugged. “To limbo with the scholar—their value to me was quite considerable!”

Moonglum put a hand on his friend’s arm and Elric shrugged it off. “I had hoped...”

Moonglum cocked his head. “Those reptiles have followed us into the building, by the sound of it.”

They heard the distant sound of strange footsteps in the passages behind them.

The little band moved as silently as it could through the ruined scrolls and crossed the hall until they entered another corridor which led sharply upward.

Then, suddenly, daylight was visible.

Elric peered ahead. “The corridor has collapsed ahead of us and is blocked, by the look of it. The roof has caved in and we may be able to escape through the hole.”

They clambered upward over the fallen stones, glancing warily behind them for signs of their pursuers.

At last they emerged in the central square of the city. On the far sides of this square were placed the feet of the great statue, which now towered high above their heads.

Directly before them were two peculiar constructions which, unlike the rest of the buildings, were completely whole. They were domed and faceted and were made of some glasslike substance which diffracted the rays of the sun.

From below they heard the reptile men advancing down the corridor.

“We’ll seek shelter in the nearest of those domes,” Elric said. He broke into a trot, leading the way.

The others followed him through the irregularly shaped opening at the base of the dome.

Once inside, however, they hesitated, shielding their eyes and blinking heavily as they tried to discern their way.

“It’s like a maze of mirrors!” Moonglum gasped. “By the gods, I’ve never seen a better. Was that its function, I wonder?”

Corridors seemed to go off in all directions—yet they might be nothing more than reflections of the passage they were in. Cautiously Elric began to continue further into the maze, the five others following him.

“This smells of sorcery to me,” Moonglum muttered as they advanced. “Have we been forced into a trap? I wonder.”

Elric drew his sword. It murmured softly—almost querulously.



Everything shifted suddenly and the shapes of his companions grew dim.

“Moonglum! Duke Avan!”

He heard voices murmuring, but they were not the voices of his friends.

“Moonglum!”

But then the little man faded away altogether and Elric was alone.

## CHAPTERSIX

He turned and a wall of red brilliance struck his eyes and blinded him.

He called out and his voice was turned into a dismal wail which mocked him.

He tried to move, but he could not tell whether he remained in the same spot or walked a dozen miles.

Now there was someone standing a few yards away, seemingly obscured by a screen of multicoloured transparent gems. He stepped forward and made to dash away the screen, but it vanished and he stopped suddenly.

He looked on a face of infinite sorrow.

And the face was his own face, save that the man's colouring was normal and his hair was black.

“What are you?” Elric said thickly.

“I have had many names. One is Erekosë. I have been many men. Perhaps I am all men.”

“But you are like me!”

“I am you.”

“No!”

The phantom's eyes held tears as it stared in pity at Elric.

“Do not weep for me!” Elric roared. “I need no sympathy from you!”

“Perhaps I weep for myself, for I know our fate.”

“And what is that?”

“You would not understand.”

“Tell me.”

“Ask your gods.”

Elric raised his sword. Fiercely he said, “No—I’ll have my answer from you!”

And the phantom faded away.

Elric shivered. Now the corridor was populated by a thousand such phantoms. Each murmured a different name. Each wore different clothes. But each had his face, if not his colouring.

“Begone!” he screamed. “Oh, gods, what is this place?”

And at his command they disappeared.

“Elric?”

The albino whirled, sword ready. But it was Duke Avan Astran of Old Hrolmar. He touched his own face with trembling fingers, but said levelly, “I must tell you that I believe I am losing my sanity, Prince Elric...”

“What have you seen?”

“Many things. I cannot describe them.”

“Where are Moonglum and the others?”

“Doubtless each went his separate way, as we did.”

Elric raised Stormbringer and brought the blade crashing against a crystal wall. The Black Sword moaned, but the wall merely changed its position.

But through the gap now Elric saw ordinary daylight. “Come, Duke Avan—there is escape!”

Avan, dazed, followed him and they stepped out of the crystal and found themselves in the central square of R’lin K’ren A’a.

But there were noises. Carts and chariots moved about the square. Stalls were erected on one side. People moved peacefully about. And the Jade Man did not dominate the sky above the city. Here, there was no Jade Man at all.

Elric looked at the faces. They were the eldritch features of the folk of Melniboné. Yet these had a different cast to them which he could not at first define. Then he recognized what they had. It was tranquility. He reached out his hand to touch one of the people.

“Tell me, friend, what year...?”

But the man did not hear him. He walked by.

Elric tried to stop several of the passers-by, but not one could see or hear him.

“How did they lose this peace?” Duke Avan asked wonderingly. “How did they become like you, Prince Elric?”

Elric almost snarled as he turned sharply to face the Vilmirian. “Be silent!”

Duke Avan shrugged. "Perhaps this is merely an illusion."

"Perhaps," Elric said sadly. "But I am sure this is how they lived—until the coming of the High Ones."

"You blame the gods, then?"

"I blame the knowledge that the gods brought."

Duke Avan nodded gravely. "I understand."

He turned back towards the great crystal and then stood listening. "Do you hear that voice, Prince Elric? What is it saying?"

Elric heard the voice. It seemed to be coming from the crystal. It was speaking the old tongue of Melniboné, but with a strange accent. "This way," it said. "This way."

Elric paused. "I have no liking to return there."

Avan said, "What choice have we?"

They stepped together through the entrance.

Again they were in the maze that could be one corridor or many and the voice was clearer. "Take two paces to your right," it instructed.

Avan glanced at Elric. "What was that?"

Elric told him.

"Shall we obey?" Avan asked.

"Aye." There was resignation in the albino's voice.

They took two paces to their right.

"Now four to your left," said the voice.

They took four paces to their left.

"Now one forward."

They emerged into the ruined square of R'lin K'ren A'a.

Moonglum and one Vilmirian crewman stood there.

"Where are the others?" Avan demanded.

"Ask him," Moonglum said wearily, gesturing with the sword in his right hand.

They stared at the man who was either an albino or a leper. He was completely naked and he bore a

distinct likeness to Elric. At first Elric thought this was another phantom, but then he saw that there were also several differences in their faces. There was something sticking from the man's side, just above the third rib. With a shock, Elric recognized it as the broken shaft of a Vilmirian arrow.

The naked man nodded. "Aye—the arrow found its mark. But it could not slay me, for I am J'osui C'reln Reyr..."

"You believe yourself to be the Creature Doomed to Live," Elric murmured.

"I am he." The man gave a bitter smile. "Do you think I try to deceive you?"

Elric glanced at the arrow shaft and then shook his head.

"You are ten thousand years old?" Avan stared at him.

"What does he say?" asked J'osui C'reln Reyr of Elric. Elric translated.

"Is that all it has been?" The man sighed. Then he looked intently at Elric. "You are of my race?"

"It seems so."

"Of what family?"

"Of the royal line."

"Then you have come at last. I, too, am of that line."

"I believe you."

"I notice that the Olab seek you."

"The Olab?"

"Those primitives with the clubs."

"Aye. We encountered them on our journey upriver."

"I will lead you to safety. Come."

Elric allowed J'osui C'reln Reyr to take them across the square to where part of a tottering wall still stood. The man then lifted a flagstone and showed them steps leading down into darkness. They followed him, descending cautiously as he caused the flagstone to lower itself above their heads. And then they found themselves in a room lit by crude oil lamps. Save for a bed of dried grasses the room was empty.



“You live sparely,” Elric said.

“I have need for nothing else. My head is sufficiently furnished...”

“Where do the Olab come from?” Elric asked.

“They are but recently arrived in these parts. Scarcely a thousand years ago—or perhaps half that time—they came from further upriver after some quarrel with another tribe. They do not usually come to the island. You must have killed many of them for them to wish you such harm.”

“We killed many.”

J’osui C’reln Reyr gestured at the others who were staring at him in some discomfort. “And these? Primitives, also, eh? They are not of our folk.”

“There are few of our folk left.”

“What does he say?” Duke Avan asked.

“He says that those reptile warriors are called the Olab,” Elric told him.

“And was it these Olab who stole the Jade Man’s eyes?”

When Elric translated the question the Creature Doomed to Live was astonished. “Did you not know, then?”

“Know what?”

“Why, you have been *in* the Jade Man’s eyes! Those great crystals in which you wandered—that is what they are!”

CHAPTERSEVEN

When Elric offered this information to Duke Avan, the Vilmirian burst into laughter. He flung his head back and roared with mirth while the others looked gloomily on. The cloud that had fallen across his features of late suddenly cleared and he became again the man whom Elric had first met in Chalal.

Moonglum was the next to smile and even Elric acknowledged the irony of what had happened to them.

“Those crystals fell from his face like tears soon after the High Ones departed,” continued J’osui C’rein Reyr.

“So the High Ones did come here.”

“Aye—the Jade Man brought the message and all the folk departed, having made their bargain with him.”

“The Jade Man was not built by your people?”

“The Jade Man is Duke Arioch of Hell. He strode from the forest one day and stood in the square and told the people what was to come about—that our city lay at the centre of some particular configuration and that it was only there that the Lords of the Higher Worlds could meet.”

“And the bargain?”

“In return for their city, our royal line might in future increase their power with Arioch as their patron. He would give them great knowledge and the means to build a new city elsewhere.”

“And they accepted this bargain without question?”

“There was little choice, kinsman.”

Elric lowered his eyes to regard the dusty floor. “And thus they were corrupted,” he murmured.

“Only I refused to accept the pact. I did not wish to leave this city and I mistrusted Arioch. When all others set off down the river, I remained here—where we are now—and I heard the Lords of the Higher Worlds arrive and I heard them speak, laying down the rules under which Law and Chaos would fight thereafter. When they had gone, I emerged. But Arioch—the Jade Man—was still here. He looked down on me through his crystal eyes and he cursed me. When that was done the crystals fell and landed where you now see them. Arioch’s spirit departed, but his jade image was left behind.”

“And you still retain all memory of what transpired between the Lords of Law and Chaos?”

“That is my doom.”

“Perhaps your fate was less harsh than that which befell those who left,” Elric said quickly. “I am the last inheritor of that particular doom...”

J’osui C’rein Reyr looked puzzled and then he stared into Elric’s eyes and an expression of pity crossed his face. “I had not thought there was a worse fate—but now I believe there might be...”

Elric said urgently, “Ease my soul, at least. I must know what passed between the High Lords in those days. I must understand the nature of my existence—as you, at least, understand yours. Tell me, I beg you!”

J'osui C'reln Reyr frowned and he stared deeply into Elric's eyes. "Do you not know all my story, then?"

"Is there more?"

"I can only *remember* what passed between the High Lords—but when I try to tell my knowledge aloud or try to write it down, I cannot..."

Elric grasped the man's shoulder. "You must try! You must try!"

"I know that I cannot."

Seeing the torture in Elric's face, Moonglum came up to him. "What is it, Elric?"

Elric's hands clutched his head. "Our journey has been useless." Unconsciously he used the old Melnibonéan tongue.

"It need not be," said J'osui C'reln Reyr. "For me, at least." He paused. "Tell me, how did you find this city? Was there a map?"

Elric produced the map. "This one."

"Aye, that is the one. Many centuries ago I put it into a casket which I placed in a small trunk. I launched the trunk into the river, hoping that it would follow my people and they would know what it was."

"The casket was found in Melniboné, but no-one had bothered to open it," Elric explained. "That will give you an idea of what happened to the folk who left here..."

The strange man nodded gravely. "And was there still a seal upon the map?"

"There was. I have it."

"An image of one of the manifestations of Arioch, embedded in a small ruby?"

"Aye. I thought I recognized the image, but I could not place it."

"The Image in the Gem," murmured J'osui C'reln Reyr. "As I prayed, it has returned—borne by one of the royal line!"

"What is its significance?"

Moonglum interrupted. "Will this fellow help us to escape, Elric? We are becoming somewhat impatient..."

"Wait," the albino said. "I will tell you everything later."

"The Image in the Gem could be the instrument of my release," said the Creature Doomed to Live. "If he who possesses it is of the royal line, then he can command the Jade Man."

"But why did you not use it?"

“Because of the curse that was put on me. I had the power to command, but not to summon the demon. It was a joke, I understand, of the High Lords.”

Elric saw bitter sadness in the eyes of J’osui C’rein Reyr. He looked at the white, naked flesh and the white hair and the body that was neither old nor young, at the shaft of the arrow sticking out above the third rib on the left side.

“What must I do?” he asked.

“You must summon Arioeh and then you must command him to enter his body again and recover his eyes so that he may see to walk away from R’lin K’rein A’a.”

“And when he walks away?”

“The curse goes with him.”

Elric was thoughtful. If he did summon Arioeh—who was plainly reluctant to come—and then commanded him to do something he did not wish to do, he stood the chance of making an enemy of that powerful, if unpredictable entity. Yet they were trapped here by the Olab warriors, with no means of escaping them. If the Jade Man walked, the Olab would almost certainly flee and there would be time to get back to the ship and reach the sea. He explained everything to his companions. Both Moonglum and Avan looked dubious and the remaining Vilmirian crewman looked positively terrified.

“I must do it,” Elric decided, “for the sake of this man. I must call Arioeh and lift the doom that is on R’lin K’rein A’a.”

“And bring a greater doom to us!” Duke Avan said, putting his hand automatically upon his sword-hilt. “No. I think we should take our chances with the Olab. Leave this man—he is mad—he raves. Let’s be on our way.”

“Go if you choose,” Elric said. “But I will stay with the Creature Doomed to Live.”

“Then you will stay here for ever. You cannot believe his story!”

“But I do believe it.”

“You must come with us. Your sword will help. Without it, the Olab will certainly destroy us.”

“You saw that Stormbringer has little effect against the Olab.”

“And yet it has some. Do not desert me, Elric!”

“I am not deserting you. I must summon Arioeh. That summoning will be to your benefit, if not to mine.”

“I am unconvinced.”

“It was my sorcery you wanted on this venture. Now you shall have my sorcery.”

Avan backed away. He seemed to fear something more than the Olab, more than the Summoning. He seemed to read something in Elric’s face which even Elric did not know.



“We must go outside,” said J’osui C’rein Reyr. “We must stand beneath the Jade Man.”

“And when this is done,” Elric asked suddenly, “how will we leave R’lin K’rein A’a?”

“There is a boat. It has no provisions, but much of the city’s treasure is on it. It lies at the west end of the island.”

“That is some comfort,” Elric said. “And you could not use it yourself?”

“I could not leave.”

“Is that part of the curse?”

“Aye—the curse of my timidity.”

“Timidity has kept you here ten thousand years?”

“Aye...”

They left the chamber and went out into the square. Night had fallen and a huge moon was in the sky. From where Elric stood it seemed to frame the Jade Man’s sightless head like a halo. It was completely silent. Elric took the Image in the Gem from his pouch and held it between the forefinger and thumb of his left hand. With his right he drew Stormbringer. Avan, Moonglum and the Vilmirian crewman fell back.

He stared up at the huge jade legs, the genitals, the torso, the arms, the head, and he raised his sword in both hands and screamed:

“ARIOCH!”

Stormbringer’s voice almost drowned his. It pulsed in his hands; it threatened to leave his grasp altogether as it howled.

“ARIOCH!”

All the watchers saw now was the throbbing, radiant sword, the white face and hands of the albino and his crimson eyes glaring through the blackness.

“ARIOCH!”

And then a voice which was not Arioch’s came to Elric’s ears and it seemed that the sword itself spoke.

“*Elric—Arioch must have blood and souls. Blood and souls, my lord...*”

“No. These are my friends and the Olab cannot be harmed by Stormbringer. Arioch must come without the blood, without the souls.”

“Only those can summon him for certain!” said a voice, more clearly now. It was sardonic and it seemed to come from behind him. He turned, but there was nothing there.

He saw Duke Avan’s nervous face, and as his eyes fixed on the Vilmirian’s countenance, the sword

came round and plunged towards the duke.

“No!” cried Elric. “Stop!”

But Stormbringer would not stop until it had plunged deep into Duke Avan’s heart and quenched its thirst. The crewman stood transfixed as he watched his master die.

Duke Avan writhed. “Elric! What treachery do you...?” He screamed. “Ah, no!”

He jerked. “Please...”

He quivered. “My soul...”

He died.

Elric withdrew the sword and cut the crewman down. The action had been without thought.

“Now Arioch has his blood and his souls,” he said coldly. “Let Arioch come!”

Moonglum and the Creature Doomed to Live had retreated, staring at the possessed Elric in horror. The albino’s face was cruel.

“LET ARIOCH COME!”

“I am here, Elric.”

Elric whirled and saw that something stood in the shadow of the statue’s legs—a shadow within a shadow.

“Arioch—thou must return to this manifestation and make it leave R’lin K’ren A’a for ever.”

“I do not choose to, Elric.”

“Then I must command thee, Duke Arioch.”

“Command? Only he who possesses the Image in the Gem may command Arioch—and then only once.”

“I have the Image in the Gem.” Elric held up the tiny object. “See.”

The shadow within a shadow swirled for a moment as if in anger.

“If I obey your command, you will set in motion a chain of events which you might not desire,” Arioch said, speaking suddenly in Low Melnibonéan as if to give extra gravity to his words.

“Then let it be. I command you to enter the Jade Man and pick up its eyes so that it might walk again. Then I command you to leave here and take the curse of the High Ones with you.”

Arioch replied, “When the Jade Man ceases to guard the place where the High Ones meet, then the great struggle of the Upper Worlds begins.”

“I command thee, Arioch. Go into the Jade Man!”

“You are an obstinate creature, Elric.”

“Go!” Elric raised Stormbringer. It seemed to sing in monstrous glee and it seemed at that moment to be more powerful than Arioch himself, more powerful than all the Lords of the Higher Worlds.

The ground shook. Fire suddenly blazed around the form of the great statue. The shadow within a shadow disappeared.

And the Jade Man stooped.

Its great bulk bent over Elric and its hands reached past him and it groped for the two crystals that lay on the ground. Then it found them and took one in each hand, straightening its back.

Elric stumbled towards the far corner of the square where Moonglum and J’osui C’reln Reyr already stood, their bodies crouched in terror.

A fierce light now blazed from the Jade Man’s eyes and the jade lips parted.

“*It is done, Elric!*” said a huge voice.

J’osui C’reln Reyr began to sob.

“Then go, Arioch.”

“I go. The curse is lifted from R’lin K’ren A’a and from J’osui C’reln Reyr—but a greater curse now lies upon your whole plane. I journey now to Pan Tang to answer, at last, the Theocrat’s prayers to me!”

“What is this, Arioch? Explain yourself!” Elric cried.

“Soon you will have your explanation. Farewell!”

The enormous legs of jade moved suddenly and in a single step had cleared the ruins and had begun to crash through the jungle. In a moment the Jade Man had disappeared.

Then the Creature Doomed to Live laughed. It was a strange joy that he voiced. Moonglum blocked his ears.

“And now!” shouted J’osui C’reln Reyr. “Now your blade must take my life. I can die at last!”

Elric passed his hand across his face. He had hardly been aware of the events of the past moments. “No,” he said in a dazed tone. “I cannot...”

And Stormbringer flew from his hand—flew to the body of the Creature Doomed to Live and buried itself in its chest.

And as he died, J’osui C’reln Reyr laughed. He fell to the ground and his lips moved. A whisper came from them. Elric stepped nearer to hear.

“The sword has my knowledge now. My burden has left me.”

The eyes closed.

J'osui C'reln Reyr's ten-thousand-year life-span had ended.

Weakly, Elric withdrew Stormbringer and sheathed it. He stared down at the body of the Creature Doomed to Live and then he looked up, questioningly, at Moonglum.

The little Eastlander turned away.

The sun began to rise. Grey dawn came. Elric watched the corpse of J'osui C'reln Reyr turn to powder that was stirred by the wind and mixed with the dust of the ruins. He walked back across the square to where Duke Avan's twisted body lay and he fell to his knees beside it.

"You were warned, Duke Avan Astran of Old Hrolmar, that ill befell those who linked their fortunes with Elric of Melniboné. But you thought otherwise. Now you know." With a sigh he got to his feet.

Moonglum stood beside him. The sun was now touching the taller parts of the ruins. Moonglum reached out and gripped his friend's shoulder.

"The Olab have vanished. I think they've had their fill of sorcery."

"Another one has been destroyed by me, Moonglum. Am I forever to be tied to this cursed sword? I must discover a way to rid myself of it or my heavy conscience will bear me down so that I cannot rise at all."

Moonglum nodded, but was silent.

"I will lay Duke Avan to rest," Elric said. "You go back to where we left the ship and tell the men that we come."

Moonglum began to stride across the square towards the east.

Elric tenderly picked up the body of Duke Avan and went towards the opposite side of the square, to the underground room where the Creature Doomed to Live had lived out his life for ten thousand years.

It seemed so unreal to Elric now, but he knew that it had not been a dream, for the Jade Man had gone. His tracks could be seen through the jungle. Whole clumps of trees had been flattened.

He reached the place and descended the stairs and laid Duke Avan down on the bed of dried grasses. Then he took the duke's dagger and, for want of anything else, dipped it in the duke's blood and wrote on the wall above the corpse:

*This was Duke Avan Astran of Old Hrolmar. He explored the world and brought much knowledge and treasure back to Vilmir, his land. He dreamed and became lost in the dream of another and so died. He enriched the Young Kingdoms—and thus encouraged another dream. He died so that the Creature Doomed to Live might die, as he desired...*

Elric paused. Then he threw down the dagger. He could not justify his own feelings of guilt by

composing a high-sounding epitaph for the man he had slain.

He stood there, breathing heavily, then once again picked up the dagger.

*He died because Elric of Melniboné desired a peace and a knowledge he could never find. He died by the Black Sword.*

Outside in the middle of the square, at noon, still lay the lonely body of the last Vilmirian crewman. Nobody had known his name. Nobody felt grief for him or tried to compose an epitaph for him. The dead Vilmirian had died for no high purpose, followed no fabulous dream. Even in death his body would fulfill no function. On this island there was no carrion-eater to feed. In the dust of the city there was no earth to fertilize.

Elric came back into the square and saw the body and for him, for a moment, it symbolized everything that had transpired here and would transpire later.

“There is no purpose,” he murmured.

Perhaps his remote ancestors had, after all, realized that, but had not cared. It had taken the Jade Man to make them care and then go mad in their anguish. The knowledge had caused them to close their minds to much.

“Elric!”

It was Moonglum returning. Elric looked up.

“I met the only survivor on the trail. Before he died he told me the Olab had dealt with the crew and the ship before they came after us. They’re all slain. The boat is destroyed.”

Elric remembered something the Creature Doomed to Live had told him. “There is another boat,” he said. “It lies at the west end of the island.”

It took them the rest of the day and all of that night to discover where J’osui C’reln Reyr had hidden his boat. They pulled it down to the water and inspected it. It was a sturdy boat, made of the same strange material they had seen in the library of R’lin K’rein A’a. Moonglum peered into the lockers and grinned at what he saw there. “Treasure! So we have benefited from this venture, after all!”

“The jewels will not feed us,” Elric said. “It is a long journey home.”

“Home?”

“Back to the Young Kingdoms.”

Moonglum winked at him. “I saw some cases of provisions amongst the wreckage of Avan’s schooner. We’ll sail round the island and pick them up.”

Elric looked back at the silent forest and a shiver passed through him. He thought of all the hopes he had had on the journey upriver and he cursed himself for a fool.

There was something of a smile on his face as they cast off, raised the sail and began to move with the current.

Moonglum displayed a handful of emeralds. "We are poor no longer, friend Elric!"

"Aye," said Elric. "Are we not lucky, you and I, Moonglum?"

And this time it was Moonglum's turn to shiver.

## **THE STONE THING**

A Tale of Strange Parts

(1974)

OUT OF THE dark places; out of the howling mists; out of the lands without sun; out of Ghonorea came tall Catharz, with the moody sword Oakslayer in his right hand, the cursed spear Bloodlicker in his left hand, the evil bow Deathsinger on his back together with his quiver of fearful rune-fletched arrows, Heartseeker, Goregreedy, Soul-snatcher, Orphanmaker, Eyeblinder, Sorrowsower, Beanslicer, and several others.

Where his right eye should have been there was a jewel of slumbering scarlet whose colour sometimes shifted to smouldering blue, and in the place of his left eye was a many-faceted crystal, which pulsed as if possessed of independent life. Where Catharz had once had a right hand, now a thing of iron, wood and carved amethyst sat upon his stump; nine-fingered, alien, cut by Catharz from the creature who had sliced off his own hand. Catharz's left hand was at first merely gauntleted, but when one looked further it could be observed that the gauntlet was in fact a many-jointed limb of silver, gold and lapis lazuli, but as Catharz rode by, those who saw him pass remarked not on the murmuring sword in his right hand, not on the whispering spear in his left hand, not on the whining bow upon his back or the grumbling arrows in the quiver; neither did they remark on his right eye of slumbering scarlet, his left eye of pulsing crystal, his nine-fingered right hand, his shining metallic left hand; they saw only the fearful foot of Cwlwwymwn which throbbed in the stirrup at his mount's right flank.



The foot of the Aching God, Cwlwymwn Rootripper, whose ambition upon the old and weary Earth had been to make widows of all wives; Cwlwymwn the Striker, whose awful feet had trampled whole cities when men had first made cities; Cwlwymwn of the Last Ones, Last of the Last Ones, who had been driven back to his island domain on the edge of the world, beyond the Western Ice, and who now came limping after Catharz screaming out for vengeance, demanding the return of his foot, sliced from his leg by Oakslayer so that Catharz might walk again and continue upon his doom-laden quest, bearing weapons which were not his protection but his burden, seeking consolation for the guilt which ate at his soul since it was he who had been responsible for the death of his younger brother, Forax the Golden, for the death of his niece, Libia Gentleknee, for the living death of his cousin, Wertigo the Unbalanced, seeking the whereabouts of his lost love, Cyphila the Fair, who had been stolen from him by his archenemy, the wizard To'me'ko'op'r, most powerful, most evil, most lustful of all the great sorcerers of this magic-clouded world.

And there were no friends here to give aid to Catharz Godfoot. He must go alone, with shuddering terror before him and groaning guilt behind him, and Cwlwymwn, screaming, vengeful, limping Cwlwymwn, following always.

And Catharz rode on, rarely stopping, scarcely ever dismounting, anxious to claim his own vengeance on the sorcerer, and the foot of Cwlwymwn, Last of the Last Ones, was heavy on him, as well it might be for it was at least eighteen inches longer than his left foot and naked, for he had had to abandon his boot when he had found that it did not fit. Now Cwlwymwn possessed the boot; it was how he had known that Catharz was the mortal who had stolen his green, seventeen-clawed limb, attaching it by fearful sorcery to the flesh of his leg. Catharz's left leg was not of flesh at all, but of lacquered cork, made for him by the People of the World Beneath the Reefs, when he had aided them in their great fight against the Gods of the Lowest Sea.

The sun had stained the sky a livid crimson and had sunk below the horizon before Catharz would allow himself a brief rest and it was just before dark that he came in sight of a small stone cottage, sheltered beneath terraces of glistening limestone, where he hoped he might find food, for he was very hungry.

Knocking upon the door he called out:

“Greetings, I come in friendship, seeking hospitality, for I am called Catharz the Melancholy, who carries

the curse of Cwlwwymwn Rootripper upon him, who has many enemies and no friends, who slew his brother, Forax the Golden, and caused the death of Libia Gentleknee, famous for her beauty, and who seeks his lost love Cyphila the Fair, prisoner of the wizard To'me'ko'op'r, and who has a great and terrible doom upon him."

The door opened and a woman stood there. Her hair was the silver of a spiderweb in the moonlight, her eyes were the deep gold found at the centre of a beehive, her skin had the pale, blushing beauty of the tea-rose. "Welcome, stranger," she said. "Welcome to all that is left of the home of Lanoli, whose father was once the mightiest in these parts."

And, upon beholding her, Catharz forgot Cyphila the Fair, forgot that he had slain his brother, his niece, and betrayed his cousin, Wertigo the Unbalanced.

"You are very beautiful, Lanoli," he said.

"Ah," said she, "that is what I have learned. But beauty such as mine can only thrive if it is seen and it has been so long since anyone came to these lands."

"Let me help your beauty thrive," he said.

Food was forgotten, guilt was forgotten, fear was forgotten as Catharz divested himself of his sword, his spear, his bow and his arrows and walked slowly into the cottage. His gait was a rolling one, for he still bore the burden that was the foot of the Last of the Last Ones, and it took him some time to pull it through the door, but at length he stood inside and had closed the door behind him and had taken her in his arms and had pressed his lips to hers.

"Oh, Catharz," she breathed. "Catharz!"

It was not long until they stood naked before one another. Her eyes traveled over his body and it was plain that the eyes of scarlet and crystal were lovely to her, that she admired his silver hand and his nine-fingered hand, that even the great foot of Cwlwwymwn was beautiful in her sight. But then her eyes, shy until now, fell upon that which lay between his legs, and those eyes widened a little, and she blushed. Her lovely lips framed a question, but he moved forward as swiftly as he could and embraced her again.

"How?" she murmured. "How, Catharz?"

"It is a long tale and a bloody one," he whispered, "of rivalry and revenge, but suffice to say that it ended in my father, Xympwll the Cruel, taking a terrible vengeance upon me. I fled from his court into the wastes of Grxiwynn, raving mad, and it was there that the tribesmen of Velox found me and took me to the Wise Man of Oorps in the mountains beyond Katatonia. He nursed me and carved that for me. It took him two years, and all through those two years I remained raving, living off dust and dew and roots, as he lived. The engravings had mystical significance, the runes contain the sum of his great wisdom, the tiny pictures show all that there is to show of physical love. Is it not beautiful? More beautiful than that which it has replaced?"

Her glance was modest; she nodded slowly.

"It is indeed, very beautiful," she agreed. And then she looked up at him and he saw that tears glistened in her eyes. "But did it *have* to be made of Sandstone?"

"There is little else," he explained sadly, "in the mountains beyond Katatonia."



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Volume 67 in *The History of the Purple Poignard* )

## ELRIC AT THE END OF TIME

(1981)

### CHAPTER ONE

*In Which Mrs. Persson Detects an Above Average*

*Degree of Chaos in the Megaflow*

RETURNING FROM CHINA to London and the Spring of 1936, Una Persson found an unfamiliar quality of pathos in most of the friends she had last seen, as far as she recalled, during the Blitz on her way back from 1970. Then they had been desperately hearty: it was a comfort to understand that the condition was not permanent. Here, at present, Pierrot ruled and she felt she possessed a better grip on her power. This was, she admitted with shame, her favourite moral climate for it encouraged in her an enormously gratifying sense of spiritual superiority: the advantage of having been born, originally, into a later and probably more sophisticated age. The 1960s. Some women, she reflected, were forced to have children in order to enjoy this pleasure.

But she was uneasy, so she reported to the local Time Centre and the bearded, sullen features of Sergeant Alvarez who welcomed her in white, apologizing for the fact that he had himself only just that morning left the Lower Devonian and had not had time to change.

"It's the megaflow, as you guessed," he told her, operating toggles to reveal his crazy display systems. "We've lost control."

"We never really had it." She lit a Sherman's and shook her long hair back over the headrest of the swivel chair, opening her military overcoat and loosening her webbing. "Is it worse than usual?"

"Much." He sipped cold coffee from his battered silver mug. "It cuts through every plane we can pick up—a rogue current swerving through the dimensions. Something of a twister."

"Jerry?"

"He's dormant. We checked. But it's like him, certainly. Most probably another aspect."

"Oh, sod." Una straightened her shoulders.

"That's what I thought," said Alvarez. "Someone's going to have to do a spot of rubato." He studied a

screen. It was Greek to Una. For a moment a pattern formed. Alvarez made a note. “Yes. It can either be fixed at the nadir or the zenith. It’s too late to try anywhere in between. I think it’s up to you, Mrs. P.”

She got to her feet. “Where’s the zenith?”

“The End of Time.”

“Well,” she said, “that’s something.”

She opened her bag and made sure of her jar of instant coffee. It was the one thing she couldn’t get at the End of Time.

“Sorry,” said Alvarez, glad that the expert had been there and that he could remain behind.

“It’s just as well,” she said. “This period’s no good for my moral well-being. I’ll be off, then.”

“Someone’s got to.” Alvarez failed to seem sympathetic.

“It’s Chaos out there.”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

She entered the makeshift chamber and was on her way to the End of Time.

## CHAPTERTWO

### *In Which the Eternal Champion Finds*

### *Himself at the End of Time*

Elric of Melniboné shook a bone-white fist at the greedy, glaring stars—the eyes of all those men whose souls he had stolen to sustain his own enfeebled body. He looked down. Though it seemed he stood on something solid, there was only more blackness falling away below him. It was as if he hung at the centre of the universe. And here, too, were staring points of yellow light. Was he to be judged?

His half-sentient runesword, Stormbringer, in its scabbard on his left hip, murmured like a nervous dog.

He had been on his way to Imrryr, to his home, to reclaim his kingdom from his cousin Yyrkoon; sailing from the Isle of the Purple Towns where he had guested with Count Smiorgan Baldhead. Magic winds had caught the Filkharian trader as she crossed the unnamed water between the Vilmirian peninsula and the Isle of Melniboné. She had been borne into the Dragon Sea and thence to Sorcerers’ Isle, so-called because that barren place had been the home of Cran Liret, the Thief of Spells, a wizard infamous for his borrowings, who had, at length, been dispatched by those he sought to rival. But much residual magic had been left behind. Certain spells had come into the keeping of the Krettii, a tribe of near-brutes who had migrated to the island from the region of The Silent Land less than fifty years before. Their shaman, one Grrodd Ybene Eenr, had made unthinking use of devices buried by the dying sorcerer as the spells of his peers sucked life and sanity from them. Elric had dealt with more than one clever wizard, but never with so mindless a power. His battle had been long and exhausting and had required the sacrifice of most of the Filkharians as well as the entire tribe of Krettii. His sorcery had become increasingly desperate.

Sprite fought sprite, devil fell upon devil, in both physical and astral, all around the region of Sorcerers' Isle. Eventually Elric had mounted a massive Summoning against the allies of Grrodd Ybene Eenr with the result that the shaman had been at last overwhelmed and his remains scattered in limbo. But Elric, captured by his own monstrous magickings, had followed his enemy and now he stood in the Void, crying out into appalling silence, hearing his words only in his skull:

*"Arioch! Arioch! Aid me!"*

But his patron Duke of Hell was absent. He could not exist here. He could not, for once, even hear his favourite protégé.

*"Arioch! Repay my loyalty! I have given you blood and souls!"*

He did not breathe. His heart had stopped. All his movements were sluggish.

The eyes looked down at him. They looked up at him. Were they glad? Did they rejoice in his terror?

*"Arioch!"*

He yearned for a reply. He would have wept, but no tears would come. His body was cold; less than dead, yet not alive. A fear was in him greater than any fear he had known before.

*"Oh, Arioch! Aid me!"*

He forced his right hand towards the pulsing pommel of Stormbringer which, alone, still possessed energy. The hilt of the sword was warm to his touch and, as slowly he folded his fingers around it, it seemed to swell in his fist and propel his arm upwards so that he did not draw the sword. Rather the sword forced his limbs into motion.

And now it challenged the Void, glowing with black fire, singing its high, gleeful battle-song.

"Our destinies are intertwined, Stormbringer," said Elric. "Bring us from this place, or those destinies shall never be fulfilled."

Stormbringer swung like the needle of a compass and Elric's unfeeling arm was wrenched round to go with it. In eight directions the sword swung, as if to the eight points of Chaos. It was questing—like a hound sniffing a trail. Then a yell sounded from within the strange metal of the blade; a distant cry of delight, it seemed to Elric. The sound one would hear if one stood above a valley listening to children playing far below.

Elric knew that Stormbringer had sensed a plane they might reach. Not necessarily their own, but one which would accept them. And, as a drowning mariner must yearn for the most inhospitable rock rather than no rock at all, Elric yearned for that plane.

*"Stormbringer. Take us there!"*

The sword hesitated. It moaned. It was suspicious.

*"Take us there!"* whispered the albino to his runesword.

The sword struck back and forth, up and down, as if it battled invisible enemies. Elric scarcely kept his

grip on it. It seemed that Stormbringer was frightened of the world it had detected and sought to drive it back but the act of seeking had in itself set them both in motion. Already Elric could feel himself being drawn through the darkness, towards something he could see very dimly beyond the myriad eyes, as dawn reveals clouds undetected in the night sky.

Elric thought he saw the shapes of crags, pointed and crazy. He thought he saw water, flat and ice-blue. The stars faded and there was snow beneath his feet, mountains all around him, a huge, blazing sun overhead—and above that another landscape, a desert, as a magic mirror might reflect the contrasting character of he who peered into it—a desert, quite as real as the snowy peaks in which he crouched, sword in hand, waiting for one of these landscapes to fade so that he might establish, to a degree, his bearings. Evidently the two planes had intersected.

But the landscape overhead did not fade. He could look up and see sand, mountains, vegetation, a sky which met his own sky at a point halfway along the curve of the huge sun—and blended with it. He looked about him. Snowy peaks in all directions. Above—desert everywhere. He felt dizzy, found that he was staring downwards, reaching to cup some of the snow in his hand. It was ordinary snow, though it seemed reluctant to melt in contact with his flesh.

“This is a world of Chaos,” he muttered. “It obeys no natural laws.” His voice seemed loud, amplified by the peaks, perhaps. “That is why you did not want to come here. This is the world of powerful rivals.”

Stormbringer was silent, as if all its energy were spent. But Elric did not sheathe the blade. He began to trudge through the snow towards what seemed to be an abyss. Every so often he glanced upward, but the desert overhead had not faded; sun and sky remained the same. He wondered if he walked around the surface of a miniature world, that if he continued to go forward he might eventually reach the point where the two landscapes met. He wondered if this were not some punishment wished upon him by his untrustworthy allies of Chaos. Perhaps he must choose between death in the snow or death in the desert. He reached the edge of the abyss and looked down.

The walls of the abyss fell for all of five feet before reaching a floor of gold and silver squares which stretched for perhaps another seven feet before they reached the far wall, where the landscape continued—snow and crags—uninterrupted.

“This is undoubtedly where Chaos rules,” said the prince of Melniboné. He studied the smooth, chequered floor. It reflected parts of the snowy terrain and the desert world above it. It reflected the crimson-eyed albino who peered down at it, his features drawn in bewilderment and tiredness.

“I am at their mercy,” said Elric. “They play with me. But I shall resist them, even as they destroy me.” And some of his wild, careless spirit came back to him as he prepared to lower himself onto the chequered floor and cross to the opposite bank.

He was halfway over when he heard a grunting sound in the distance and a beast appeared, its paws slithering uncertainly on the smooth surface, its seven savage eyes glaring in all directions as if it sought the instigator of its terrible indignity.

And, at last, all seven eyes focused on Elric and the beast opened a mouth in which row upon row of thin, vicious teeth were arranged, and uttered a growl of unmistakable resentment.

Elric raised his sword. “Back, creature of Chaos. You threaten the Prince of Melniboné!”

The beast was already propelling itself towards him. Elric flung his body to one side, aiming a blow with

the sword as he did so, succeeding only in making a thin incision in the monster's heavily muscled hind leg. It shrieked and began to turn.

“Back!”

Elric's voice was the brave, thin squeak of a lemming attacked by a hawk. He drove at the thing's snout with Stormbringer. The sword was heavy. It had spent all its energy and there was no more to give. Elric wondered why he, himself, did not weaken. Possibly the Laws of Nature were entirely abolished in the Realm of Chaos. He struck and drew blood. The beast paused, more in astonishment than fear.

Then it opened its jaws, pushed its back legs against the snowy bank, and shot towards the albino who tried to dodge it, lost his footing, and fell, sprawling backwards, on the gold and silver surface.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### *In Which Una Persson Discovers an Unexpected Snag*



The gigantic beetle, rainbow carapace glittering, turned as if into the wind, which blew from the distant mountains, its thick, flashing wings beating rapidly as it bore its single passenger over the queer landscape.

On its back Mrs. Persson checked the instruments on her wrist. Ever since Man had begun to travel in time it had become necessary for the Guild to develop techniques to compensate for the fluctuations and disruptions in the space-time continua; perpetually monitoring the chronoflow and megafLOW. She pursed her lips. She had picked up the signal. She made the semi-sentient beetle swing a degree or two SSE and head directly for the mountains. She was in some sort of enclosed (but vast) environment. These mountains, as well as everything surrounding them, lay in the territory most utilized by the gloomy, natural-born Werther de Goethe, poet and romantic, solitary seeker after truth in a world no longer differentiating between the degrees of reality. He would not remember her, she knew, because, as far as Werther was concerned, they had not met yet. Had Werther even experienced his adventure with Mistress Christia, the Everlasting Concubine? A story on which she had dined out more than once, in duller eras.

The mountains drew closer. From here it was possible to see the entire arrangement (a creation of Werther's very much in character): a desert landscape, a central sun, and, inverted above it, winter mountains. Werther strove to make statements, like so many naïve artists before him, by presenting

simple contrasts: *The World is Bleak / The World is Cold / Barren am I As I Grow Old / Tomorrow I Die, Entombed in Cold / For Silver My Poor Soul Was Sold*—she remembered he was perhaps the worst poet she had encountered in an eternity of meetings with bad poets. He had taught himself to read and write in old, old English so that he might carve those words on one of his many abandoned tombs (half his time was spent in composing obituaries for himself). Like so many others he seemed to equate self-pity with artistic inspiration. In an earlier age he might have discovered his public and become quite rich (self-pity passing for passion in the popular understanding). Sometimes she regretted the passing of Wheldrake, so long ago, so far away, in a universe bearing scarcely any resemblances to those in which she normally operated.

She brought her wavering mind back to the problem. The beetle dipped and circled over the desert, but there was no sight of her quarry.

She was about to abandon the search when she heard a faint roaring overhead and she looked up to see another characteristic motif of Werther's—a gold and silver chessboard on which, upside down, a monstrous doglike creature was bearing down on a tiny white-haired man dressed in the most abominable taste Una had seen for some time.

She directed the air car upwards and then, reversing the machine as she entered the opposing gravity, downwards to where the barbarically costumed swordsman was about to be eaten by the beast.

“Shoo!” cried Una commandingly.

The beast raised a befuddled head.

“Shoo.”

It licked its lips and returned its seven-eyed gaze to the albino, who was now on his knees, using his large sword to steady himself as he climbed to his feet.

The jaws opened wider and wider. The pale man prepared, shakily, to defend himself.

Una directed the air car at the beast's unkempt head. The great beetle connected with a loud crack. The monster's eyes widened in dismay. It yelped. It sat on its haunches and began to slide away, its claws making an unpleasant noise on the gold and silver tiles.

Una landed the air car and gestured for the stranger to enter. She noticed with distaste that he was a somewhat unhealthy looking albino with gaunt features, exaggeratedly large and slanting eyes, ears that were virtually pointed, and glaring, half-mad red pupils.

And yet, undoubtedly, it was her quarry and there was nothing for it but to be polite.

“Do, please, get in,” she said. “I am here to rescue you.”

“*Shaarmraaam torjistoo quellahm vyeearr,*” said the stranger in an accent that seemed to Una to be vaguely Scottish.

“Damn,” she said, “that's all we need.” She had been anxious to approach the albino in private, before one of the denizens of the End of Time could arrive and select him for a menagerie, but now she regretted that Werther or perhaps Lord Jagged were not here, for she realized that she needed one of their translation pills, those tiny tablets which could “engineer” the brain to understand a new language. By a

fluke—or perhaps because of her presence here so often—the people at the End of Time currently spoke formal early 20th-century English.

The albino—who wore a kind of tartan divided kilt, knee-length boots, a blue and white jerkin, a green cloak and a silver breastplate, with a variety of leather belts and metal buckles here and there upon his person—was vehemently refusing her offer of a lift. He raised the sword before him as he backed away, slipped once, reached the bank, scrambled through snow and disappeared behind a rock.

Mrs. Persson sighed and put the car into motion again.

## CHAPTERFOUR

### *In Which the Prince of Melniboné Encounters*

#### *Further Terrors*

Xiombarg herself, thought Elric as he slid beneath the snows into the cave. Well, he would have no dealings with the Queen of Chaos; not until he was forced to do so.

The cave was large. In the thin light from the gap above his head he could not see far. He wondered whether to return to the surface or risk going deeper into the cave. There was always the hope that he would find another way out. He was attempting to recall some rune that would aid him, but all he knew depended either upon the aid of elementals who did not exist on this plane, or upon the Lords of Chaos themselves—and they were unlikely to come to his assistance in their own realm. He was marooned here: the single mouse in a world of cats.

Almost unconsciously, he found himself moving downwards, realizing that the cave had become a tunnel. He was feeling hungry but, apart from the monster and the woman in the magical carriage, had seen no sign of life. Even the cavern did not seem entirely natural.

It widened; there was phosphorescent light. He realized that the walls were of transparent crystal, and behind the walls were all manner of artifacts. He saw crowns, sceptres and chains of precious jewels; cabinets of complicated carving; weapons of strangely turned metal; armour, clothing, things whose use he could not guess—and food. There were sweetmeats, fruits, flans and pies, all out of reach.

Elric groaned. This was torment. Perhaps deliberately planned torment. A thousand voices whispered to him in a beautiful, alien language.

“*Bie-meee... Bie-meee...*” the voices murmured. “*Baa-gen, baa-gen...*”

They seemed to be promising every delight, if only he could pass through the walls; but they were of transparent quartz, lit from within. He raised Stormbringer, half-tempted to try to break down the barrier, but he knew that even his sword was, at its most powerful, incapable of destroying the magic of Chaos.

He paused, gasping with astonishment at a group of small dogs which looked at him with large brown eyes, tongues lolling, and jumped up at him.

“*O, Nee Tubbens!*” intoned one of the voices.

“Gods!” screamed Elric. “This torture is too much!” He swung his body this way and that, threatening with his sword, but the voices continued to murmur and promise, displaying their riches but never allowing him to touch.

The albino panted. His crimson eyes glared about him. “You would drive me insane, eh? Well, Elric of Melniboné has witnessed more frightful threats than this. You will need to do more if you would destroy his mind!”

And he ran through the whispering passages, looking to neither his right nor his left, until, quite suddenly, he had run into blazing daylight and stood staring down into pale infinity—a blue and endless void.

He looked up. And he screamed.

Overhead were the gentle hills and dales of a rural landscape, with rivers, grazing cattle, woods and cottages. He expected to fall, headlong, but he did not. He was on the brink of the abyss. The cliff-face of red sandstone fell immediately below and then was the tranquil void. He looked back:

“*Baa-gen... O, Nee Tubbens...*”

A bitter smile played about the albino’s bloodless lips as, decisively, he sheathed his sword.

“Well, then,” he said. “Let them do their worst!”

And, laughing, he launched himself over the brink of the cliff.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *In Which Werther de Goethe Makes a Wonderful Discovery*

With a gesture of quiet pride, Werther de Goethe indicated his gigantic skull.

“It is very large, Werther,” said Mistress Christia, the Everlasting Concubine, turning a power ring to adjust the shade of her eyes so that they perfectly matched the day.

“It is monstrous,” said Werther modestly. “It reminds us all of the Inevitable Night.”

“Who was that?” enquired golden-haired Gaf the Horse in Tears, at present studying ancient legendry. “Sir Lew Grady?”

“I mean Death,” Werther told him, “which overwhelms us all.”

“Well, not us,” pointed out the Duke of Queens, as usual a trifle literal-minded. “Because we’re immortal, as you know.”

Werther offered him a sad, pitying look and sighed briefly. “Retain your delusions, if you will.”

Mistress Christia stroked the gloomy Werther’s long, dark locks. “There, there,” she said. “We have compensations, Werther.”



“Without Death,” intoned the Last Romantic, “there is no point to Life.”

As usual, they could not follow him, but they nodded gravely and politely.

“The skull,” continued Werther, stroking the side of his air car (which was in the shape of a large flying reptile) to make it circle and head for the left eye-socket, “is a Symbol not only of our Mortality, but also of our Fruitless Ambitions.”

“Fruit?” Bishop Castle, drowsing at the rear of the vehicle, became interested. His hobby was currently orchards. “Less? My pine trees, you know, are proving a problem. The apples are much smaller than I was led to believe.”

“The skull is lovely,” said Mistress Christia with valiant enthusiasm. “Well, now that we have seen it...”

“The outward shell,” Werther told her. “It is what it hides which is more important. Man’s Foolish Yearnings are all encompassed therein. His Greed, his Need for the Impossible, the Heat of his Passions, the Coldness which must Finally Overtake him. Through this eye-socket you will encounter a little invention of my own called The Bargain Basement of the Mind...”

He broke off in astonishment.

On the top edge of the eye-socket a tiny figure had emerged.

“What’s that?” enquired the Duke of Queens, craning his head back. “A random thought?”

“It is not mine at all!”

The figure launched itself into the sky and seemed to fly, with flailing limbs, towards the sun.

Werther frowned, watching the tiny man disappear. “The gravity field is reversed there,” he said absently, “in order to make the most of the paradox, you understand. There is a snowscape, a desert...” But he was much more interested in the newcomer. “How do you think he got into my skull?”

“At least he’s enjoying himself. He seems to be laughing.” Mistress Christia bent an ear towards the thin sound, which grew fainter and fainter at first, but became louder again. “He’s coming back.”

Werther nodded. “Yes. The field’s no longer reversed.” He touched a power ring.

The laughter stopped and became a yell of rage. The figure hurtled down on them. It had a sword in one white hand and its red eyes blazed.

Hastily, Werther stroked another ring. The stranger tumbled into the bottom of the air car and lay there panting, cursing and groaning.

“How wonderful!” cried Werther. “Oh, this is a traveler from some rich, romantic past. Look at him! What else could he be? What a prize!”

The stranger rose to his feet and raised the sword high above his head, defying the amazed and delighted passengers as he screamed at the top of his voice:

“*Heeshgeegrowinaz!*”

“Good afternoon,” said Mistress Christia. She reached in her purse for a translation pill and found one. “I wonder if you would care to swallow this—it’s quite harmless...”

“*Yakoom, oom glallio,*” said the albino contemptuously.

“Aha,” said Mistress Christia. “Well, just as you please.”

The Duke of Queens pointed towards the other socket. A huge, whirring beetle came sailing from it. In its back was someone he recognized with pleasure. “Mrs. Persson!”

Una brought her air car alongside.

“Is he in your charge?” asked Werther with undisguised disappointment. “If so, I could offer you...”

“I’m afraid he means a lot to me,” she said.

“From your own age?” Mistress Christia also recognized Una. She still offered the translation pill in the palm of her hand. “He seems a mite suspicious of us.”

“I’d noticed,” said Una. “It would be useful if he would accept the pill. However, if he will not, one of us...”

“I would be happy,” offered the generous Duke of Queens. He tugged at his green and gold beard. “Werther de Goethe, Mrs. Persson.”

“Perhaps I had better,” said Una nodding to Werther. The only problem with translation pills was that they did their job so thoroughly. You could speak the language perfectly, but you could speak no other.

Werther was, for once, positive. “Let’s all take a pill,” he suggested.

Everyone at the End of Time carried translation pills, in case of meeting a visitor from Space or the Past.

Mistress Christia handed hers to Una and found another. They swallowed.

“Creatures of Chaos,” said the newcomer with cool dignity, “I demand that you release me. You cannot hold a mortal in this way, not unless he has struck a bargain with you. And no bargain was struck which would bring me to the Realm of Chaos.”

“It’s actually more orderly than you’d think,” said Werther apologetically. “Your first experience, you see, was the world of my skull, which was deliberately muddled. I meant to show what Confusion was the Mind of Man...”

“May I introduce Mistress Christia, the Everlasting Concubine,” said the Duke of Queens, on his best manners. “This is Mrs. Persson, Bishop Castle, Gaf the Horse in Tears. Werther de Goethe—your unwitting host—and I am the Duke of Queens. We welcome you to our world. Your name, sir...?”

“You must know me, my lord Duke,” said Elric. “For I am Elric of Melniboné, Emperor by Right of Birth, Inheritor of the Ruby Throne, Bearer of the Actorios, Wielder of the Black Sword...”

“Indeed!” said Werther de Goethe. In a whispered aside to Mrs. Persson: “What a marvelous scowl!”

What a noble sneer!”

“You are an important personage in your world, then?” said Mistress Christia, fluttering the eyelashes she had just extended by half an inch. “Perhaps you would allow me...”

“I think he wishes to be returned to his home,” said Mrs. Persson hastily.

“Returned?” Werther was astonished. “But the Morphail Effect! It is impossible.”

“Not in this case, I think,” she said. “For if he is not returned there is no telling the fluctuations which will take place throughout the dimensions...”

They could not follow her, but they accepted her tone.

“Aye,” said Elric darkly, “return me to my realm, so that I may fulfill my own doom-laden destiny...”

Werther looked upon the albino with affectionate delight. “Aha! A fellow spirit! I, too, have a doom-laden destiny.”

“I doubt it is as doom-laden as mine.” Elric peered moodily back at the skull as the two air cars fled away towards a gentle horizon where exotic trees bloomed.

“Well,” said Werther with an effort, “perhaps it is not, though I assure you...”

“I have looked upon hellborn horror,” said Elric, “and communicated with the very Gods of the Uttermost Darkness. I have seen things which would turn other men’s minds to useless jelly...”

“Jelly?” interrupted Bishop Castle. “Do you, in your turn, have any expertise with, for instance, blackbird trees?”

“Your words are meaningless,” Elric told him, glowering. “Why do you torment me so, my lords? I did not ask to visit your world. I belong in the world of men, in the Young Kingdoms, where I seek my weird. Why, I have but lately experienced adventures...”

“I do think we have one of those bores,” murmured Bishop Castle to the Duke of Queens, “so common amongst time-travelers. They all believe themselves unique.”

But the Duke of Queens refused to be drawn. He had developed a liking for the frowning albino. Gaf the Horse in Tears was also plainly impressed, for he had fashioned his own features into a rough likeness of Elric’s. The Prince of Melniboné pretended insouciance, but it was evident to Una that he was frightened. She tried to calm him.

“People here at the End of Time...” she began.

“No soft words, my lady.” A cynical smile played about the albino’s lips. “I know you for that great unholy temptress, Queen of the Swords, Xiombarg herself.”

“I assure you, I am as human as you, sir...”

“Human? I, human? I am not human, madam—though I be a mortal, ’tis true. I am of older blood, the blood of the Bright Empire itself, the Blood of R’lin K’reu A’a which Cran Liret mocked, not

understanding what it was he laughed at. Aye, though forced to summon aid from Chaos, I made no bargain to become a slave in your realm...”

“I assure you—um—your majesty,” said Una, “that we had not meant to insult you and your presence here was no doing of ours. I am, as it happens, a stranger here myself. I came especially to see you, to help you escape...”

“Ha!” said the albino. “I have heard such words before. You would lure me into some worse trap than this. Tell me, where is Duke Arioeh? He, at least, I owe some allegiance to.”

“We have no-one of that name,” apologized Mistress Christia. She enquired of Gaf, who knew everyone. “No time-traveler?”

“None,” Gaf studied Elric’s eyes and made a small adjustment to his own. He sat back, satisfied.

Elric shuddered and turned away mumbling.

“You are very welcome here,” said Werther. “I cannot tell you how glad I am to meet one as essentially morbid and self-pitying as myself!”

Elric did not seem flattered.

“What can we do to make you feel at home?” asked Mistress Christia. She had changed her hair to a rather glossy blue in the hope, perhaps, that Elric would find it more attractive. “Is there anything you need?”

“Need? Aye. Peace of mind. Knowledge of my true destiny. A quiet place where I can be with Cymoril, whom I love.”

“What does this Cymoril look like?” Mistress Christia became just a trifle overeager.

“She is the most beautiful creature in the universe,” said Elric.

“It isn’t very much to go on,” said Mistress Christia. “If you could imagine a picture, perhaps? There are devices in the old cities which could visualize your thoughts. We could go there. I should be happy to fill in for her, as it were...”

“What? You offer me a simulacrum? Do you not think I should detect such witchery at once? Ah, this is loathsome! Slay me, if you will, or continue the torment. I’ll listen no longer!”

They were floating now, between high cliffs. On a ledge far below a group of time-travelers pointed up at them. One waved desperately.

“You’ve offended him, Mistress Christia,” said Werther pettishly. “You don’t understand how sensitive he is.”

“Yes I do.” She was aggrieved. “I was only being sympathetic.”

“Sympathy!” Elric rubbed at his long, somewhat pointed jaw. “Ha! What do I want with sympathy?”

“I never heard anyone who wanted it more.” Mistress Christia was kind. “You’re like a little boy, really,

aren't you?"

"Compared to the ancient Lords of Chaos, I am a child, aye. But my blood is old and cold, the blood of decaying Melniboné, as well you know." And with a huge sigh the albino seated himself at the far end of the car and rested his head on his fist. "Well? What is your pleasure, my Lords and Ladies of Hell?"

"It is your pleasure we are anxious to achieve," Werther told him. "Is there anything at all we can do? Some environment we can manufacture? What are you used to?"

"Used to? I am used to the crack of leathery dragon wings in the sweet, sharp air of the early dawn. I am used to the sound of red battle, the drumming of hoofs on bloody earth, the screams of the dying, the yells of the victorious. I am used to warring against demons and monsters, sorcerers and ghouls. I have sailed on magic ships and fought hand to hand with reptilian savages. I have encountered the Jade Man himself. I have fought side by side with the elementals, who are my allies. I have battled black evil..."

"Well," said Werther, "that's something to go on, at any rate. I'm sure we can..."

"Lord Elric won't be staying," began Una Persson politely. "You see—these fluctuations in the megaflow—not to mention his own destiny...He should not be here, at all, Werther."

"Nonsense!" Werther flung a black velvet arm about the stiff shoulders of his new friend. "It is evident that our destinies are one. Lord Elric is as grief-haunted as myself!"

"How can you know what it is to be haunted by grief?" murmured the albino. His face was half-buried in Werther's generous sleeve.

Mrs. Persson controlled herself. She rose from Werther's air car and made for her own. "Well," she said, "I must be off. I hope to see you later, everybody."

They sang out their farewells.

Una Persson turned her beetle westward, towards Castle Canaria, the home of her old friend Lord Jagged.

She needed help and advice.

## CHAPTERSIX

### *In Which Elric of Melniboné Resists the*

### *Temptations of the Chaos Lords*

Elric reflected on the subtle way in which laughing Lords of Chaos had captured him. Apparently, he was merely a guest and quite free to wander where he would in their realm. Actually, he was in their power as much as if they had chained him, for he could not flee this flying dragon and they had already demonstrated their enormous magical gifts in subtle ways, primarily with their shape-changing. Only the one who called himself Werther de Goethe (plainly a leader in the hierarchy of Chaos) still had the face and clothing he had worn when first encountered.

It was evident that this realm obeyed no natural laws, that it was mutable according to the whims of its powerful inhabitants. They could destroy him with a breath and had, subtly enough, given him evidence of that fact. How could he possibly escape such danger? By calling upon the Lords of Law for aid? But he owed them no loyalty and they, doubtless, regarded him as their enemy. But if he were to transfer his allegiance to Law...

These thoughts and more continued to engage him, while his captors chatted easily in the ancient High Speech of Melniboné, itself a version of the very language of Chaos. It was one of the other ways in which they revealed themselves for what they were. He fingered his runesword, wondering if it would be possible to slay such a lord and steal his energy, giving himself enough power for a little while to hurl himself back to his own sphere...

The one called Lord Werther was leaning over the side of the beast-vessel. "Oh, come and see, Elric. Look!"

Reluctantly, the albino moved to where Werther peered and pointed.

The entire landscape was filled with a monstrous battle. Creatures of all kinds and all combinations tore at one another with huge teeth and claws. Shapeless things slithered and hopped; giants, naked but for helmets and greaves, slashed at these beasts with great broadswords and axes, but were borne down. Flame and black smoke drifted everywhere. There was a smell. The stink of blood?

"What do you miss most?" asked the female. She pressed a soft body against him. He pretended not to be aware of it. He knew what magic flesh could hide on a she-witch.

"I miss peace," said Elric almost to himself, "and I miss war. For in battle I find a kind of peace..."

"Very good!" Bishop Castle applauded. "You are beginning to learn our ways. You will soon become one of our best conversationalists."

Elric touched the hilt of Stormbringer, hoping to feel it grow warm and vibrant under his hand, but it was still, impotent in the Realm of Chaos. He uttered a heavy sigh.

"You are an adventurer, then, in your own world?" said the Duke of Queens. He was bluff. He had changed his beard to an ordinary sort of black and was wearing a scarlet costume; quilted doublet and tight-fitting hose, with a blue and white ruff, an elaborately feathered hat on his head. "I, too, am something of a vagabond. As far, of course, as it is possible to be here. A buccaneer, of sorts. That is, my actions are in the main bolder than those of my fellows. More spectacular. Vulgar. Like yourself, sir. I admire your costume."

Elric knew that this Duke of Hell was referring to the fact that he affected the costume of the southern barbarian, that he did not wear the more restrained colours and more cleverly wrought silks and metals of his own folk. He gave tit for tat at this time. He bowed.

"Thank you, sir. Your own clothes rival mine."

"Do you think so?" The hell-lord pretended pleasure. If Elric had not known better, the creature would seem to be swelling with pride.

"Look!" cried Werther again. "Look, Lord Elric—we are attacked."

Elric whirled.

From below were rising oddly wrought vessels—something like ships, but with huge round wheels at their sides, like the wheels of water-clocks he had seen once in Pikarayd. Coloured smoke issued from chimneys mounted on their decks which swarmed with huge birds dressed in human clothing. The birds had multicoloured plumage, curved beaks, and they held swords in their claws, while on their heads were strangely shaped black hats on which were blazed skulls with crossed bones beneath.

“Heave to!” squawked the birds. “Or we’ll put a shot across your bowels!”

“What can they be?” cried Bishop Castle.

“Parrots,” said Werther de Goethe soberly. “Otherwise known as the hawks of the sea. And they mean us no good.”

Mistress Christia blinked.

“Don’t you mean pirates, dear?”

Elric took a firm grip on his sword. Some of the words the Chaos Lords used were absolutely meaningless to him. But whether the attacking creatures were of their own conception, or whether they were true enemies of his captors, Elric prepared to do bloody battle. His spirits improved. At least here was something substantial to fight.

## CHAPTERSEVEN

*In Which Mrs. Persson Becomes Anxious*

*About the Future of the Universe*

Lord Jagged of Canaria was nowhere to be found. His huge castle, of gold and yellow spires, an embellished replica of Kings Cross station, was populated entirely by his quaint robots, whom Jagged found at once more mysterious and more trustworthy than android or human servants, for they could answer only according to a limited programme.

Una suspected that Jagged was, himself, upon some mission, for he, too, was a member of the Guild of Temporal Adventurers. But she needed aid. Somehow she had to return Elric to his own dimension without creating further disruptions in the fabric of time and space. The Conjunction was not due yet and, if things got any worse, might never come. So many plans depended on the Conjunction of the Million Spheres that she could not risk its failure. But she could not reveal too much either to Elric or his hosts. As a Guild member she was sworn to the utmost and indeed necessary secrecy. Even here at the End of Time there were certain laws which could be disobeyed only at enormous risk. Words alone were dangerous when they described ideas concerning the nature of time.

She racked her brains. She considered seeking out Jherek Carnelian, but then remembered that he had scarcely begun to understand his own destiny. Besides, there were certain similarities between Jherek and Elric which she could only sense at present. It would be best to go cautiously there.

She decided that she had no choice. She must return to the Time Centre and see if they could detect

Lord Jagged for her.

She brought the necessary co-ordinates together in her mind and concentrated. For a moment all memories, all sense of identity left her.

Sergeant Alvarez was beside himself. His screens were no longer completely without form. Instead, peculiar shapes could be seen in the arrangements of lines. Una thought she saw faces, beasts, landscapes. That had never occurred before. The instruments, at least, had remained sane, even as they recorded insanity.

“It’s getting worse,” said Alvarez. “You’ve hardly any Time left. What there is, I’ve managed to borrow for you. Did you contact the rogue?”

She nodded. “Yes. But getting him to return. . . I want you to find Jagged.”

“Jagged? Are you sure?”

“It’s our only chance, I think.”

Alvarez sighed and bent a tense back over his controls.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *In Which Elric and Werther Fight Side by Side*

### *Against Almost Overwhelming Odds*

Somewhere, it seemed to Elric, as he parried and thrust at the attacking bird-monsters, rich and rousing music played. It must be a delusion, brought on by battle-madness. Blood and feathers covered the carriage. He saw the one called Christia carried off screaming. Bishop Castle had disappeared. Gaf had gone. Only the three of them, shoulder to shoulder, continued to fight. What was disconcerting to Elric was that Werther and the Duke of Queens bore swords absolutely identical to Stormbringer. Perhaps they were the legendary Brothers of the Black Sword, said to reside in Chaos?

He was forced to admit to himself that he experienced a sense of comradeship with these two, who were braver than most in defending themselves against such dreadful, unlikely monsters—perhaps some creation of their own which had turned against them.

Having captured the Lady Christia, the birds began to return to their own craft.

“We must rescue her!” cried Werther as the flying ships began to retreat. “Quickly! In pursuit!”

“Should we not seek reinforcements?” asked Elric, further impressed by the courage of this Chaos Lord.

“No time!” cried the Duke of Queens. “After them!”

Werther shouted to his vessel. “Follow those ships!”

The vessel did not move.



“It has an enchantment on it,” said Werther. “We are stranded! Ah, and I loved her so much!”

Elric became suspicious again. Werther had shown no signs, previously, of any affection for the female.

“You loved her?”

“From a distance,” Werther explained. “Duke of Queens, what can we do? Those parrots will ransom her savagely and mishandle her objects of virtue!”

“Dastardly poltroons!” roared the huge duke.

Elric could make little sense of this exchange. It dawned on him, then, that he could still hear the rousing music. He looked below. On some sort of dais in the middle of the bizarre landscape a large group of musicians was assembled. They played on, apparently oblivious of what happened above. This was truly a world dominated by Chaos.

Their ship began slowly to fall towards the band. It lurched. Elric gasped and clung to the side as they struck yielding ground and bumped to a halt.

The Duke of Queens, apparently elated, was already scrambling overboard. “There! We can follow on those mounts.”

Tethered near the dais was a herd of creatures bearing some slight resemblance to horses but in a variety of dazzling, metallic colours, with horns and bony ridges on their backs. Saddles and bridles of alien workmanship showed that they were domestic beasts, doubtless belonging to the musicians.

“They will want some payment from us, surely,” said Elric, as they hurried towards the horses.

“Ah, true!” Werther reached into a purse at his belt and drew forth a handful of jewels. Casually he flung them towards the musicians and climbed into the saddle of the nearest beast. Elric and the Duke of Queens followed his example. Then Werther, with a whoop, was off in the direction in which the bird-monsters had gone.

The landscape of this world of Chaos changed rapidly as they rode. They galloped through forests of crystalline trees, over fields of glowing flowers, leapt rivers the colour of blood and the consistency of mercury, and their tireless mounts maintained a headlong pace which never faltered. Through clouds of boiling gas which wept, through rain, through snow, through intolerable heat, through shallow lakes in which oddly fashioned fish wriggled and gasped, until at last a range of mountains came in sight.

“There!” panted Werther, pointing with his own runesword. “Their lair. Oh, the fiends! How can we climb such smooth cliffs?”

It was true that the base of the cliffs rose some hundred feet before they became suddenly ragged, like the rotting teeth of the beggars of Nadsokor. They were of dusky, purple obsidian and so smooth as to reflect the faces of the three adventurers who stared at them in despair.

It was Elric who saw the steps put into the side of the cliff.

“These will take us up some of the way, at least.”

“It could be a trap,” said the Duke of Queens. He, too, seemed to be relishing the opportunity to take action. Although a Lord of Chaos there was something about him that made Elric respond to a fellow spirit.

“Let them trap us,” said Elric laconically. “We have our swords.”

With a wild laugh, Werther de Goethe was the first to swing himself from his saddle and run towards the steps, leaping up them almost as if he had the power of flight. Elric and the Duke of Queens followed more slowly.

Their feet slipping in the narrow spaces not meant for mortals to climb, ever aware of the dizzying drop on their left, the three came at last to the top of the cliff and stood clinging to sharp crags, staring across a plain at a crazy castle rising into the clouds before them.

“Their stronghold,” said Werther.

“What are these creatures?” Elric asked. “Why do they attack you? Why do they capture the Lady Christia?”

“They nurse an abiding hatred for us,” explained the Duke of Queens, and looked expectantly at Werther, who added:

“This was their world before it became ours.”

“And before it became theirs,” said the Duke of Queens, “it was the world of the Yargtroon.”

“The Yargtroon?” Elric frowned.

“They dispossessed the bodiless vampire goat-folk of Kia,” explained Werther. “Who, in turn, destroyed—or thought they destroyed—the Grash-Tu-Xem, a race of Old Ones older than any Old Ones except the Elder Old Ones of Ancient Thriss.”

“Older even than Chaos?” asked Elric.

“Oh, far older,” said Werther.

“It’s almost completely collapsed, it’s so old,” added the Duke of Queens.

Elric was baffled. “Thriss?”

“Chaos,” said the Duke.

Elric let a thin smile play about his lips. “You still mock me, my lord. The power of Chaos is the greatest there is, only equaled by the power of Law.”

“Oh, certainly,” agreed the Duke of Queens.

Elric became suspicious again. “Do you play with me, my lord?”

“Well, naturally, we try to please our guests...”

Werther interrupted. "Yonder doomy edifice holds the one I love. Somewhere within its walls she is incarcerated, while ghouls taunt at her and devils threaten."

"The bird-monsters...?" began Elric.

"Chimerae," said the Duke of Queens. "You saw only one of the shapes they assume."

Elric understood this. "Aha!"

"But how can we enter it?" Werther spoke almost to himself.

"We must wait until nightfall," said Elric, "and enter under the cover of darkness."

"Nightfall?" Werther brightened.

Suddenly they were in utter darkness.

Somewhere the Duke of Queens lost his footing and fell with a muffled curse.

## CHAPTER NINE

*In Which Mrs. Persson at Last Makes*

*Contact with Her Old Friend*

They stood together beneath the striped awning of the tent while a short distance away armoured men, mounted on armoured horses, jousting, were injured or died. The two members wore appropriate costumes for the period. Lord Jagged looked handsome in his surcoat and mail, but Una Persson merely looked uncomfortable in her wimple and kirtle.

"I can't leave just now," he was saying. "I am laying the foundations for a very important development."

"Which will come to nothing unless Elric is returned," she said.

A knight with a broken lance thundered past, covering them in dust.

"Well played Sir Holger!" called Lord Jagged. "An ancestor of mine, you know," he told her.

"You will not be able to recognize the world of the End of Time when you return, if this is allowed to continue," she said.

"It's always difficult, isn't it?" But he was listening to her now.

"These disruptions could as easily affect us and leave us stranded," she added. "We would lose any freedom we have gained."

He bit into a pomegranate and offered it to her. "You can only get these in this area. Did you know? Impossible to find in England. In the thirteenth century, at any rate. The idea of freedom is such a nebulous one, isn't it? Most of the time when angry people are speaking of 'freedom' what they are

actually asking for is much simpler—respect. Do those in authority or those with power ever really respect those who do not have power?” He paused. “Or do they mean ‘power’ and not ‘freedom’. Or are they the same...?”

“Really, Jagged, this is no time for self-indulgence.”

He looked about him. “There’s little else to do in the Middle East in the 13th century, I assure you, except eat pomegranates and philosophize...”

“You must come back to the End of Time.”

He wiped his handsome chin. “Your urgency,” he said, “worries me, Una. These matters should be handled with delicacy—slowly...”

“The entire fabric will collapse unless he is returned to his own dimension. He is an important factor in the whole plan.”

“Well, yes, I understand that.”

“He is, in one sense at least, your protégé.”

“I know. But not my responsibility.”

“You must help,” she said.

There was a loud bang and a crash.

A splinter flew into Mrs. Persson’s eye.

“Oh, zounds!” she said.

## CHAPTERTEN

### *In Which the Castle is Assaulted and the Plot Thickened*

Amoon had appeared above the spires of the castle which seemed to Elric to have changed its shape since he had first seen it. He meant to ask his companions for an explanation, but at present they were all sworn to silence as they crept nearer. From within the castle burst light, emanating from guttering brands stuck into brackets on the walls. There was laughter, noise of feasting. Hidden behind a rock they peered through one large window and inspected the scene within.

The entire hall was full of men wearing identical costumes. They had black skull-caps, loose white blouses and trousers, black shoes. Their eyebrows were black in dead white faces, even paler than Elric’s and they had bright red lips.

“Aha,” whispered Werther, “the parrots are celebrating their victory. Soon they will be too drunk to know what is happening to them.”

“Parrots?” said Elric. “What is that word?”

“Pierrots, he means,” said the Duke of Queens. “Don’t you, Werther?” There were evidently certain words which did not translate easily into the High Speech of Melniboné.

“Shh,” said the Last Romantic, “they will capture us and torture us to death if they detect our presence.”

They worked their way around the castle. It was guarded at intervals by gigantic warriors whom Elric at first mistook for statues, save that, when he looked closely, he could see them breathing very slowly. They were unarmed, but their fists and feet were disproportionately large and could crush any intruder they detected.

“They are sluggish, by the look of them,” said Elric. “If we are quick, we can run beneath them and enter the castle before they realize it. Let me try first. If I succeed, you follow.”

Werther clapped his new comrade on the back. “Very well.”

Elric waited until the nearest guard halted and spread his huge feet apart, then he dashed forward, scuttling like an insect between the giant’s legs and flinging himself through a dimly lit window. He found himself in some sort of store-room. He had not been seen, though the guard cocked his ear for half a moment before resuming his pace.

Elric looked cautiously out and signaled to his companions. The Duke of Queens waited for the guard to stop again, then he, too, made for the window and joined Elric. He was panting and grinning. “This is wonderful,” he said.

Elric admired his spirit. There was no doubt that the guard could crush any of them to a pulp, even if (as still nagged at his brain) this was all some sort of complicated illusion.

Another dash, and Werther was with them.

Cautiously, Elric opened the door of the store-room. They looked onto a deserted landing. They crossed the landing and looked over a balustrade. They had expected to see another hall, but instead there was a miniature lake on which floated the most beautiful miniature ship, all mother-of-pearl, brass and ebony, with golden sails and silver masts. Surrounding this ship were mermaids and mermen bearing trays of exotic food (reminding Elric how hungry he still was) which they fed to the ship’s only passenger, Mistress Christia.

“She is under an enchantment,” said Elric. “They beguile her with illusions so that she will not wish to come with us even if we do rescue her. Do you know no counter-spells?”

Werther thought for a moment. Then he shook his head.

“You must be very minor Lords of Chaos,” said Elric, biting his lower lip.

From the lake, Mistress Christia giggled and drew one of the mermaids towards her. “Come here, my pretty piscine!”

“Mistress Christia!” hissed Werther de Goethe.

“Oh!” The captive widened her eyes (which were now both large and blue). “At last!”

“You wish to be rescued?” said Elric.

“Rescued? Only by you, most alluring of albinos!”

Elric hardened his features. “I am not the one who loves you, madam.”

“What? I am loved? By whom? By you, Duke of Queens?”

“Sshh,” said Elric. “The demons will hear us.”

“Oh, of course,” said Mistress Christia gravely, and fell silent for a second. “I’ll get rid of all this, shall I?”

And she touched one of her rings.

Ship, lake and merfolk were gone. She lay on silken cushions, attended by monkeys.

“Sorcery!” said Elric. “If she has such power, then why—?”

“It is limited,” explained Werther. “Merely to such tricks.”

“Quite,” said Mistress Christia.

Elric glared at them. “You surround me with illusions. You make me think I am aiding you, when really...”

“No, no!” cried Werther. “I assure you, Lord Elric, you have our greatest respect—well, mine at least—we are only attempting to—”

There was a roar from the gallery above. Rank upon rank of grinning demons looked down upon them. They were armed to the teeth.

“Hurry!” The Duke of Queens leapt to the cushions and seized Mistress Christia, flinging her over his shoulder. “We can never defeat so many!”

The demons were already rushing down the circular staircase. Elric, still not certain whether his new friends deceived him or not, made a decision. He called to the Duke of Queens. “Get her from the castle. We’ll keep them from you for a few moments, at least.” He could not help himself. He behaved impulsively.

The Duke of Queens, sword in hand, Mistress Christia over the other shoulder, ran into a narrow passage. Elric and Werther stood together as the demons rushed down on them. Blade met blade. There was an unbearable shrilling of steel mingled with the cacklings and shrieks of the demons as they gnashed their teeth and rolled their eyes and slashed at the pair with swords, knives and axes. But worst of all was the smell. The dreadful smell of burning flesh which filled the air and threatened to choke Elric. It came from the demons. The smell of hell. He did his best to cover his nostrils as he fought, certain that the smell must overwhelm him before the swords. Above him was a set of metal rungs fixed into the stones, leading high into a kind of chimney. As a pause came he pointed upward to Werther, who understood him. For a moment they managed to drive the demons back. Werther jumped onto Elric’s shoulders (again displaying a strange lightness) and reached down to haul the albino after him.

While the demons wailed and cackled below, they began to climb the chimney.

They climbed for nearly fifty feet before they found themselves in a small, round room whose windows looked out over the purple crags and, beyond them, to a scene of bleak rocky pavements pitted with holes, like some vast, unlikely cheese.

And there, rolling over this relatively flat landscape, in full daylight (for the sun had risen) was the Duke of Queens in a carriage of brass and wood, studded with jewels, and drawn by two bovine creatures which looked to Elric as if they might be the fabulous oxen of mythology who had drawn the war-chariot of his ancestors to do battle with the emerging nations of mankind.

Mistress Christia was beside the Duke of Queens. They seemed to be waiting for Elric and Werther.

“It’s impossible,” said the albino. “We could not get out of this tower, let alone across those crags. I wonder how they managed to move so quickly and so far. And where did the chariot itself come from?”

“Stolen, no doubt, from the demons,” said Werther. “See, there are wings here.” He indicated a heap of feathers in the corner of the room. “We can use those.”

“What wizardry is this?” said Elric. “Man cannot fly on bird wings.”

“With the appropriate spell he can,” said Werther. “I am not that well versed in the magic arts, of course, but let me see...” He picked up one set of wings. They were soft and glistened with subtle, rainbow colours. He placed them on Elric’s back, murmuring his spell:

“Oh, for the wings, for the wings of a dove,

To carry me to the one I love...

“There!” He was very pleased with himself. Elric moved his shoulders and his wings began to flap. “Excellent! Off you go, Elric. I’ll join you in a moment.”

Elric hesitated, then saw the head of the first demon emerging from the hole in the floor. He jumped to the window ledge and leapt into space. The wings sustained him. Against all logic he flew smoothly towards the waiting chariot and behind him came Werther de Goethe. At the windows of the tower the demons crowded, shaking fists and weapons as their prey escaped them.

Elric landed rather awkwardly beside the chariot and was helped aboard by the Duke of Queens. Werther joined them, dropping expertly amongst them. He removed the wings from the albino’s back and nodded to the Duke of Queens who yelled at the oxen, cracking his whip as they began to move.

Mistress Christia flung her arms about Elric’s neck. “What courage! What resourcefulness!” she breathed. “Without you, I should now be ruined!”

Elric sheathed Stormbringer. “We all three worked together for your rescue, madam.” Gently he removed her arms. Courteously he bowed and leaned against the far side of the chariot as it bumped and hurtled over the peculiar rocky surface.

“Swifter! Swifter!” called the Duke of Queens, casting urgent looks backwards. “We are followed!”

From the disappearing tower there now poured a host of flying, gibbering things. Once again the creatures had changed shape and had assumed the form of striped, winged cats, all glaring eyes, fangs and extended claws.

The rock became viscous, clogging the wheels of the chariot, as they reached what appeared to be a silvery road, flowing between the high trees of an alien forest already touched by a weird twilight.

The first of the flying cats caught up with them, slashing.

Elric drew Stormbringer and cut back. The beast roared in pain, blood streaming from its severed leg, its wings flapping in Elric's face as it hovered and attempted to snap at the sword.

The chariot rolled faster, through the forest to green fields touched by the moon. The days were short, it seemed, in this part of Chaos. A path stretched skyward. The Duke of Queens drove the chariot straight up it, heading for the moon itself.

The moon grew larger and larger and still the demons pursued them, but they could not fly as fast as the chariot which went so swiftly that sorcery must surely speed it. Now they could only be heard in the darkness behind and the silver moon was huge.

"There!" called Werther. "There is safety!"

On they raced until the moon was reached, the oxen leaping in their traces, galloping over the gleaming surface to where a white palace awaited them.

"Sanctuary," said the Duke of Queens. And he laughed a wild, full laugh of sheer joy.

The palace was like ivory, carved and wrought by a million hands, every inch covered with delicate designs.

Elric wondered. "Where is this place?" he asked. "Does it lie outside the Realm of Chaos?"

Werther seemed nonplused. "You mean our world?"

"Aye."

"It is still part of our world," said the Duke of Queens.

"Is the palace to your liking?" asked Werther.

"It is lovely."

"A trifle pale for my own taste," said the Last Romantic. "It was Mistress Christia's idea."

"You built this?" The albino turned to the woman. "When?"

"Just now." She seemed surprised.

Elric nodded. "Aha. It is within the power of Chaos to create whatever whims it pleases."



The chariot crossed a white drawbridge and entered a white courtyard. In it grew white flowers. They dismounted and entered a huge hall, white as bone, in which red lights glowed. Again Elric began to suspect mockery, but the faces of the Chaos Lords showed only pleasure. He realized that he was dizzy with hunger and weariness, as he had been ever since he had been flung into this terrible world where no shape was constant, no idea permanent.

“Are you hungry?” asked Mistress Christia.

He nodded. And suddenly the room was filled by a long table on which all kinds of food were heaped—and everything, meats and fruits and vegetables, was white.

Elric moved to take the seat she indicated and he put some of the food on a silver plate and he touched it to his lips and he tasted it. It was delicious. Forgetting suspicion, he began to eat heartily, trying not to consider the colourless quality of the meal. Werther and the Duke of Queens also took some food, but it seemed they ate only from politeness. Werther glanced up at the faraway roof. “What a wonderful tomb this would make,” he said. “Your imagination improves, Mistress Christia.”

“Is this your domain?” asked Elric. “The moon?”

“Oh no,” she said. “It was all made for the occasion.”

“Occasion?”

“For your adventure,” she said. Then she fell silent.

Elric became grave. “Those demons? They were not your enemies. They belong to you!”

“Belong?” said Mistress Christia. She shook her head.

Elric frowned and pushed back his plate. “I am, however, most certainly your captive.” He stood up and paced the white floor. “Will you not return me to my own plane?”

“You would come back almost immediately,” said Werther de Goethe. “It is called the Morphail Effect. And if you did not come here, you would yet remain in your own future. It is in the nature of time.”

“This is nonsense,” said Elric. “I have left my own realm before and returned—though admittedly memory becomes weak, as with dreams poorly recalled.”

“No man can go back in time,” said the Duke of Queens. “Ask Brannart Morphail.”

“He, too, is a Lord of Chaos?”

“If you like. He is a colleague.”

“Could he not return me to my realm? He sounds a clever being.”

“He could not and he would not,” said Mistress Christia. “Haven’t you enjoyed your experiences here so far?”

“Enjoyed?” Elric was astonished. “Madam, I think... Well, what has happened this day is not what we mortals would call ‘enjoyment’!”

“But you *seemed* to be enjoying yourself,” said the Duke of Queens in some disappointment. “Didn’t he, Werther?”

“You were much more cheerful through the whole episode,” agreed the Last Romantic. “Particularly when you were fighting the demons.”

“As with many time-travelers who suffer from anxieties,” said Mistress Christia, “you appeared to relax when you had something immediate to capture your attention. . .”

Elric refused to listen. This was clever Chaos talk, meant to deceive him and take his mind from his chief concern.

“If I was any help to you,” he began, “I am, of course. . .”

“He isn’t very grateful,” Mistress Christia pouted.

Elric felt madness creeping nearer again. He calmed himself.

“I thank you for the food, madam. Now, I would sleep.”

“Sleep?” She was disconcerted. “Oh! Of course. Yes. A bedroom?”

“If you have such a thing.”

“As many as you like.” She moved a stone on one of her rings. The walls seemed to draw back to show bedchamber after bedchamber, in all manner of styles, with beds of every shape and fashion. Elric controlled his temper. He bowed, thanked her, said goodnight to the two lords and made for the nearest bed.

As he closed the door behind him, he thought he heard Werther de Goethe say: “We must try to think of a better entertainment for him when he wakes up.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *In Which Mrs. Persson Witnesses the First Sign of the Megaflow’s Disintegration*

In Castle Canaria Lord Jagged unrolled his antique charts. He had had them drawn for him by a baffled astrologer in 1950. They were one of his many affectations. At the moment, however, they were of considerably greater use than Alvarez’s electronics.

While he used a wrist computer to check his figures, Una Persson looked out of the window of Castle Canaria and wondered who had invented this particular landscape. A green and orange sun cast sickening light over the herds of grazing beasts who resembled, from this distance at any rate, nothing so much as gigantic human hands. In the middle of the scene was raised some kind of building in the shape of a vast helmet, vaguely Greek in conception. Beyond that was a low, grey moon. She turned away.

“I must admit,” said Lord Jagged, “that I had not understood the extent. . .”

“Exactly,” she said.

“You must forgive me. A certain amount of amnesia—euphoria, perhaps?—always comes over one in these very remote periods.”

“Quite.”

He looked up from the charts. “We’ve a few hours at most.”

Her smile was thin, her nod barely perceptible.

While she made the most of having told him so, Lord Jagged frowned, turned a power ring and produced an already lit pipe which he placed thoughtfully in his mouth, taking it out again almost immediately. “That wasn’t Dunhill Standard Medium.” He laid the pipe aside.

There came a loud buzzing noise from the window. The scene outside was disintegrating as if melting on glass. An eerie golden light spread everywhere, flooding from an apex of deeper gold, as if forming a funnel.

“That’s a rupture,” said Lord Jagged. His voice was tense. He put his arm about her shoulders. “I’ve never seen anything of the size before.”

Rushing towards them along the funnel of light there came an entire city of turrets and towers and minarets in a wide variety of pastel colours. It was set into a saucer-shaped base which was almost certainly several miles in circumference.

For a moment the city seemed to retreat. The golden light faded. The city remained, some distance away, swaying a little as if on a gentle tide, a couple of thousand feet above the ground, the grey moon below it.

“That’s what I call megaflow distortion,” said Una Persson in that inappropriately facetious tone adopted by those who are deeply frightened.

“I recognize the period.” Jagged drew a telescope from his robes. “Second Candlemaker’s Empire, mainly based in Arcturus. This is a village by their standards. After all, Earth was merely a rural park during that time.” He retreated into academe, his own response to fear.

Una craned her head. “Isn’t that some sort of vehicle heading towards the city. From the moon—good heavens, they’ve spotted it already. Are they going to try to put the whole thing into a menagerie?”

Jagged had the advantage of the telescope. “I think not.” He handed her the instrument.

Through it she saw a scarlet and black chariot borne by what seemed to be some form of flying fairground horses. In the chariot, armed to the teeth with lances, bows, spears, swords, axes, morningstars, maces and almost every other barbaric hand-weapon, clad in quasi-mythological armour, were Werther de Goethe, the Duke of Queens and Elric of Melniboné.

“They’re attacking it!” she said faintly. “What will happen when the two groups intersect?”

“Three groups,” he pointed out. “Untangling that in a few hours is going to be even harder.”

“And if we fail?”

He shrugged. “We might just as well give ourselves up to the biggest chronoquake the universe has ever experienced.”

“You’re exaggerating,” she said.

“Why not? Everyone else is.”

## CHAPTERTWELVE

### *The Attack on the Citadel of the Skies*

“Melniboné! Melniboné!” cried the albino as the chariot circled over the spires and turrets of the city. They saw startled faces below. Strange engines were being dragged through the narrow streets.

“Surrender!” Elric demanded.

“I do not think they can understand us,” said the Duke of Queens. “What a find, eh? A whole city from the past!”

Werther had been reluctant to embark on an adventure not of his own creation, but Elric, realizing that here at last was a chance of escape, had been anxious to begin. The Duke of Queens had, in an instant, aided the albino by producing costumes, weapons, transport. Within minutes of the city’s appearance, they had been on their way.

Exactly why Elric wished to attack the city, Werther could not make out, unless it was some test of the Melnibonéan’s to see if his companions were true allies or merely pretending to have befriended him. Werther was learning a great deal from Elric, much more than he had ever learned from Mongrove, whose ideas of angst were only marginally less notional than Werther’s own.

A broad, flat blue ray beamed from the city. It singed one wheel of the chariot.

“Ha! They make sorcerous weapons,” said Elric. “Well, my friends. Let us see you counter with your own power.”

Werther obediently imitated the blue ray and sent it back from his fingers, slicing the tops off several towers. The Duke of Queens typically let loose a different coloured ray from each of his extended ten fingers and bored a hole all the way through the bottom of the city so that fields could be seen below. He was pleased with the effect.

“This is the power of the Gods of Chaos!” cried Elric, a familiar elation filling him as the blood of old Melniboné was fired. “Surrender!”

“Why do you want them to surrender?” asked the Duke of Queens in some disappointment.

“Their city evidently has the power to fly through the dimensions. If I became its lord I could force it to return to my own plane,” said Elric reasonably.

“The Morphail Effect...” began Werther, but realized he was spoiling the spirit of the game. “Sorry.”

The blue ray came again, but pattered out and faded before it reached them.

“Their power is gone!” cried Elric. “Your sorcery defeats them, my lords. Let us land and demand they honour us as their new rulers.”

With a sigh, Werther ordered the chariot to set down in the largest square. Here they waited until a few of the citizens began to arrive, cautious and angry, but evidently in no mood to give any further resistance.

Elric addressed them. “It was necessary to attack and conquer you, for I must return to my own realm, there to fulfill my great destiny. If you will take me to Melniboné, I will demand nothing further from you.”

“One of us really ought to take a translation pill,” said Werther. “These people probably have no idea where they are.”

A meaningless babble came from the citizens. Elric frowned. “They understand not the High Speech,” he said. “I will try the common tongue.” He spoke in a language neither Werther, the Duke of Queens nor the citizens of this settlement could understand.

He began to show signs of frustration. He drew his sword Stormbringer. “By the Black Sword, know that I am Elric, last of the royal line of Melniboné! You must obey me. Is there none here who understands the High Speech?”

Then, from the crowd, stepped a being far taller than the others. He was dressed in robes of dark blue and deepest scarlet and his face was haughty, beautiful and full of evil.

“I speak the High Tongue,” he said.

Werther and the Duke of Queens were nonplused. This was no-one they recognized.

Elric gestured. “You are the ruler of the city?”

“Call me that, if you will.”

“Your name?”

“I am known by many names. And you know me, Elric of Melniboné, for I am your lord and your friend.”

“Ah,” said Elric lowering his sword, “this is the greatest deception of them all. I am a fool.”

“Merely a mortal,” said the newcomer, his voice soft, amused and full of a subtle arrogance. “Are these the renegades who helped you?”

“Renegades?” said Werther. “Who are you, sir?”

“You should know me, rogue lords. You aid a mortal and defy your brothers of Chaos.”

“Eh?” said the Duke of Queens. “I haven’t got a brother.”

The stranger ignored him. “Demigods who thought that by helping this mortal they could threaten the power of the Greater Ones.”

“So you did aid me against your own,” said Elric. “Oh, my friends!”

“And they shall be punished!”

Werther began: “We regret any damage to your city. After all, you were not invited...”

The Duke of Queens was laughing. “Who are you? What disguise is this?”

“Know me for your master.” The eyes of the stranger glowed with myriad fires. “Know me for Arioch, Duke of Hell!”

“Arioch!” Elric became filled with a strange joy. “Arioch! I called upon thee and was not answered!”

“I was not in this realm,” said the Duke of Hell. “I was forced to be absent. And while I was gone, fools thought to displace me.”

“I really cannot follow all this,” said the Duke of Queens. He set aside his mace. “I must confess I become a trifle bored, sir. If you will excuse me.”

“You will not escape me.” Arioch lifted a languid hand and the Duke of Queens was frozen to the ground, unable to move anything save his eyes.

“You are interfering, sir, with a perfectly—” Werther too was struck dumb and paralyzed.

But Elric refused to quail. “Lord Arioch, I have given you blood and souls. You owe me...”

“I owe you nothing, Elric of Melniboné. Nothing I do not choose to owe. You are my slave...”

“No,” said Elric. “I serve you. There are old bonds. But you cannot control me, Lord Arioch, for I have a power within me which you fear. It is the power of my very mortality.”

The Duke of Hell shrugged. “You will remain in the Realm of Chaos for ever. Your mortality will avail you little here.”

“You need me in my own realm, to be your agent. That, too, I know, Lord Arioch.”

The handsome head lowered a fraction as if Arioch considered this. The beautiful lips smiled. “Aye, Elric. It is true that I need you to do my work. For the moment it is impossible for the Lords of Chaos to interfere directly in the world of mortals, for we should threaten our own existence. The rate of entropy would increase beyond even our control. The day has not yet come when Law and Chaos must decide the issue once and for all. But it will come soon enough for you, Elric.”

“And my sword will be at your service, Lord Arioch.”

“Will it, Elric?”

Elric was surprised by this doubting tone. He had always served Chaos, as his ancestors had. “Why should I turn against you? Law has no attractions for one such as Elric of Melniboné.”

The Duke of Hell was silent.

“And there is the bargain,” added Elric. “Return me to my own realm, Lord Arioch, so that I might keep it.”

Arioch sighed. “I am reluctant.”

“I demand it,” bravely said the albino.

“Oho!” Arioch was amused. “Well, mortal, I’ll reward your courage and I’ll punish your insolence. The reward will be that you are returned whence you came, before you called on Chaos in your battle with that pathetic wizard. The punishment is that you will recall every incident that occurred since then—but only in your dreams. You will be haunted by the puzzle for the rest of your life—and you will never for a moment be able to express what mystifies you.”

Elric smiled. “I am already haunted by a curse of that kind, my lord.”

“Be that as it may, I have made my decision.”

“I accept it,” said the albino, and he sheathed his sword, Stormbringer.

“Then come with me,” said Arioch, Duke of Hell. And he drifted forward, took Elric by the arm, and lifted them both high into the sky, floating over distorted scenes, half-formed dream-worlds, the whims of the Lords of Chaos, until they came to a gigantic rock shaped like a skull. And through one of the eye-sockets Lord Arioch bore Elric of Melniboné. And down strange corridors that whispered and displayed all manner of treasures. And up into a landscape, a desert in which grew many strange plants, while overhead could be seen a land of snow and mountains, equally alien. And from his robes Arioch, Duke of Hell, produced a wand and he bade Elric to take hold of the wand, which was hot to the touch and glittered, and he placed his own slender hand at the other end, and he murmured words which Elric could not understand and together they began to fade from the landscape, into the darkness of limbo where many eyes accused them, to an island in a grey and storm-tossed sea; an island littered with destruction and with the dead.



Then Arioch, Duke of Hell, laughed a little and vanished, leaving the Prince of Melniboné sprawled amongst corpses and ruins while heavy rain beat down upon him.

And in the scabbard at Elric's side, Stormbringer stirred and murmured once more.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *In Which There is a Small Celebration at the End of Time*

Werther de Goethe and the Duke of Queens blinked their eyes and found that they could move their heads. They stood in a large, pleasant room full of charts and ancient instruments. Mistress Christia was there, too.

Una Persson was smiling as she watched golden light fade from the sky. The city had disappeared, hardly any the worse for its existence. She had managed to save the two friends without a great deal of fuss, for the citizens had still been bewildered by what had happened to them. Because of the megaflow distortion, the Morphail Effect would not manifest itself. They would never understand where they had been or what had actually happened.

"Who on earth was that fellow who turned up?" asked the Duke of Queens. "Some friend of yours, Mrs. Persson? He's certainly no sportsman."

"Oh, I wouldn't agree. You could call him the ultimate sportsman," she said. "I am acquainted with him, as a matter of fact."

"It's not Jagged in disguise is it?" said Mistress Christia who did not really know what had gone on. "This is Jagged's castle—but where is Jagged?"

"You are aware how mysterious he is," Una answered. "I happened to be here when I saw that Werther



and the Duke were in trouble in the city and was able to be of help.”

Werther scowled (a very good copy of Elric’s own scowl). “Well, it isn’t good enough.”

“It was a jolly adventure while it lasted, you must admit,” said the Duke of Queens.

“It wasn’t meant to be jolly,” said Werther. “It was meant to be significant.”

Lord Jagged entered the room. He wore his familiar yellow robes. “How pleasant,” he said. “When did all of you arrive?”

“I have been here for some time,” Mrs. Persson explained, “but Werther and the Duke of Queens...”

“Just got here,” explained the Duke. “I hope we’re not intruding. Only we had a slight mishap and Mrs. Persson was good enough...”

“Always delighted,” said the insincere lord. “Would you care to see my new—”

“I’m on my way home,” said the Duke of Queens. “I just stopped by. Mrs. Persson will explain.”

“I, too,” said Werther suspiciously, “am on my way back.”

“Very well. Goodbye.”

Werther summoned an air car, a restrained figure of death, in rags with a sickle, who picked the three up in his hand and bore them towards a bleak horizon.

It was only days later, when he went to visit Mongrove to tell him of his adventures and solicit his friend’s advice, that Werther realized he was still speaking High Melnibonéan. Some nagging thought remained with him for a long while after that. It concerned Lord Jagged, but he could not quite work out what was involved.

After this incident there were no further disruptions at the End of Time until the conclusion of the story concerning Jherek Carnelian and Mrs. Amelia Underwood.

## CHAPTERFOURTEEN

*In Which Elric of Melniboné Recovers from a Variety of Enchantments and Becomes Determined to Return to the Dreaming City*

Elric was awakened by the rain on his face. Wearily he peered around him. To left and right there were only the dismembered corpses of the dead, the Krettii and the Filkharian sailors destroyed during his battle with the half-brute who had somehow gained so much sorcerous power. He shook his milk-white hair and he raised crimson eyes to the grey, boiling sky.

It seemed that Arioeh had aided him, after all. The sorcerer was destroyed and he, Elric, remained alive. He recalled the sweet, bantering tones of his patron demon. Familiar tones, yet he could not remember what the words had been.

He dragged himself over the dead and waded through the shallows towards the Filkharian ship which still had some of its crew. They were, by now, anxious to head out into open sea again rather than face any more terrors on Sorcerers' Isle.

He determined to see Cymoril, whom he loved, to regain his throne from Yyrkoon, his cousin. . .

## CHAPTERFIFTEEN

### *In Which a Brief Reunion Takes Place at the Time Centre*

With the manuscript of Colonel Pyat's rather dangerous volume of memoirs safely back in her briefcase, Una Persson decided it was the right moment to check into the Time Centre. Alvarez should be on duty again and his instruments should be registering any minor imbalances resulting from the episode concerning the gloomy albino.

Alvarez was not alone. Lord Jagged was there, in a disreputable Norfolk jacket and smoking a battered briar. He had evidently been holidaying in Victorian England. He was pleased to see her.

Alvarez ran his gear through all functions. "Sweet and neat," he said. "It hasn't been as good since I don't know when. We've you to thank for that, Mrs. P."

She was modest.

"Certainly not. Jagged was the one. Your disguise was wonderful, Jagged. How did you manage to imitate that character so thoroughly? It convinced Elric. He really thought you were whatever it was—a Chaos Duke?"

Jagged waved a modest hand.

"I mean," said Una, "it's almost as if you *were* this fellow 'Arioch' . . ."

But Lord Jagged only puffed on his pipe and smiled a secret and superior smile.

## THE BLACK BLADE'S SONG

(The White Wolf's Song)

(1994)

Come, Mephistophilis, let us dispute again,

And argue of divine Astrology.

Tell me, are there many Heavens above the moon?

Are all celestial bodies but one globe,

As is the substance of this centric earth?

Christopher Marlowe,  
*The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*

## CHAPTER ONE

### *An Unusual Occurrence on the Xanardwys Road*

THE RIDER WAS lean, almost etiolated, but subtly muscled. His ascetic features were sensitive, his skin milk-white. From deep cavities within that half-starved face moody crimson eyes burned like the flowers of Hell. Once or twice he turned in his saddle to look back.

A tribe of Alofian hermaphrodites at his heels, the man rode eastward across the Dakwinsi Steppe, hoping to reach fabled Xanardwys before the snows blocked the pass.

His pale silver mare, hardiest of all Bastans, was bred to this terrain and had as determined a hold on life as the sickly albino who had to sustain himself by drugs or the stolen life-stuff of his fellows.

Drawing the black sealskin snow-cloak about him, the man set his face against the weather. His name was Elric and he was a prince in his own country, the last of his long line and without legitimate issue, an outcast almost everywhere in a world coming to hate and resent this alien kind as the power of Melniboné faded and the strength of the Young Kingdoms grew. He did not much care for his own safety but he was determined to live, to return to his island kingdom and be reunited with his sweet cousin Cymoril, whom he would one day marry. It was this ambition alone which drove him on through the blizzard.

Clinging to his horse's mane as the sturdy beast pressed against the deepening drifts which threatened to bury the world, Elric's senses grew as numb as his flesh. The mare moved slowly across the ridges, keeping to the high ground, heading always away from the afternoon sun. At night Elric dug them both a snow-hole and wrapped them in his lined canvasses. He carried the equipment of the Kardik, whose hunting grounds these were.

Elric no longer dreamed. He was almost entirely without conscious thought. Yet still his horse moved steadily towards Xanardwys, where hot springs brought eternal summer and where scarlet roses bloomed against the snow.

Towards evening on the fifth day of his journey, Elric became aware of an extra edge of coldness in the air. Though the great crimson disc of the setting sun threw long shadows over the white landscape, its light did not penetrate far. It now appeared to Elric that a vast wall of ice loomed up ahead, like the sides of a gigantic, supernatural fortress. There was something insubstantial about it. Perhaps Elric had discovered one of those monumental mirages which, according to the Kardik, heralded the inevitable doom of any witness.

Elric had faced more than one inevitable doom and felt no terror for this one, but his curiosity aroused him from the semi-stupor into which he had fallen. As they approached the towering ice he saw himself

and his horse in perfect reflection. He smiled a grim smile, shocked by his own gauntness. He looked twice his real age and felt a hundred times older. Encounters with the supernatural had a habit of draining the spirit, as others whom he had met could readily testify...

Steadily his reflection grew larger until without warning he was swallowed by it—suddenly united with his own image! Then he was riding through a quiet, green dale which, he sincerely hoped, was the Valley of Xanardwys. He looked over his shoulder and saw a blue cloud billowing down a hillside and disappearing. Perhaps the mirror effect had something to do with the freakish weather of this region? He was profoundly relieved that Xanardwys—or at least its valley—was proving a somewhat substantial legend. He dismissed all questions concerning the phenomenon which had brought him here and pressed on in good spirits. All around were the signs of spring—the warm, scented air, the bright wild-flowers, the budding trees and shrubs, the lush grass—and he marveled at a wonderful paradox of geography which, according to the tales he'd heard, had saved many fugitives and travelers. Soon he must come to the ivory spires and ebony roofs of the city herself where he would rest, buy provisions, shelter and then continue his journey to Elwher, which lay beyond all the maps of his world.

The valley was narrow with steeply rising sides, like a tunnel, roots and branches of dark green trees tangling overhead in the soft earth. Elric felt a welcome sense of security and he drew deep breaths, relishing the sweet fecundity all around. This luxury of nature after the punishing ice brought him fresh vitality and new hope. Even his mare had developed a livelier gait.

However, when after an hour or two the sides grew yet steeper and narrower, the albino prince began to puzzle. He had never encountered such a natural phenomenon and indeed was beginning to believe that this gorgeous wealth of spring might be, after all, supernatural in origin. But then, even as he considered turning back and taking heed of a prudence he usually ignored, the sides of the valley began to sink to gentler rolling hills, widening to reveal in the distance a misty outline which must surely be that of Xanardwys.

After pausing to drink at a sparkling stream, Elric and his mare continued on. Now they crossed a vast stretch of greensward flanked by distant mountains, punctuated by stands of trees, flowery meadows, ponds and rivers. Slowly they came closer to the domestic reassurance of Xanardwys's rural rooftops.

Elric drew in a deep, contented sigh.

A great roaring erupted suddenly in Elric's ears and he was blinded as a new sun rose rapidly into the western sky, shrieking and wailing like a soul escaped from hell, multicoloured flames forming a pulsing aura. Then the sound became a single, deep, sonorous chord, slowly fading.

Elric's horse stood mesmerized, as if turned to ice. The albino dismounted, cursing and throwing up his arm to protect his eyes. The broad rays stretched for miles across the landscape, bursting from the pulsing globe and carrying with them huge shapes, dark and writhing, seeming to struggle and fight even as they fell. And now the air was filled with an utterly horrifying noise, like the beating of a million pairs of monstrous wings. Trumpets bellowed, the brazen voices of an army, heralding an even more horrible sound—the despairing moan of a whole world's souls voicing their agony, the fading shouts and dying cries of warriors in the last, weary stages of a battle.

Peering into the troubled vivacity of that mighty light, Elric felt heavy, muscular, gigantic forms, stinking with a sweet, bestial, almost overpowering odour, landing with massive thuds, shaking the ground with such force that the entire terrain threatened to collapse. This rain of monsters did not cease. It was only the purest of luck which saved Elric from being crushed under one of the falling bodies. He had the impression of metal ringing and clashing, of voices screaming and calling, of wings beating, beating,

beating, like the wings of moths against a window, in a kind of frantic hopelessness. And still the monsters continued to fall out of a sky whose light changed subtly now, growing deeper and more stable until the entire world was illuminated by a steady, scarlet glare against which flying, falling shapes moved in black silhouette—wings, helmets, armour, swords—twisted in the postures of defeat. Now the predominant smell reminded Elric of the Fall and the sweet odour of rot, of the summer's riches returning to their origins, and still mingled with this was the foetid stink of angry brutes.

As the light became gentler and the great disc began to fade, Elric grew aware of other colours and more details. The stink alone threatened to steal his senses—the snorting, acrid breath of titanic beasts, threatening sudden death and alarming every revitalized fibre of his being. Elric glimpsed brazen scales, huge silvery feathers, hideously beautiful insect eyes and mouths, wondrously distorted, half-crystalline bodies and faces, like Leviathan and all his kin, emerging after millions of years from beneath a sea which had encrusted them with myriad colours and asymmetrical forms, made them moving monuments in coral, with faceted eyes which stared up in blind anguish at a sky through which still plunged, wings flapping, fluttering, folded or too damaged to bear their weight, the godlike forms of their supernatural kind. Clashing rows of massive fangs and uttering sounds whose depth and force alone was sufficient to shake the whole valley, to topple Xanardwys's towers, crack her walls and send her townsfolk fleeing with black blood boiling from every orifice, the monsters continued to fall.



Only Elric, inured to the supernatural, his senses and his body tuned to alien orchestrations, did not suffer the fate of those poor, unlucky creatures.

For mile upon mile in all directions, through light now turning to a bloody pink flecked with brass and copper, the landscape was crowded with the fallen titans: some on their knees; some supporting themselves upon swords, spears or shields; some stumbling blindly before collapsing over the bodies of their comrades; some lying still and breathing slowly, resting with wary relief as their eyes scanned the heavens. And still the mighty angels fell.

Elric, with all his experience, all the years of mystic study, could not imagine the immensity of the battle from which they fled. He, whose own patron Chaos Duke had the power to destroy all mortal enemies, attempted to imagine the collective power of this myriad army, each common soldier of which might belong to Hell's aristocracy. For these were the very Lords of Chaos, each one of whom had a vast and complex constituency. Of that, Elric was certain.

He realized that his heart was beating rapidly and he was breathing in brief, painful gasps. Deliberately he took control of himself, convinced that the mere presence of that battered host must ultimately kill him. Determined, at least, to experience all he could before he was consumed by the casual power of the monsters, Elric was about to step forward when he heard a voice behind him. It was human, it was sardonic, and its accent was subtly queer, but it used the High Speech of Old Melniboné.

"I've seen a few miracles in my travels, sir, but by heavens, it must be the first time I've witnessed a shower of angels. Can you explain it, sir? Or are you as mystified as me?"

## CHAPTERTWO

### *A Dilemma Discovered in Xanardwys*

The stranger was roughly the same height and build as Elric, with delicate, tanned features and pale blue eyes, sharp as steel. He wore the loose, baggy, cream-coloured clothing of some outland barbarian, belted with brown leather and a pouch which doubtless holstered some weapon or charm. He wore a broad-brimmed hat the colour of his shirt and breeches and he carried over his right shoulder another strange-looking weapon, or perhaps a musical instrument, all walnut, brass and steel. "Are you a denizen of these parts, sir, or have you been dragged, like me, through some damnable Chaos vortex against your will? I am Count Renark von Bek, late of the Rim. And you, sir?"

"Prince Elric of Melniboné. I believed myself in Xanardwys, but now I doubt it. I am lost, sir. What do you make of this?"

"If I were to call upon the mythology and religion of my ancestors, I would say we looked at the defeated Host of Chaos, the very archangels who banded with Lucifer to challenge the power of God. All peoples tell their own stories of such a war amongst the angels, doubtless echoes of some true event. So they say, sir. Do you travel the moonbeams, as I do?"

"The question's meaningless to me." Elric's attention was focused upon just one of the thousands of Chaos Lords. They lay everywhere now, darkening the hills and plains as far as the horizon. He had recognized certain aspects of the creature well enough to identify him as Arioch, his own patron Duke of Hell.

Count von Bek became curious. "What do you see, Prince Elric?"

The albino paused, his mind troubled. There was a mystery to all this which he could not understand and

which he was too terrified to want to understand. He yearned with all his being to be elsewhere, anywhere but here; yet his feet were already moving, taking him through the groaning ranks whose huge bodies towered above him, seeking out his patron. “Lord Arioch? Lord Arioch?”

A frail, distant voice. “Ah, sweetest of my slaves. I thought thee dead. Has thou brought me sustenance, darling heart? Sweetmeats for thy lord?”

There was no mistaking Lord Arioch’s tone, but the voice had never been weaker. Was Lord Arioch already considering his own paradoxical death?

“I have no blood, no souls for thee today, great duke.” Elric made his way towards a massive figure lying panting across a hillside. “I am as weak as thee.”

“Then I love thee not. Begone...” The voice became nothing but fading echoes, even as Elric approached its source. “Go back, Elric. Go back whence ye came...It is not thy time...Thou shouldst not be here...Beware...Obey me or I shall...” But the threat was empty and both knew it. Arioch had used all his strength.

“I would gladly obey thee, Duke Arioch.” Elric spoke feelingly. “For I have a notion that even an adept in sorcery could not survive long in a world where so much Chaos dwells. But I know not how. I came here by an accident. I thought myself in Xanardwys.”

There was a pause, then a painful gasp of words. “This...is...Xanardwys...but not that of thy realm. There is no...hope...here. Go...go...back. There...is...no hope...This is the very end of time...It is cold...so...cold...Thy destiny...does...not...lie...here...”

“Lord Arioch?” Elric’s voice was urgent. “I told thee...I know not how to return.”

The massive head lowered, regarding him with the complex eyes of the fly, but no sound came from his sweet, red lips of youth. Duke Arioch’s skin was like shifting mercury, roiling upon his body, giving off sparks and auras and sudden bursts of brilliant, multicoloured dust, reflecting the invisible fires of hell. And Elric knew that if his patron had manifested himself in all his original glory, not in this sickly form, Elric’s very soul would have been consumed by the demon’s presence. Duke Arioch was even now gathering his strength to speak again. “Thy sword...has...the...power...to carve a gateway...to...the road home...” The vast mouth opened to drag in whatever atmosphere sustained its monstrous body. Silver teeth rattled like a hundred thousand arrows; the red mouth erupted with heat and stink, sufficient to drive the albino back. Oddly coloured wisps of flame poured from the nostrils. The voice was full of weary irony. “Thou art...too...valuable to me, sweet Elric...Now I need all my allies...even mortals. This battle...must be...our last...against...against the power...of...the...Balance...and those who have...allied themselves...with it...those vile servants of Singularity...who would reduce all the substance of...the multiverse...to one, dull, coherent agony of boredom...”

This speech took the last of his energy. One final gasp, a painful gesture. “Sing the song...the sword’s song...sing together...that power will break thee into...the roads...”

“Lord Arioch, I cannot understand thee. I must know more.”

But the huge eyes had grown dull and it seemed some kind of lid had folded over them. Lord Arioch slept, or faded into death. And Elric wondered at the power that could bring low one of the great Chaos Lords. What power could extinguish the life-stuff of invulnerable immortals? Was that the power of the Balance? Or merely the power of Law—which the Lords of Entropy called “The Singularity”? Elric had

only a glimmering of the motives and ambitions of those mighty forces.

He turned to find von Bek standing beside him. The man's face was grim and he held his strange instrument in his two hands, as if to defend himself. "What did the brute tell you, Prince Elric?"

Elric had spoken a form of High Melnibonéan, developed through the millennia as a means of intercourse between mortal and demon. "Little that was concrete. I believe we should head for what remains of the city. These weary lords of hell seem to have no interest in it."

Count Renark agreed. The landscape still resounded with the titanic clank of sword against shield and the thunderous descent of an armoured body, the smack of great wings and the stink of their breath. The stink was unavoidable, for what they expelled—dust, vapours, showers of fluttering flames and noxious gases of all descriptions—shrouded the whole world. Like mice running amongst the feet of elephants, the two men stumbled through shadows, avoiding the slow, weary movements of the defeated host. All around them the effects of Chaos grew manifest. Ordinary rocks and trees were warping and changing. Overhead the sky was a raging cacophony of lightnings, bellowings, and agitated, brilliantly coloured clouds. Yet somehow they reached the fallen walls of Xanardwys. Here corpses were already transforming, taking on something of the shapes of those who had brought this catastrophe with them when they fell through the multiverse, tearing the very fabric of reality as they descended, ruined and defeated.

Elric knew that soon these corpses would become re-animated with the random Chaos energy which, while insufficient to help the Chaos Lords themselves, was more than enough to give a semblance of life to a thing which had been mortal.

Even as von Bek and Elric watched, they saw the body of a young woman liquefy and then re-form itself so that it still had something human about it but was now predominantly a mixture of bird and ape.

"Everywhere Chaos comes," said Elric to his companion. "It is always the same. These people died in agony and now they are not even allowed the dignity of death..."

"You're a sentimentalist, sir," Count Renark spoke a little ironically.

"I have no feeling for these folk," Elric assured him with rather too much haste. "I merely mourn the waste of it all." Stepping over metamorphosing bodies and fallen architecture, which also began to alter its shape, the two men reached a small, domed structure of marble and copper, seemingly untouched by the rest of Chaos.

"Some kind of temple, no doubt," said von Bek.

"And almost certainly defended by sorcery," added the albino, "for no other building remains in one piece. We had best approach with a little caution."

And he placed a hand up on his runesword, which stirred and murmured and seemed to moan for blood. Von Bek glanced towards the sword and a small shudder passed through his body. Then he led the way towards the temple. Elric wondered if this were some kind of entrance back to his own world. Had that been what Arioch meant? "These are singularly unpleasant manifestations of Chaos," Count von Bek was saying. "This, surely, is Chaos gone sour—all that was virtue turned to vice. I have seen it more than once—in individuals as in civilizations."

"You have traveled much, Count von Bek?"



“It was for many years my profession to wander, as it were, between worlds. I play the Game of Time, sir. As, I presume, do you.”

“I play no games, sir. Does your experience tell you if this building marks a route away from this realm and back to my own?”

“I could not quite say, sir. Not knowing your realm, for instance.”

“Sorcery protects this place,” said the albino, reaching for the hilt of his runesword. But Stormbringer uttered a small warning sound, as if to tell him that it could not be employed against this odd magic. Count von Bek had stepped closer and was inspecting the walls.

“See here, Prince Elric. There is a science at work. Look. Something alien to Chaos, perhaps?” He indicated seams in the surface of the building and, taking out a small folding knife, he scratched at it, revealing metal. “This place has always had a supernatural purpose.”

As if the traveler had triggered some mechanism, the dome above them began to spin, a pale blue aura spreading from it and encompassing them before they could retreat. They stood unmoving as a door in the base opened and a human figure regarded them. It was a creature almost as bizarre as any Elric had seen before, with the same style of clothing as von Bek, but with a peaked, grubby white cap on its unruly hair, stubble upon its chin, its eyes bloodshot but sardonically intelligent, a piece of charred root (doubtless some tribal talisman) still smouldering in the corner of its mouth. “Greetings, dear sirs. You seem as much in a pickle over this business as I am. Don’t it remind you a bit of Milton, what? ‘Cherub and Seraph rolling in the flood, with scattered arms and ensigns?’ Paradise lost, indeed, my dear comrades in adversity. And I would guess that is not all we are about to lose... Will you step inside?”

The eccentric stranger introduced himself as Captain Quelch, a soldier of fortune, who had been in the middle of a successful arms sale when he had found himself falling through space, to arrive within the building. “I have a feeling it’s this old fellow’s fault, gentlemen.”

The interior was simple. It was bathed in a blue light from above and contained no furniture or evidence of ritual. There was a plain geometric design on the floor and coloured windows set high near the roof.

The place was filled with children of all ages, gathered around an old man who lay near the centre of the temple, on the tiles.

He was clearly dying. He beckoned for Elric to approach. It was as if he, like the Lords of Chaos, had been drained of all his life-stuff. Elric knelt down and asked if there were anything he needed, but the old man shook his head. “Only a promise, sir. I am Patrius, High Priest of Donblas the Justice Maker. I was able to save these, of all Xanardwys’s population, because they were attending my class. I drew on the properties of this temple to throw a protection around us. But the effort of making such desperate and powerful magic has killed me, I fear. All I wish now is that you take the children to safety. Find a way out of this world, for soon it must collapse into unformed matter, into the primal stuff of Chaos. It is inevitable. There is no hope for this realm, sir. Chaos devours us.”

A dark-skinned girl began to weep at this and the old man reached out his hand to comfort her.

“She weeps for her parents,” said the old man. “She weeps for what became of them and what they will become. All these children have second sight. I have tutored them in the ways of the multiverse. Take them to the roads, sir. They will survive, I am sure. It is all you need do. Lead them to the roads!”

A silence fell. The old man died.

Elric murmured to von Bek—“Roads? He entrusts me with a task that’s meaningless to me.”

“Not to me, Prince Elric.” Von Bek was looking warily in Captain Quelch’s direction. The man had climbed a stone stair and stood peering out of the windows in the direction of the defeated legions of hell. He seemed to be talking to himself in a foreign language.

“You understood the elder? You know a way out of this doomed place?”

“Aye, Prince Elric. I told you. I am an adept. A jugador. I play the Game of Time and roam the roads between the worlds. I sense that you are a comrade—perhaps even more than that—and that you are unconscious of your destiny. It is not my place to reveal anything to you more than is necessary—but if you would join with me in the Game of Time, become a mukhamir, then you have only to say.”

“My interest is in returning to my own sphere and to the woman I love,” said Elric simply. He reached out a long-fingered, bone-white hand, on which throbbed a single Actorios, and touched the hair of the sobbing child. It was a gesture which gave the watching von Bek much insight into the character of this moody lord. The girl looked up, her eyes desperate for reassurance, but she found little hope in the ruby orbs of the alien creature who stared down at her, his expression full of loss, of yearning for some impossible ambition. Yet she spoke: “Will you save us, sir?”

“Madam,” said the prince of ruins, with a small smile and a bow, “I regret that I am in a poor position to save myself, let alone an entire college of tyro seers, but it is in my self-interest that we should all be free of this. That you can be sure of. . .”

Captain Quelch came down the steps with an awkward swagger and a hearty, if unconvincing, chuckle. “We’ll be out of this in no time, little lady, be certain of that.”

But it was Elric to whom the young woman still looked and it was to Elric she spoke. “I am called Far-Seeing and First-of-Her-Kind. The former name explains my skills. The latter explains my future and is mysterious to me. You have the means of saving us, sir. That I can see.”

“A young witch!” Captain Quelch chuckled again, this time with an odd note, almost of self-reference. “Well, my dear. We are certainly saved, with so much sorcery at our disposal!”

Elric met the eyes of Far-Seeing and was almost shocked by the beauty he saw there. She was, he knew, part of his destiny. But perhaps not yet. Perhaps not ever, if he failed to escape the doom which came relentlessly to Xanardwys. They were in no immediate danger from the Chaos Lords; only from the demons’ unconscious influence, which gave foul vitality to the very folk they had killed, transforming them into travesties. Casually, unknowingly, the aristocracy of hell was destroying its own sanctuary, as mortals, equally unknowingly, poison their own wells with their waste. Such brute behaviour horrified Elric and made him despair. Perhaps after all, we were mere toys in the hands of mad, immortal beasts? Beasts without conscience or motive.

This was no time for abstract introspection! Even as he looked behind him, Elric saw the walls of the temple begin to shudder, lose substance, and then re-form. But those within had nowhere to flee. They heard grunts and howls from outside.

Shambling Chaos creatures pawed at the building, their sensibilities too crude to be challenged by

argument, science or sorcery. The revived citizens of Xanardwys now only knew blind need, a horrible hunger to devour any form of flesh. By that means alone could they keep even this faint grip on life and what they had once been. They were driven by the knowledge of utter and everlasting extermination; their souls unjustly damned, mere fodder for the Lords of Hell.

Once, Elric's folk had made a pact with Chaos in all her vital glory, in all her power and magnificent creativity. They had seen only the golden promise of Chaos, not the vile decadence which greed and blind ambition could make of it. Yet, when they had discovered Evil and married that to Chaos, then the true immorality of their actions had become plain to all save themselves. They had lost the will to see beyond their own culture and convictions, their own needs and brute survival. Their decadence was all too evident to the Young Kingdoms and to one sickly inheritor of the Ruby Throne, Elric; who, yearning to know how his great people had turned to cruel and melancholy incest, had left his inheritance in the keeping of his cousin; had left the woman he loved beyond life to seek an answer to his questions. . . But, he reflected, instead he had come to Xanardwys to die.

Renark von Bek was running for the steps, his weapon in his hands. Even as he reached the top a creature, flapping on leathery wings in parody of the Chaos Lords, burst through the window. Von Bek threw his weapon to his shoulder. There was a sharp report and the creature screamed, falling backwards with a great, ragged wound in its head. "Angel shot," called von Bek. "I carry nothing else, these days." Quelch seemed to understand him and approve.

While he could not grasp the nature of the weapon, Elric was grateful for it, for now the door of the temple bulged inward.

He felt a soft hand on his wrist. He looked down to see the girl staring up at him. "Your sword must sing its song," she said. "This I know. Your sword must sing its song—and you must sing with it. You must sing together. It will give us our road." Her eyes were unfocused. She saw into the future, as Arioch had done, or was it the past? She spoke distantly. Elric knew he was in the presence of a great natural psychic—but still her words hardly made sense to him.

"Aye—the sword will be singing, my lady, soon enough," he said as he caressed her hair, longing for his youth, his happiness and his Cymoril. "But I fear you'll not favour the tune Stormbringer plays." Gently he pushed her to go with the children and comfort them. Then his right arm swung like a heavy pendulum and his right gauntlet settled upon the black hilt of his runesword until, with a single, sudden movement, he drew the blade from its scabbard and Stormbringer gave a yelp of glee, like a thirsty hound craving blood.

"These souls are mine, Lord Arioch!"

But he knew that, ironically, he would be stealing a little of his patron's own life-stuff; for that was what animated these Chaos creatures, their bizarre deformities creating an obscene forest of flesh as they pressed through the doorway of the temple. That energy which had already destroyed this realm also gave a semblance of life to the creeping half-things which now confronted Elric and von Bek. Captain Quelch, claiming that he had no weapon, had gone to stand with the children, his arms out in a parody of protection. "Good luck with that elephant gun, old man," he said to Count von Bek, who lifted the weapon to his shoulder, took careful aim, squeezed the trigger and, in his own words, "put a couple of pounds of Purdy's best into the blighters." There was a hideous splash of ichor and soft flesh. Elric stepped away fastidiously as his companion again took aim and again pounded the horrible creatures back from the door. "Though I think it fair to warn you, Prince Elric, that I only have a couple more of these left. After that, it's down to the old Smith and Wesson, I'm afraid." And he tapped the pouch at his belt.

But the weapon was needed elsewhere as, against all the windows high in the walls, there came a rattling of scales and a scratching of claws and von Bek fell back to cover the centre while Elric stepped forward, his black runesword moaning with anticipation, pulsing with dark fire, its runes writhing and skipping in the unholy metal, the whole terrible weapon independent within the grip of its wielder, possessed of a profound and sinister life of its own, rising and falling now as the white prince moved against the Chaos creatures, drinking their life-stuff. What remained of their souls passed directly into the deficient body of the Melnibonéan, whose own eyes blazed in that unwholesome glory, whose own lips were drawn back in a wolfish snarl, his body splashed from head to foot with the filthy fluids of his post-human antagonists.

The sword began to utter a great, triumphant dirge as its thirst was satisfied, and Elric howled too, the ancient battle shouts of his people, calling upon the aristocracy of hell, upon its patron demons, and upon Lord Arioch, as the malformed corpses piled themselves higher and higher in the doorway, while von Bek's weapons banged and cracked, defending the windows.

"These things will keep attacking us," called von Bek. "There's no end to them. We must escape. It is our only hope, else we shall be overwhelmed soon enough."

Elric agreed. He leaned, panting, on his blade, regarding his hideous work, his eyes cold with a death-light, his face a martial mask. "I have a distaste for this kind of butchery," he said. "But I know nothing else to do."

"You must take the sword to the centre," said a pure, liquid voice. It was the girl, Far-Seeing.

She left the group, pushing past an uncertain Captain Quelch and reaching fearlessly out to the pulsing sword, its alien metal streaming with corrupted blood. "To the centre."

Von Bek, Captain Quelch and the other children stared in amazed silence as the girl's hand settled upon that awful blade, drawing it and its wielder through their parting ranks to where the corpse of the old man lay.

"The centre lies beneath his heart," said Far-Seeing. "You must pierce his heart and drive the sword beyond his heart. Then the sword will sing and you will sing, too."

"I know nothing of any sword song," said Elric again, but his protest was a ritual one. He found himself trusting the tranquil certainty of the girl, her deft movements, the way she guided him until he stood straddling the peaceful body of the master wizard.

"He is rich with the best of Law," said Far-Seeing. "And it is that stuff which, for a while, will fill your sword and make it work for us, perhaps even against its own interests."

"You know much of my sword, my lady," said Elric, puzzled.

The girl closed her eyes. "I am against the sword and I am of the sword and my name is Swift Thorn." Her voice was a chant, as if another occupied her body. She had no notion of the meaning of the words which issued from her. "I am for the sword and I replace the sword. I am of the sisters. I am of the Just. It is our destiny to turn the ebony to silver, to seek the light, to create justice."

Von Bek leaned forward. Far-Seeing's words seemed to have important meaning to him and yet he was clearly astonished at hearing them at all. He passed his hand before her eyes.

All attention was on her. Even Quelch's face had grown serious, while outside came the sounds of the Chaos creatures preparing for a fresh attack.

Then she was transformed, her face glowing with a pink-gold radiance, bars of silver light streaming from hair that seemed on fire, her rich, dark skin vibrant with supernatural life. "Strike!" she cried. "Strike, Prince Elric. Strike to the heart, to the centre! Strike now or our future is forever forbidden us!"

There came a guttural cough from the doorway. They had an impression of a jeweled eye, a wriggling red mouth, and they knew that some rogue Chaos Lord, scenting blood and souls, had determined to taste them for himself.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Walking Between the Worlds*

"Strike! O, my lord! Strike!"

The girl's voice rang out, a pure, golden chord against the cacophony of Chaos, and she guided the black sword's fleshly iron towards the old man's heart.

"Strike, my lord. And sing your song!"

Then she made a movement with her palms and the runesword plunged downwards, plunged into the heart, plunged through sinew and bone and flesh into the very stone beneath and suddenly, through that white alchemy, a pale blue flame began to burn within the blade, gradually turning to pewter and fiery bronze, then to a brilliant, steady, silver.

Von Bek gasped. "The sword of the archangel himself!"

But Elric had no time to ask what he meant for now the transformed runesword burned brighter still, blinding the children who whimpered and fell back before it, making Captain Quelch curse and grumble that he was endangered, while the girl was suddenly gone, leaving only her voice behind, lifted in a song of extraordinary beauty and spiritual purity; a song which seemed to ring from the steel itself; a song so wonderful, speaking of such joys and fulfillment, that Elric felt his heart lifting, even as the Chaos Lord's long, grey tongue flicked at his heels. From somewhere within him all the longing he had known, all the sadness and the grief and the loneliness, all his aspirations and dreams, his times of intense happiness, his loves and his hatreds, his affections and his dislikes, all were voiced in the same music which issued from his throat, as if his whole being had been concentrated into this single song. It was a victory and a plea. It was a celebration and an agony. It was nothing more nor less than the Song of Elric, the song of a single, lonely individual in an uncertain world, the song of a troubled intellect and a generous heart, of the last lord of his people, the brooding prince of ruins, the White Wolf of Melniboné.

And most of all, it was a song of love, of yearning idealism and desperate sadness for the fate of the world.

The silver light blazed brighter still and at its centre, where the old man's body had been and where the blade still stood, there now hovered a chalice of finely wrought gold and silver, its rim and base emblazoned with precious stones which themselves emitted powerful rays. Elric, barely able to cling to

the sword as the white energy poured through him, heard Count von Bek cry out in recognition. And then the vision was gone. And blackness, fine and silky as a butcher's familiar, spread away in all directions, as if they stood at the very beginning of Time, before the coming of the Light.

Then, as they watched, it seemed that spiders spun gleaming web after web upon that black void, filling it with their argent silk.

They saw shapes emerging, connected by the webs, filling the vacuum, crowding it, enriching it with wonder and colour, countless mighty spheres and curving roads and an infinite wealth of experience.

"This," said Renark von Bek, "is what we can make of Chaos. Here is the multiverse; those webs you see are the wide roads that pass between the realms. We call them 'moonbeams' and it is here that creatures trade from world to world and where ships arrive from the Second Ether, bringing cargoes of terrible, exquisite stuffs not meant for mortal eyes. Here are the infinite realms, all the possibilities, all the best and the worst that can be in God's creation..."

"You do your deity credit, sir," said Elric.

Von Bek made a graceful movement of his hand, like an elegant showman.

Forms of every kind blossomed before him, stretching to infinity—nameless colours, flaming and shimmering and glowing, or dull and distant and cold—complex spiderwebs stretching through all dimensions, one connected with another, glinting, quivering and delicate, yet bearing the cargo and traffic of countless millions of realms.

"There are your moonbeams, sir." Von Bek was grinning like an ape and relishing this vast, varied, yet ultimately ordered multiverse, forever fecund, forever reproducing, forever expanding its materials derived from the raw, unreasoning, unpredictable stuff of Chaos, which mighty alchemy made concrete. This was the ultimate actuality, the fundamental reality on which all other realities were based, which most mortals only glimpsed in visions, in dreams, in an echo from deep within. "The webs between the worlds are the great roads we tread to pass from one realm of the multiverse to another."

Spheres blossomed and erupted, re-formed and blossomed again. Swirling, half-familiar images reproduced themselves over and over in every possible variety and on every scale. Elric saw worlds in the shape of trees, galaxies like flowers, star systems which had grown together, root and branch, so tangled that they had become one huge, irregular planet; universes which were steely oceans; universes of unstable fire; universes of desolation and cold evil; universes of pulsing colour whose beings passed through flames to take benign and holy shapes; universes of gods and angels and devils; universes of vital tranquility; universes of shame, of outrage, of humiliation and contemplative courtesy; universes of perpetually raging Chaos, of exhausted, sterile Law; all dominated by a sentience which they themselves had spawned. The multiverse had become entirely dependent for its existence on the reasoning powers, the desires and terrors, the courage and moral resolve of its inhabitants. One could no longer exist without the other.

And still a presence could be sensed behind all this: the *presence* which held in its hand the scales of justice, the Cosmic Balance, forever tilting this way or that, towards Law or towards Chaos, and always stabilized by the struggles of mortal beings and their supernatural counterparts, their unseen, unknown sisters and brothers in all the mysterious realms of the multiverse.

"Have you heard of a Guild of Adepts calling itself 'the Just'?" asked von Bek, still as stone and drinking in this familiar vision, this infinite constituency, as another might kneel upon his native earth. Since his

companions did not reply, he continued, “Well, my friends, I am of that persuasion. I trained in Alexandria and Marrakech. I have learned to walk between the realms. I have learned to play the *Zeitjuego*, the Game of Time. Grateful as I am for your wizardry, sir, you should know that your skills drew unconsciously upon all this. You are able to perform certain rituals, describe certain openings through which you summon aid from other realms. You define these allies in terms of unsophisticated, even primitive superstition. You, sir, with all your learning and experience, do little else. But if you come with me and play the great Game of Time, I will show you all the wonders of this multiverse. I will teach you how to explore it and manipulate it and remember it—for without training, without the long years in which one learns the craft of the mukhamir, the mortal mind cannot grasp and contain all it witnesses.”

“I have things to do in my own realm,” Elric told him. “I have responsibilities and duties.”

“I respect your decision, sir,” said von Bek with a bow, “though I regret it. You would have made a noble player in the Game. Yet, however unconsciously, I think you have always played and will continue to play.”

“Well, sir,” said Elric, “I believe you intend to honour me and I thank you. Now I would appreciate it if you would put me on the right road to my realm.”

“I’ll take you back there myself, sir. It’s the least I can do.”

Elric would not, as von Bek had predicted, remember the details of his journey between the realms. It would come to seem little more than a vague dream, yet now he had the impression of constant proliferation, of the natural and supernatural worlds blending and becoming a single whole. Monstrous beings prowled empty spaces of their own making. Whole nations and races and worlds experienced their histories in the time it took Elric to put one foot in front of another upon the silver moonbeams, that delicate, complicated lacework of roads. Shapes grew and decayed, translated and transmogrified, becoming at once profoundly familiar and disturbingly strange. He was aware of passing other travelers upon the silver roads; he was aware of complex societies and unlikely creatures, of communicating with some of them. Walking with a steady, determined gait, von Bek led the albino onward. “Time is not measured as you measure it,” the guide senser explained. “Indeed, it is scarcely measured at all. One rarely requires it as one walks between the worlds.”

“But what is this—this multiverse?” Elric shook his head. “It’s too much for me, sir. I doubt my brain is trained enough to accept it at all!”

“I can help you. I can take you to the *medersim* of Alexandria or of Cairo, of Marrakech and Malador, there to learn the skills of the adept, to learn all the moves in the great Game of Time.”

Again the albino shook his head.

With a shrug von Bek returned his attention to the children. “But what are we to do with these?”

“They’ll be safe enough with me, old boy.” Captain Quelch spoke from behind them. The floor of the temple alone remained, hovering in space, with the children gathered upon it. At their centre now stood Far-Seeing, smiling, her arms extended in a gesture of protection. “We’ll find a safe little harbour, my dears.”

“Have you power over all this, Count Renark?” Elric asked.

“It is within the power of all mortals to manipulate the multiverse, to create reality, to make justice and

order out of the raw stuff of Chaos. Yet without Chaos there would be no Creation, and perhaps no Creator. That is the simple truth of all existence, Lord Elric. The promise of immortality. It is possible to affect one's own destiny. That is the hope Chaos offers us." Von Bek kept a wary eye upon Quelch, who seemed aggrieved.

"If you'll forgive me interrupting this philosophical discourse, old sport, I must admit to being concerned for my own safety and future and that of the little children for whom I now have responsibility. You gentlemen have affairs of multiversal magnitude to concern you, but I am the only guardian of these orphans. What are we to do? Where are we to go?" There were tears in Quelch's eyes. His own plight had moved him to some deep emotion.

The girl called Far-Seeing laughed outright at Captain Quelch's protestations. "We need no such guardianship as yours, my lord."

Captain Quelch made a crooked grin and reached towards her.

Whereupon the temple floor vanished and they all stood upon a broad, bright road, stretching through the multicoloured multitude of spheres and planes, that great spectrum of unguessable dimensions, staring at Quelch.

"I'll take the children, sir," said Count von Bek. "I have an idea I know where they will be safe and where they can improve their skills without interference."

"What are you suggesting, sir?" Captain Quelch bridled as if accused. "Do you find me insufficiently responsible...?"

"Your motives are suspect, my lord." Again Far-Seeing spoke, her pure tones seeming to fill the whole multiverse. "I suspect you want us only that you may eat us."

Elric, baffled by the girl's words, glanced at von Bek, who shrugged in helpless uncertainty. There was a confrontation taking place between the child and the man.

"To eat you, my dear? Ha, ha! I'm old Captain Quelch, not some cannibal troll."

The white road blazed on every side.

Elric felt frail and vulnerable beneath the gaze of that multiplicity of spheres and realms. He could barely keep his sanity in the face of so many sudden changes, so much new knowledge. He thought that Captain Quelch's features twisted, faded a little and then became of quite a different shape, with eyes that reminded him of Arioch's. Then, just as von Bek realized the same thing, Elric knew they had been duped. This creature could still change its shape!

A Chaos Lord, no doubt, who had not been as badly wounded as the others, who had scented the life-stuff within the temple and found a way of admittance. Perhaps it was Quelch who had drained the old man of life and had failed to feed on the children only because the girl unconsciously resisted him. The children gathered around her, forming a compact circle. Their eyes glared into those of an insect, into the very face of the Fly. Now Quelch's body shifted and trembled and quaked and cracked and took its true, bizarrely baroque shape, all asymmetrical carapace and coruscating scales, brass feathery wings, the same obscene stink which had filled the Xanardwys Valley; as if he could keep his human shape no longer, must burst back into his true form, hungry for souls, craving every scrap of mortal essence to feed his depleted veins.



“If you seek to escape your Conqueror’s vengeance, my lord, you are mistaken,” said the girl. “You are already condemned. See what you have become. See what you would feed off to sustain your life. Look upon what you would destroy—upon what you once wished to be. Look upon all this and remember, Lord Demon, that this is what you have turned your back upon. It is not yours. We are not yours. You cannot feed off us. Here we are free and powerful as you. But you never deceived me, for I am called Far-Seeing and First-of-Her-Kind and now I sense my destiny, which is to live my own tale. For it is by our stories that we create the reality of the multiverse and by our faith that we sustain it. Your tale is almost ended, great Lord of Chaos—”

And at this she was surprised by the great beast’s bawling mockery, its only remaining weapon against her. It shook with mephitic mirth, its scales clattering and switching. It clutched at a minor triumph.

“It is you who are mistaken, my Lady Far-Seeing. I am not of Chaos! I am Chaos’s enemy. I fought well but was caught up with them as they fell. Their master is not my master. I serve the great Singularity, the Harbinger of Final Order, the Original Insect. I am Quelch and I am, foolish girl, *a Lord of Law* ! It is my party which would *abolish* Chaos. We fight for complete control of the Cosmic Balance. Nothing less. Those Chaos Engineers, those adventurers, those rebellious rogues and corsairs who have so plagued the Second Ether, I am their nemesis!” The monstrous head turned, almost craftily. “Can you not see how different I am?”

In truth, Elric and von Bek could see only similarity. This Quelch of Law was identical in appearance to Arioeh of Chaos. Even their hatreds and ambitions seemed alike.

“It is sometimes impossible to understand the differences between the parties,” murmured von Bek to Elric. “They have fought so long they have become almost the same thing. This, I think, is decadence. It is time, I suspect, for the Conjunction.” He explained nothing and Elric desired to know no more.

Lord Quelch now towered above them, constantly licking lips glittering with fiery saliva, scratching at his crystalline carapace, his moody, insect eyes searching the reaches of the multiverse, perhaps for allies.

“I can call upon the Authority of the Great Singularity,” Lord Quelch boasted. “You are powerless. I must feed. I must continue my work. Now I will eat you.”

One reptilian foot stepped forward, then another as he bore down upon the gathered children, while Far-Seeing stared back bravely in an attitude of challenge. Then von Bek and Elric had moved between the monster and its intended prey. Stormbringer still shone with the remaining grey-green light of its white sorcery, still murmured and whispered in Elric’s grasp.

Lord Quelch turned his attention upon the albino prince. “You took what was mine. I am a Lord of Law. The old man had what I must have. I must survive. I must continue to exist. The fate of the multiverse depends upon it. What is that to the sacrifice of a few young occultists? Law believes in the power of reason, the measurement and control of all natural forces, the husbandry of our resources. I must continue the fight against Chaos. Once millions gave themselves up in ecstasy to my cause.”

“Once, perhaps, your cause was worthy of their sacrifice,” said von Bek quietly. “But too much blood has been spilt in this terrible war. Those of you who refuse to speak of reconciliation are little more than brutes and deserve nothing of the rest of us, save our pity and our contempt.”

Elric wondered at this exchange. Even when reading the most obscure of his people’s grimoires, he could never have imagined witnessing such a confrontation between a mortal and a demigod.

Lord Quelch snarled again. Again he turned his hungry insect's eyes upon his intended prey. "Just one or two, perhaps?"

Neither Elric nor von Bek were required to defend the children. Quelch was cowering before the gaze of Far-Seeing, increasingly frightened, as if he only now understood the power he was confronting. "I am hungry," he said.

"You must look elsewhere for your sustenance, my lord." Far-Seeing and her children still stared directly up into his face, as if challenging him to attack.

But the Lord of Law crept backwards along the moonbeam road. "I would be mortal again," he said. "What you saw was my mortal self. He still exists. Do you know him? Las Cascadas?" It seemed as if he made a pathetic attempt at familiarity, to win them to his cause through sympathy, but Quelch knew he had failed. "We shall destroy Chaos and all who serve her." He glared at Elric and his companion. "The Singularity shall triumph over Entropy. Death will be checked. We shall abolish Death in all his forms. I am Quelch, a great Lord of Law. You must serve me. It is for the Cause..."

Watching him lope away down that long, curving moonbeam road through the multiverse, Elric felt a certain pity for a creature which had abandoned every ideal, every part of its faith, every moral principle, in order to survive for a few more centuries, scavenging off the very souls it claimed to protect.

"What ails that creature, von Bek?"

"They are not immortal but they are almost immortal," said von Bek. "The multiverse does not exist in infinity but in quasi-infinity. These are not deliberate paradoxes. Our great archangels fight for control of the Balance. They represent two perfectly reasonable schools of thought and, indeed, are almost the same in habit and belief. Yet they fight—Chaos against Law, Entropy against Stasis—and these arguments are mirrored in all our mortal histories, our daily lives, and are connected in profound but complex ways. Over all this hangs the Cosmic Balance, tilting this way and that but always restoring itself. A wasteful means of maintaining the multiverse, you might say. I think our role is to find less wasteful ways of achieving the same end, to create Order without losing the creativity and fecundity of Chaos. Soon, according to other adepts I have met, there will be a great Conjunction of the multiversal realms, a moment of maximum stability, and it is at this time that the very nature of reality can be changed."

Elric clapped his hands to his head. "Sir, I beg you! Cease! I stand here, in the middle of some astral realm, about to tread a moonbeam into near-infinity, and every part of me, physical and spiritual, tells me that I must be irredeemably insane."

"No," said Renark von Bek. "What you behold is the ultimate sanity, the ultimate variety, and perhaps the ultimate order. Come, I will take you home."

Von Bek turned to the children and addressed Far-Seeing. "Would you care for a military escort, my lady?"

Her smile was quiet. "I think I have no further use for swords. Not for the moment. But I thank you, sir."

Already she was leading her flock away from them, up the steep curve of the moonbeam and into a haze of blue-flecked light. "I thank you for your song, Prince Elric. For the singing of it you will, in time, be repaid a hundredfold. But I think you will not remember the singing of your song, which brought the Grail to us three, who are, perhaps, its guardians and its beneficiaries. It was the sword which found the Grail

and the Grail which led us through. Thank you, sir. You say you are not of the Just, yet I think you are unknowingly of that company. Farewell.”

“Where do you go, Far-Seeing?” asked Melniboné’s lord.

“I seek a galaxy they call The Rose, whose planets form one mighty garden. I have seen it in a vision. We shall be the first human creatures to settle it, if it will accept us.”

“I wish you good fortune, my lady,” said Count Renark with a bow.

“And you, sir, as you play the great Game of Time. Good luck to you, also.” Then the child turned her back on them and led her weary flock towards its destiny.

“Can you not see the possibilities?” Von Bek still sought to tempt Elric to his Cause. “The variety—every curiosity satisfied—and new ones whetted? Friend Elric, I offer you the quasi-infinity of the multiverse, of the First and Second Ethers, and the thrilling life of a trained mukhamir, a player in the great Game.”

“I am a poor gambler, sir.” As if fearing he would not remember them, Elric drank in the wonders all about him: the crowded, constantly swirling, constantly changing multiverse; realm upon realm of reality, most of which knew only the merest hint of the great order in which they played a tiny, but never insignificant, part. He looked down at the misty stuff beneath his feet, which felt as firm as thrice-tempered Imrryrian steel, and he marveled at the paradoxes, the conflicts of logic. It was almost impossible for his mind to grasp anything but a hint of what this meant. He understood even so that every action taken in the mortal realms was repeated and echoed in the supernatural and vice versa. Every action of every creature in existence had meaning, significance and consequence.

“I once witnessed a fight between archangels and dragons,” von Bek was saying, leading the albino gently down the moonbeam to where it crossed another. “We will go this way.”

“How do you know where you are? How are time and distance measured here?” Elric was reduced to almost childlike questions. Now he understood what his grimoires had only ever hinted at, unable or unwilling to describe this super-reality. Yet he could not blame his predecessors for their failures. The multiverse defied description. It could, indeed, only be hinted at. There was no language, no logic, no experience which allowed this terrifying and rapturous reality.

“We travel by other means and other instincts,” von Bek assured him. “If you would join us, you will learn how to navigate not merely the First Ether, but also the Second.”

“You have agreed, Count Renark, to guide me back to my own realm.” Elric was flattered by this strange man’s attempts to recruit him.

Von Bek clapped his companion upon the back. “Fair enough.” They loped down the moonbeams at a soldier’s pace. Elric caught glimpses of worlds, of landscapes, hints of scenes, familiar scents and sounds, completely alien sights, seemingly all at random. For a while he felt his grasp on sanity weakening and, as he walked, the tears streamed down his face. He wept for a loss he could not remember. He wept for the mother he had never known and the father who had refused to know him. He wept for all those who suffered and who would suffer in the useless wars which swept his world and most others. He wept in a mixture of self-pity and a compassion which embraced the multiverse. And then a sense of peace blanketed him.

Stormbringer was still in his hand, unsheathed. He did not wish to sheathe the blade until the last of that strange Law-light was gone from it. At this moment he understood how the conflict in him between his loyalty to Chaos and his yearning for Law was no simple one and perhaps would never be resolved. Perhaps there was no need to resolve the conflict. Perhaps, however, it could be reconciled.

They walked between the worlds.

They walked for timeless miles, taking this path and then another through the great silver lattice of the moonbeam roads, while everywhere the multiverse blossomed and warped and erupted and glowed, a million worlds in the making, a million realms decaying, and countless billions of mortal souls full of aspiration and despair, and they talked intimately, in low voices, enjoying conversations which only one of them would remember. It seemed sometimes to Elric that he and Count von Bek were the same being, both echoes of some lost original.

And it seemed sometimes that they were free for ever of the common bounds of time or space, of pressing human concerns, free to explore the wonderful abstraction of it all, the incredible physicality of this supraréality which they could experience with senses themselves transformed and attuned to the new stimuli. They became reconciled to the notion that little by little their bodies would fade and their spirits blend with the stuff of the multiverse, to find true immortality as a fragment of legend, a hint of a myth, a mark made upon our everlasting cosmic history, which is perhaps the best that most of us will ever know—to have played a part, no matter how small, in that great game, the glorious Game of Time...

## **CRIMSON EYES**

(1994)

### **CHAPTER ONE**

#### *Crimes of the City*

**WE ARE ALL** familiar with the wave of murders, scandals and suicides coinciding with the collapse of BBIC and culminating on Christmas Eve with the bizarre death of a profoundly unpopular Prime Minister.

“That poor fellow captained the most incompetent crew of self-impressed scamps ever to tangle themselves in the rigging of the ship of state,” declared Sir Seaton Begg, heading the investigation. “But, however apt, I wouldn’t wish a fate like his on anyone.” A Callahan Home Office appointee, Begg had led the inquiry into the financial affairs of his own nephew, Barbican Begg, whose mighty frauds had drained the country.

Barbican himself had disappeared, but the aristocrats, politicians and famous plutocrats left to face trial made a sensational list, especially as they began to be killed. Barbican Begg himself had been married to the Prime Minister’s sister, Wendy, who had overdosed two years earlier. A certain coolness between the two men had not interfered with their association. The government depended heavily on Begg’s help.

It had continued to endorse BBIC while the cabinet gave authority to large-scale money laundering in the British Caribbean territories, for Begg was underwriting some of its most lunatic flotations.

The first murders in what soon emerged as a pattern had been discovered a year earlier, preceding Barbican Begg's exposure by months. At Marriage's Wharf, Wapping, three armed skinheads had been killed by a large blade leaving a single, identical wound which at first looked like the imprint of a pair of lips. The detective in charge believed the skinheads to have been slaughtered in self-defense. KGB, he thought. There was something subtly Slavic about the method. A former MI5 man, given to unfashionable and oversubtle analysis, he could not easily explain the corpses' grotesque colour nor the hideous terror marking the dead faces, unless, he suggested, the blade had been poisoned.

The pathologist brought in was a retired Scotland Yard man whom Begg had known in his private detective days. Dr. "Taffy" Sinclair's respect for Begg was returned. In the past, Dr. Sinclair had discovered causes of death previously never imagined but admitted bafflement in this case. "Clearly they were all stabbed," he told his old colleague over Christmas pints of foaming Ackroyd's at The Three Revenants, "yet I couldn't swear they'd been stabbed to death." The pathologist's high, pale forehead had creased in a frown. "It's fanciful, Begg, but if you asked how they'd died I'd have to say, well, that something was *sucked* out of them. Not blood, especially. Not even their lives, really. Something worse. And by some filthy means, too." He shuddered.

Seaton Begg had inspected several victims. Long after the Marriage's case, a senior Lloyd's officer was discovered in a Streatham brothel. His costume had greatly excited the popular imagination but Begg had been impressed by his horrified expression, the peculiar silvery sheen of the skin, the bloodless wound like a kiss. Save for the wound's position, the Prime Minister had died in exactly the same way. "As if their souls had been drained?" Begg ordered two more pints of Vortex Water.

Sinclair was enthusiastic. "Quite. It's not the first time you and I have run up against so-called black magic, but this affair beats everything, eh? Witnesses?"

Begg had no useful witnesses. Those who had heard voices from the Prime Minister's sitting room could not tell if the other speaker was native or foreign. Someone had glimpsed what he described as a "stained-glass window" full of every imaginable colour which seemed to take the shape of a jeweled cup, its gold and silver blazing so powerfully he was almost blinded before it vanished. The piteous, bloodcurdling cry awakened Downing Street at 4 a.m. Someone heard the front door close. Sleeping soldiers and police outside were discovered unhurt. "But I'm seeing two chaps tomorrow morning who sound better. One claims he spotted the murderer leaving BBIC on the night in question, when most of Barbican's closest associates called a crisis meeting at their HQ and were identically murdered. Noises, like music or singing, and a brilliant glow were reported, but the assassin was invisible. I gather my first witness believes he saw the Devil."

Begg added: "Only once before have I felt so thoroughly in the presence of the Supernatural. Rationally we must assume this is a clever murderer using superstition to terrify his victims in advance, enabling him to kill them without any significant resistance. That night he murdered fourteen of the City's cleverest men, including Sir John Sheppard, Lord Charles Peace, Duval of the Credite Lyonesse, Thomas King, Ricky Turpin and all three Al Glaouis. Only a day later he killed a whole school of Wall Street sharks over here in similar haste—Bass, Floyd, Cassidy, J.W. Harding, the James brothers, Schultz, the Bush boys and several others equally renowned. Not a bad score."

"You don't suggest this chap's done the world a favour?"

"Those who feed like parasites upon their fellows pretty much deserve to have the life sucked out of

them, I'd say. The amounts of laundered crack money alone were obscene. This business sickens me, old man. Cabinet ministers are dying faster than they can resign. I've no love of the vigilante, but I cannot say I mourn the rascals' passing. My chief regret is that they did not die with their Swiss account numbers branded on their foreheads."

Begg's uncharacteristic pronouncements surprised Sinclair. "You seem to have more sympathy for the assassin than his prey."

"Absolutely true," Begg agreed. "Believe me, Taffy, it's my very sympathy which should soon bring me face to face with our murderer!"

## CHAPTERTWO

### *An Interview with Lady Ratchet*

The Prime Minister had not been the only politician to die violently on Christmas Eve. Over in Limehouse, in identical circumstances, while his wife and children were at church praying for his mediocre soul, the education minister, Oswald Quelch, was discovered at the centre of a pentacle, not part of the seasonal decorations, designed to save him from the demon he believed he had summoned.

Seaton's first witness claimed to have bumped into the murderer as he was leaving Eel House, Quelch's eighteenth-century merchant's mansion. There were only two entrances to Eel House—the first from the river, the second from a low gate into an apparently dead-end alley where Ken "Corky" Clarke, a small-time sneak-thief, had been, as he put it, "catching his breath" in the heavy fog so characteristic of London since the repeal of the Clean Air Act. Hearing a soft movement behind him, he had turned to see what he first took to be two disembodied eyes...

"Red and troubled as the flames of Hell, Sir Seaton. Coming out of that evil, muddy fog. I swear I hadn't had a drop." Corky's gin-bloated features contradicted his claim, but Begg was inclined to believe him. It was Boxing Day. They sat together in Begg's rather austere morning chamber at Sporting Club Square where pale light, filtering through old lace, gave the room a silvery, rather unreal, appearance.

Clarke had glimpsed bone-white skin "like a leper's," a dark cape revealing a scarlet lining and the hilt of a massive sword in black, glowing iron, set with a huge ruby. "I thought he must be the Devil, Sir Seaton. You would have done, too. He came at me so sudden and horrible! His eyes pulled my heart out of my chest and left me gasping, tasting that sharp, oily fog as if it was the sweetest air of Kent, and so grateful for my life! I heard his footsteps, light and bright like a woman's, tapping off up Salt Pie Passage. Oh, Lord, sir! I never want to endure that again. I thought all my sins had caught up with me. Those crimson eyes! I'm a new man now, sir, and conscience-bound to answer your poster."

"Mr. Clarke, you've done well and I commend you!" Seaton Begg was excited. "You bring to mind an old neighbour of mine!" Corky's description had triggered a train of thought Begg was anxious to pursue. "I note you've joined Purity Bottomley's Born Again Tolstoyans and work for the relief of the homeless. Good man!" He pressed a couple of "shields" into the fellow's palm.



“God bless you, Seaton Begg!”

“It’s you, Mr. Clarke, God will surely bless! Soon all Britain will have reason to thank you. Farewell, my good chap. I must shortly interview my next witness.” And with a flourish Begg opened the door for the reformed crook, telling his housekeeper, Mrs. Curry, to preserve his peace at all costs for the next hour. Whereupon he went immediately to his shelves, selecting a large German quarto, a jar of his favourite M&E and a baroque meerschaum. Reading eagerly he flung himself down at his table, his pipe already forgotten. Begg was smiling thoughtfully to himself when Mrs. Curry announced his next visitor.

Hamish Ogilvy worked as a porter-attendant at the New Billingsgate Fish Museum. Still in his uniform, he was a small, eager man with a soft Highland accent. On special leave, he was clearly in awe of the famous Seaton Begg as the investigator kindly coaxed his story from him.

On the night of the BBIC murders, Ogilvy, staying late in attendance on a pregnant cuttlefish, had missed the evening bus and decided to risk the walk to Liverpool Street. Ogilvy was soon lost in another fog, arriving at last in Crookburn Street at the corner of Sweetcake Court where BBIC’s brutal architecture was softened by the weather. Pausing to read a sign, he heard a cab behind him. Hoping to ask his way, he saw the cab had come for a shady figure hurrying from BBIC. “I saw her face through the taxi window, Sir Seaton. She was staring back, terrified out of her skin. It was that poor, loony Mrs. Ratchet, who used to be in the government. Pale as a ghost. I could almost hear her teeth chattering.”

Ogilvy was also rewarded and thanked, though less enthusiastically. Reluctantly Begg decided to follow up the account. Apart from Barbican Begg, Lady Ratchet was the only surviving BBIC director. Under

the impression that she was variously the English Queen, the Israeli Prime Minister, the American President and Mary, Queen of Scots, she was at best an unreliable witness. She had moved South of the River on the assumption that her enemies could not cross running water and refused all visitors, even relatives. She went out only to “go over my books.” She did not trust modern electronics so her accountants kept a large ledger which she inspected every month. She agreed to a telephone interview only after Begg threatened, under his new powers, forcible entrance of her Esher Tudor castle.

Gentle and firm as possible with the babbling old creature, Begg believed a small, cunning and perfectly coherent mind lay beneath “interference” designed to bully and exhaust opposition. Steadfastly he refused her threats, whines, pathetic lies and claims and continued to demand an account of her whereabouts on the night of the murders. “Nonsense,” she insisted, “I was never there. I was not very well that evening. A touch of Alzheimer’s. My doctor will swear to it. I was at the pictures. Whoever you saw, it wasn’t me. An imposter. You’d better question your chum Elizabeth. She never liked me. They were after the cup, too, you know. They said it was theirs by right. Poppycock! They knew how much it was worth. We planned to set up an office in York. But it’s not safe there any more.”

Begg insisted he meet her and talk “chiefly for your own protection.” Eventually he persuaded her, by wonderfully veiled threats, to meet him or be arrested for murder.

“Very well, Sir Seaton.” She was suddenly brisk. “I respect your family name. Be ready to receive me this evening at six o’clock in Sporting Club Square. But please be prepared also to take responsibility for your actions...”

“I am very grateful, Lady Ratchet. By the by, would you try to recall on your way if you ever knew a fellow by the nickname of ‘Crimson Eyes’?”

A cold pause. At length Lady Ratchet replaced the receiver.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *The Last Victim*

Heavy snow was falling as the Boxing Day sun set over Sporting Club Square. Lady Ratchet, mad as she was, had never been late. Begg went to his sitting room windows and pulled back the rich, tawny Morris curtains on which the firelight made a new, dancing geometry. He peered through the blackness, through the big white flakes, through the sharply defined branches of plane trees, down into the square, towards the elaborate iron gates where “Mad Maggie” would enter.

At three minutes to six he was sure he heard a taxi setting down. Since then, save for the occasional muffled stamping of snow-laden feet, the Square had grown silent. Glancing again at his gleaming Tompion, Begg saw that it was four minutes past the hour. At that moment the soft winter air was pierced by the high-pitched shriek of a police whistle. Begg started, as if struck by a new idea, and hurried to don his overcoat. He reached the policeman outside the gates in less than a minute. “What’s up, officer?”

The answer lay before them, already touched by a thickening layer of snow. Begg instantly recognized the frail, twisted little body from the shoes subtly clashing with the skirt. It was poor old “Mad Maggie.” Noting the black leather trophy case in her left hand, Begg knelt beside the body, feeling uselessly for a pulse. The corpse seemed to shrivel as he watched, as if it had been animated solely by its owner’s lunacy. Her face stared up at him through snow still melting on her fading paint. It was an expression of



unmitigated terror. There was no sign of a wound. Maggie had died clutching at her own throat. Who had known she was on her way to see him?

Begg looked around for footprints. The snow had already obscured the trail. By the way she lay half in the gutter and half on the pavement, Lady Ratchet had met her death as she entered the square.

“By God, sir,” exclaimed the policeman, “it’s like she ran into Jack the Ripper and Mr. Hyde at the same time. What do you think she saw, sir?”

“Oh, I’d guess something much worse than either,” said Seaton Begg.

## CHAPTERFOUR

### *Old Blood*

At one in the morning, Boxing Day over and snow continuing to fall, Begg, wrapped in a heavy Ulster and fur cap, stood in the darkness of an archway on the third floor of a Sporting Club Square mansion only five blocks from his own. Begg’s stoicism was famous, but tonight he felt his age. At last he heard a soft footfall in the snow outside. A door opened almost silently. Light steps sounded on the carpeted stairway, and at last a tall figure in full evening dress appeared on the landing, stepping forward with a latchkey held out in its bone-white hand.

Then Begg revealed himself.

“And did you enjoy the Messiaen, Monsieur?”

A death’s head whirled round to confront him. The eyes were covered with thick, round tinted lenses, as if sensitive to the faintest light. Gauntly handsome features showed amusement as Begg struck a match to reveal his own face.

“The Messiaen had its moments, you know,” said the albino. “But the English play French music impossibly badly. Good evening, old neighbour. You see I’m back in my chambers. We last met in Mirenburg when you did me a great service.”

With a movement of his head Begg let his old adversary open the door. A small oriental man appeared and took their outer garments, showing them into a sparsely furnished Japanese sitting room.

“A drink, Sir Seaton?” The albino removed his dark glasses to reveal crimson orbs whose strange light threatened to reach into Begg’s very being.

“If you still keep that St. Odhran Armagnac, Count Ulrich, I would love some.” Begg’s own eyes held steady, meeting the albino’s.

“I’ll join you!” To his servant: “Bring the St. Odhran” and then to his friend, “Well, Sir Seaton Begg, explain this small-hours melodrama!”

“You know my interest in the histories of our family’s various branches and my special fascination with our common Central European ancestors. If you would spare me a little time, I would tell you a story?”

“Late as it is, Sir Seaton, I’m always glad to listen to your yarns. A detective tale, is it?”

“Nothing less. It concerns an event frequently recorded in poetry, plays, novels and films all across that part of Europe where Slav meets German. Perhaps you recognize this doggerel?”

“A call to the Cautious, a Word to the Wise;

Tonight’s the Night when Crimson Eyes,

His face bone-white and his Mouth blood-red,

Disdains the Body, but tastes the Head.”

Count von Bek laughed easily. “Some *Rauber und Ritter* nonsense? It means nothing to me. I have never been, as you have, fascinated by the patois and folklore of the streets, Sir Seaton.”

“The poem’s from Mirenburg.” Accepting a glass from the servant, Begg paused to enjoy its aroma. “Your family’s real home for centuries. Until Wäldenstein was absorbed into Austria, then Germany and then Czechoslovakia, the Saxon von Beks played a pretty important part in local politics. The legend I know from German literature is ‘Karmesinangen.’ The French called him Le Loup Blanc. Your family is closely associated with that and several other enduring Middle European legends.

“A recurrence of albinism is said to manifest itself every two generations through the maternal line of Lady Rose Perrott, kinswoman to Anne Boleyn, who married Count Michael von Bek in 1560 in Mirenburg and gave birth to albino twins, Ulrich and Oona. The albino line is traced back, people believe, before Attila, before the Romans, but like the story of your family’s special affinity with the Holy Grail and a black sword carved with living runes, the tale is comparatively recent. The event on which the poem is based took place in 1895 when Mirenburg was terrorized by a sequence of appalling murders. The victims were slain by a sword making a singular wound and leaving horrified corpses oddly coloured. A group of Rosicrucian exiles had obtained a jeweled cup they claimed was the Holy Grail and summoned a demon to help celebrate an unholy ritual. The ‘demon,’ drawn some say from Hell itself, was none other than a revived Count Ulrich von Bek, otherwise known as ‘Crimson Eyes,’ whose life-span is far longer than a common mortal’s, thanks to his sword.

“Not a demon at all, but an avenging angel! It is the von Beks’ duty to defend the Grail at all costs. Mirenburg legends say the family has a destiny to achieve the resolution of God and Satan.” Begg savoured his St. Odhran.

“Old folk tales, Sir Seaton. How people love to chill their blood! So much more mysterious and romantic than the prosaic truth! Regrettably, we have little time to chat further. I’m off on my travels tomorrow.”

“I would imagine your business here is over,” agreed Begg. “There’s talk Barbican fled to the Caymans.”

“By coincidence, exactly where I’m bound, Sir Seaton.” The albino drew a case from his jacket and offered Begg a thin, brown cigarette, taking one for himself when the investigator refused. “I’m growing too soft for these London winters.”

“The tale continues,” Begg went on equably. “It seems a City and Wall Street consortium came by an old von Bek family heirloom mislaid in 1943 when the Nazis arrested the count in Miremburg. A Polish officer sold a cup which, it was said, could heal or even raise the recently dead! The potential profit from such a thing was enormous. But it would only display its powers in the presence of Barbican Begg, its steward, who tried to sell his interests to shore up BBIC. Well, as you know, members began to die pretty regularly, first in ones and twos, then by the boardroom-full. Every man who helped set up the vast BBIC fraud was being wiped out. In 1895 the Miremburg press noted that Crimson Eyes never killed a woman, a child or an innocent. Crimson Eyes could not kill old Lady Ratchet. He let her run away and eventually cross the river into Esher. Her poor, baffled brain was addled once and for all. She locked herself up.

“Ironically, she had nothing to fear from Crimson Eyes. Neither she nor I knew that the von Beks had kept their Sporting Club Square flat. She ran into you while she was leaving her taxi and you were trying to catch it, because you were late for a supper concert at the Wig-more Hall. You did not even recognize her! But she knew you. She saw your eyes. She thought she had met her nemesis and she died of shock. Or, you might say, she died of guilt...”

Trained to hide his feelings, Count von Bek could not suppress a slight, sardonic smile. With a sigh, he sat back in his chair, his moody red eyes staring thoughtfully into the amber of the glass. “So it’s done at last. Apart from your nephew, of course, who seems to have taken the cup with him. I had not realized he was still in England until last week.”

“Hiding at Lady Ratchet’s. She’d grown to resent him. He believed she’d betray him. If he has the cup, you, presumably, have the sword?”

“A grotesque old family relic, really. Would you like to see it?” The albino’s voice had taken on a peculiar edge.

“That would be a privilege.” Begg’s own voice was steady as steel. Rising, von Bek swiftly crossed the room to open a door in the wall. From within came a distant murmuring like swarming bees. Von Bek stooped into the space and withdrew an ornate broadsword, scabbarded in heavily worked leather. A huge sphere in the hilt glowed red as the slender albino came to stand before Begg with the long scabbard stretched upon both white palms. “There’s our famous Mittelmarch blade, cousin. A rather rococo piece of smithery, you’ll recall.”

“Perhaps you could slip it from the scabbard?” Begg suggested evenly.

“Of course.” Frowning, von Bek changed his grip and drew out a few inches of the blade. His arm shook violently. Now the sound became an angry alien muttering. Seaton realized he looked upon a living thing. He sensed something horribly organic about the black metal within which red words swarmed, words in an alphabet Begg had seen only once before on three broken obsidian tablets buried in a tomb below a temple in Angkor Wat. Those runes bore no resemblance to anything else on Earth, and Begg could not free his eyes from them. He was in their power. Inch by inch the blade slipped from its scabbard, taking control of the creature who held it.

Then with an enormous effort of will, Begg broke from his trance to shout: “No! For the love of God, von Bek! Master your sword, man!”

He stepped back, watching as the albino, his red eyes blazing in their deep sockets, battled with the blade until at last he had resheathed it and fell exhausted back into his chair. The sword continued to mutter and shriek in thwarted lust.

“It would have taken your soul,” said von Bek coolly, “and fed me my share.”

“I remembered that,” said Begg. “I know the secret of your longevity. We have the murder weapon, eh? The chief motive was retribution. And we know the method. Barbican and company needed your experience when the Grail stopped ‘working.’ You were invited to London and came ashore at Marriage’s Wharf. As you realized what BBIC were up to, you took it upon yourself to ‘balance the books.’ I can’t say I approve.”

“You have evidence for any of this?” Von Bek lit another drugged cigarette.

“The blade doubtless matches the wounds, but I’m not sure we want to release it into the world, do we? You are right, count. I am unable to arrest you, but it has given me some satisfaction to solve this case and confront, as I had hoped, such an unusual killer. At a stroke or two you have considerably improved the probity of politics and business in this country. Yet still I disapprove of such actions.” He would not shake the pale hand when it was offered.

With a regretful shrug, Count Ulrich turned away. “Differing times and cultures refuse us a friendship. Can I offer you some more of the St. Odhran?”

But Begg, oddly depressed, made his excuses and left.

Returning home through the old year’s snows, he reflected that, while one act of barbarism did not justify another, he could not in his heart say that this had been an unrewarding Christmas. He looked forward to returning to the warmth of his own fireside, to opening the black trophy case Lady Ratchet had brought him, to stare with quiet ecstasy into that blazing miracle of confirmation, that great vessel of faith and conscience: the Grail, of which he was now the only steward.

## **SIR MILK-AND-BLOOD**

(1996)

“WHAT’S THE TIME,” he says. “Pad—what’s the time? My watch has stopped.”

“Four-thirty,” says Patrick. “Shouldn’t he have turned up by now?”

“He’s always on time. He’ll be here. God knows I’ll be glad to get the release.” He reaches for his cup. “It’s bothering me, Pad. I can’t get rid of it.”

“You’re bound to feel bad. After all, your brother—”

“Yes. But it’s the kids, see. . .”

“There are no ‘innocent victims’ in a war,” says Patrick. “Not in this war, anyway. You always reminded me how many of our children died to make them rich.”

“Pad, I don’t ever want to do that again. I didn’t join to kill kids.” As he looked at his companion’s frowning face he knew he was saying too much. Even if you thought it, you never said it.

“Well, it’s not likely either of us will have to do it again,” says Patrick, ignoring this breach of etiquette. “In a little while we’ll have our new passports and can be out of here. Anywhere we like, so long as it’s not Ireland or the UK. We can go to America. You’ve got relatives there, haven’t you?”

“They read the papers,” he says. But, anyway, he thinks, he won’t be free there. He’s ashamed to see his family. He already knows what they think of him. There isn’t a news channel in the world that hasn’t shown the pictures of the ruptured tram, the children’s bodies thrown everywhere, the weeping mothers. And his and Patrick’s unshaven faces staring crazily out at them, their eyes reflecting the harsh flash of the camera. “By God, Pad, don’t you wish you’d never got into this?”

“I don’t think like that,” says Patrick. “Since I was thirteen all I’ve ever done is this. I mean what else is there? What would you be doing now, if you hadn’t joined the movement?”

“I was going to be a schoolteacher, God help me, before I got into politics.” He lights a Gitane and goes to stare through the streaked grey window at the rain falling into the filthy water of the canal basin far below, where all six of the city’s great underground waterways emerged into daylight and met at the infamous Quai D’Hiver. “I thought I could do more good in the movement.”

As soon as he and Patrick were identified as the surviving bombers and their photographs had been published, they left London and traveled all the way to Paris from the Hook of Holland on a barge. It had taken a couple of weeks, but after a fortnight the authorities assumed they were far away from Europe. As it promised, the movement looked after them. Now their orders are to stay put until their “release” comes. They have been told who to expect. When he arrives, there will be no mistaking him.

“I just wish it hadn’t happened,” he says.

“Jesus, don’t you think I wish that, too! But it wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t my fault. And your bloody brother died a hero’s death. It’s him you should be grieving for. You think too bloody much. You have to put it behind you. Now, stop moaning on, will you? Honestly, it’s really not cool to start up like this.” Patrick seemed to regret the harshness of his tone. “You know that as well as I do.”

He knows he’s condemned to silence for the rest of his life. Once you join the movement, you never retire. You’re “released from active service” and that means the movement looks after you until it needs you again. He has never before longed with such passion to be free of it all.

“Well, look at it this way, we got a bit of collateral. That thing will make it easier for us, eh?” Patrick goes to the table and hefts the heavy newspaper parcel.

They had just left the tram at Waterloo Bridge. Tony was going on a stop or two, would leave his bag under his seat and then get the train at Charing Cross. When the bomb went off they had both been thrown flat by the blast and as they got to their feet, trying to catch their breath back, it was as if they had had a vision. The glass of the silversmith’s was blown out and all the stuff in the window had been flung everywhere, apart from the one heavy object that had been central to the display and hadn’t shifted or been damaged. An instinct developed from a lifetime of looting moved Patrick to grab the thing and then run for it. When they met up later, they discovered that Tony, sitting downstairs at the front of the tram, still had the bomb on his lap when it went off.

“Have another bloody drink, man.” Patrick pours whisky into two glasses. “Go on.”

“It doesn’t work for me.”

“God, you’re a bloody morbid bugger! You’re bound and determined, aren’t you?” Patrick drains his own glass and takes the other. “It’s a waste of time! Put it behind you, mate.” He moves about the little room with impatient, aimless steps, as if his body tries to escape even as his brain tells him he has to stay. “This is guerilla warfare. Nobody wants the civilian casualties, but sometimes they happen. I don’t have to remind you. You taught me. Was it our fault that the bomb went off too soon? If your stupid brother had set the bloody timer right none of us would be in this jam now!”

“Well, he’s dead. And so are ten other people, mostly kids. Going home from the pictures on a Saturday night, looking forward to their tea.”

“Oh, man, will you stop it! You’re making it worse for yourself. Nobody was supposed to be hurt. The bomb should have gone off when the tram was in its shed. The sheds were supposed to be empty. The orders were clear. No casualties. Just do maximum damage to the turning plates. Our job’s to disrupt travel and communications, not kill kids.”

“But we did kill kids. And I can’t get them out of my head. I can’t stand the thought of another day of this! Oh, Jesus God, I want to be free of it, once and for all.” Again he saw the disturbed disapproval on Patrick’s face and fell silent.

“Well, you will be, any minute now.” Patrick showed great self-restraint. “Who is this bloke? You know him, don’t you?”

“He’s a German, I think. I’ve been in the same company as him once or twice.” He tried to keep his tone normal or at least controlled. “There was something odd about him. You can’t tell how old he is. But he must be older than he looks. Mick says he was the youngest colonel in the SS.” He sat back down in his chair, feeling a little better for talking. It took his mind off the bombed tram.

“After the war he went to South America and he was in Spain for a while and North Africa. He’s been running guns for as long as I’ve been in the movement. And he’s helped us with other stuff, of course. He was our main contact with Libya until that went sour. You could call him a soldier-of-fortune, a mercenary—I think he’s nothing but a renegade. He has no loyalties at all. No cause, no religion and, as far as I can tell, no damned conscience.”

“He sounds a superior sort of chap,” says Patrick, emphasizing his consonants the way they do in Kerry to announce sarcasm.

“Oh, he is, sure.” He sighs. “No, I’m not kidding. There’s something about him. When I was a kid, we used to have this story. It’s one of those old Irish things, that seems to be just local.” He puts out the Gitane and lights another. The room is misty with his smoke. “My granny used to tell it as ‘Sir Milk-and-Blood’ in English. She didn’t speak much Gaelic, but I thought the name had to come from old Irish and I looked it up. I found something that sounded right in Cornish—*Malan-Bloyth*.”

“You said he was German.”

“My granny’s story had him come from High Germany, which was probably Saxony, and finding the Holy Grail. But *Malan-Bloyth* wasn’t a knight-errant seeking the Holy Grail, as he was in the *Sir Milk-and-Blood* version. His name means, as close as I can give it in English, *The Demon Wolf*...”

“For the love of God, what a bunch of crap,” says Patrick, sitting down with a sigh on the corner of the iron bed. He looks about, as if for escape. “Holy Jesus, I could do with a cup of decent tea. Why the hell are you telling me a kid’s story?”

“To pass the time. To take our minds off things. I was talking about this bloke.”

“The German bloke?”

“My point is, he reminded me of the hero in my granny’s story. Red eyes, and very white skin. That was why he was called Sir Milk-and-Blood. He was a supernatural creature, a son of a Sidhi man and a human woman. In granny’s version of the story, he was looking for the Holy Grail. In the other version, he’s looking for the Magic Cauldron of Finn MacCool. You know...”

“I don’t bloody know. I was never that interested.”

“It’s the sort of thing a patriot ought to know.” He manages a smirk, to show he speaks in fun, but Patrick chooses to bridle anyway.

“Maybe. And maybe a patriot wouldn’t keep going on about some poor bloody English kids he couldn’t even know were on the damned tram.” Patrick finishes his whisky and takes another Gauloise out of his pack. “So this is the bloke we’re waiting for. What is he? A bloody werewolf?”

“Some believe that he was.”

“I’m not talking about the fairy story. I’m talking about the real bloody bloke. What’s he got? Leprosy?”

“Maybe. I first met him in the Med, off the coast of Morocco. He was with Captain Quelch, another damned renegade, on that boat that almost got blown out of the water off Cuba the other day— *The Hope Dempsey*. We were dealing with some kind of volatile cargo, nobody ever said what it was, but I could guess, of course. My job was to check the boxes and pay over the money. I was always a better quartermaster than I was a field soldier...”

“Tell me about it,” says Patrick, glaring disgustedly into the rain. He hears a movement on the uncarpeted stair and rises from the bed.

The two men wait, but it’s a false alarm.

“Well, he’s a cold fish, by the sound of it,” says Patrick. “What else do you know about him?”

“Not much. He’s some sort of German prince, but everyone calls him ‘Monsieur Zenith.’ He spent a lot of time in the Far Atlas, speaks their languages, does business with the Berbers. They say he has one of those big villas in Las Cascadas. But Donald Quinn told me he lives in Egypt most of the time.”

“Why is he interested in that?” With his unlit cigarette Patrick indicated the newspaper parcel.

“It’s his price. The movement arranged it.”

“Well, let’s hope he brings cash,” says Patrick, scratching at his bottom and sighing. “I don’t know about you, but I could do with some sunshine. Another few days and I’ll be on a beach in Florida, soaking up the rays.”

“What happened isn’t that important to you, is it, Pad? You’ve already forgotten it.”

“No point in doing anything else,” says Patrick. “An incident in the ongoing struggle. You can’t make it not have happened. A bad dream. Leave it behind, mate, or it’ll fester for ever. Or go and see a bloody priest and get it off your bloody chest. Jesus Holy Christ! You’re no bloody fun any more. I’ll be damned glad to see the back of you!” And he begins that agitated pacing again, so that neither of them hears the soft knock. A second knock and Patrick is rushing for the door, dragging it wide.

“I told you he’d be on time.”

And there he is. He would be a little less terrifying if he wasn’t smiling.

“Well, thank God, at bloody last!” says Patrick, studying the tall stranger with nervous resolve.

Although it is only late afternoon, Monsieur Zenith wears perfect evening dress. Thrown back over one shoulder is an old-fashioned scarlet-lined opera cape and on his head is a silk hat. His eyes are hidden by a pair of round, smoked glasses which further emphasize the pallor of his skin. He has a long head with delicate bones and his ears seem to taper. He has an almost feminine mouth, sensitive and firm. In one white-gloved, slender hand is an ebony cane, trimmed with silver. In the other, he carries what appears to be a long electric guitar case which he now stoops to rest on the floor.

“Good evening, gentlemen.” He speaks in a soft accent that is difficult to identify. “Such confidence is flattering. I believe you have something to show me?”

Patrick backs into the room as Monsieur Zenith carries in his burden, puts it down again, takes off his hat, closes the door carefully behind him and nods a greeting. Slipping a slender silver case from his inner pocket, he removes a small, brown cigarette and lights it. He comes immediately to the point. “I have your release, gentlemen. But first I must be sure that you are who you say you are and that your circumstances are as they have been described to me.”





“What do we have to bloody prove?” says Patrick. “That we blew up a Number 37 tram in the Strand? The movement knows who we are. They sent you, didn’t they?”

“Not exactly. I volunteered to come. I had heard about that—” he gestures with his cane at the parcel on the table. “And when I learned what I was to receive for my services, I put two and two together. So that was your bomb on the Number 37?”

“It was,” says Patrick, dropping his cigarette to the boards of the floor and crushing it out. His companion is silent. Monsieur Zenith removes his smoked glasses and lifts a pale, enquiring brow.

Patrick now takes note of the albino’s ruby eyes which burn with suppressed pain and melancholy irony.

Caught for a moment in their timeless depths, Patrick feels suddenly lost, as if his entire universe has fallen away from him and he is absolutely alone. Gasping, he turns and almost runs towards the table, tearing at the newspaper. “You’d better have a look at this cup...”

“No,” says Monsieur Zenith. “I don’t want to see it. Not quite yet. I know what it is, believe me. I’ll wait. Until you’re gone.”

“So you trust us?” says Patrick. He looks expectantly towards the guitar case. He is very anxious to leave. His companion, however, sits quietly in his chair, and his nod to his old acquaintance has a reconciled, almost submissive air. He makes no effort to prepare himself for departure.

“To be who you say you are? Of course I do! Who else would claim such a crime?”

“Jesus God Almighty,” says Patrick. “Crime is it? I can’t stand another damned moralist. I’d be prepared to bet you’ve just as much blood on your hands as we have.”

“Oh,” says Monsieur Zenith lifting the case onto the table. “Infinitely more, no doubt.”

This confession of complicity, as he sees it, relaxes Patrick a little. He gestures to the bottle and glasses. “A drink, pal?”

The albino moves his head a fraction. No. His strange, almost angelic face turns to the window and notes that it is overlooked by nothing.

“You brought cash I see,” says Patrick. “And travelers cheques, like we asked, I hope?” He hesitates as the albino rapidly snaps open the case’s catches and begins to lift the lid. There’s a walkman or something in there, playing what sounds at first like modern North African music. The noise deepens until it vibrates all the glass in the room and makes Patrick feel faintly ill. Some sort of alarm, perhaps.

Then the case is fully open. It is lined in red velvet. The whole of its length and much of its breadth is taken up by an enormous broadsword. The thing is so impossibly ancient its iron has turned jet black. And along the length of the blade runs a series of disturbing red runes which, even as he watches, seem to move and reshape themselves constantly, in unison with the strange, deep howling which springs from the trembling metal. In the hilt what looks like an enormous ruby pulses in harmony with the sword’s unnerving voice.

“What the hell is that?” Patrick valiantly demands, trying to guess where the money’s hidden.

The albino seems amused. For a moment, he has a panting, wolfish air to him as he reaches both hands towards the case.

Somehow the black sword, almost as tall as he is, settles into Zenith’s grasp, its voice changing to one of profound satisfaction as it unites with its master. It shudders as if with eager anticipation. Now, with a new calmness, Monsieur Zenith turns towards the seated man, and there is still an element of compassion in his flaming red eyes.

The whole world fills with the sword’s rising song. The runes race and whirl, forming and re-forming to create whole new languages of power as they writhe up and down its black length. The universe trembles. The room fills with darkness. That same darkness floods out of the window and silences the Quai D’Hiver.

As Patrick begins to vomit uncontrollably, the albino smiles.

“It is your release,” he says.

## **THE ROAMING FOREST**

A Tale of the Red Archer

(2006)

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Rider in Red*

THE NIGHT WAS a shrieking chaos of ragged cloud racing across a sky of bruised red, green and gold. All about the scarlet clad rider the earth seemed to move like the ocean, wind whipping grass and trees into a madman's dance. Bolts of lightning, slashing down from every point of the compass, made the man's horse snort and flatten its ears, white-eyed, nostrils flaring, as it bore its bowman master on at a killing gallop.

Some old terror buried within the archer warned him that this was no normal tempest. It was not the first he had ever encountered, engendered by sorcery. He had not known such a storm on this island, but it spoke of a powerful evil at play. He was anxious to ride out of it as swiftly as he could.

At last he mounted a hill. The sky was still in turmoil but, as the first fingers of dawn came creeping under the night, the main storm was now behind him, hanging above the valley where the dark mass of a forest somehow seemed to absorb the disturbance as he watched. The red-clad archer frowned. He could have sworn that the forest had been further away the last time he looked back.

On this island, the archer was known as Red Ronan, but his given name was Rackhir. He had lived here for over a year. He wiped a mixture of water and sweat from his face and neck, throwing back his hood to catch the cool following breeze. The stallion, a big, healthy roan, was exhausted. His coat steaming, he bent to crop the lush grass. Rackhir dismounted. Grey light spread through the beginning morning and the storm subsided, falling into the forest like smoke sucked through a window. Sunrise, and the sky became its normal pale cloudy canopy. In the distance, in the next valley, Rackhir heard pipes and drums. He wondered if they were celebrating the end of the storm or hoping to drive something off. As he led his horse down a well-marked sheep-track he murmured the words of a tune which had become familiar to him since he had found himself living amongst these people.

They called him Ronan because his given name defeated their familiar tongue. They had misheard him when he first introduced himself and "Ronan" was what they thought he had said. "Ronan" resembled *r'nan*, his people's word for archer. In his own land of Phum, Rackhir ranked high amongst the Warrior Priests who served Phum's patriarch. Though by training more warrior than priest he was, by disposition, more priest than warrior. A curiosity about the world and a quest for a mysterious city had brought him accidentally to this island nation where he originally understood no language. Their culture was alien to a well-educated man like himself, who felt he had read every existing account of the Young Kingdoms of the West.

He dressed in the scarlet jerkin and breeks of his caste, a covered quiver of arrows on his back, an unstrung bow slung over his shoulder, a long, light sword at his side. To the island's people he passed for what they called a "Templar," though they were surprised he carried no cross insignia on his cloak. That cross was popular here. The mark of the chief god of their pantheon.

Ronan/Rackhir followed the music down into the valley, where a fast-flowing river ran, leading him into a grey stone village over whose roofs hung a haze of peat-smoke. He knew enough of their language and customs now to give his horse up to an ostler at the village inn and fling him one of the copper pieces he had earned here after his encounter with the seabear which attacked his boat off the coast of Lormyr. In the fight, the bear had virtually destroyed his little craft and all but killed him, giving him such a swi

its massive flipper that he had lost consciousness, to awaken on a beach at the estuary of a river the locals called “Liffé.”

He suspected that since his encounter with the seabear he had slipped into some unearthly realm, though this island was otherwise as real as anything he had experienced in his travels. It had scarcely stopped raining since he had awakened on a shingle beach to be met by a group of strangely dressed children. They had been friendly enough. They had led him to their village and fed him food, which though unpalatable was nourishing. Since then he had traveled on, finding work in the nearest large port. There, some of the other soldiers had taken exception to his foreign ways and inability to understand them, forcing him to travel further and further afield, accepting whatever work he could, mostly as bodyguard, forever hoping to find a ship to take him off the island and on his way to seek a city he knew as Tana Lorn. He cursed himself for giving credence to the old Filkharian wine merchant who had advised him to travel by sea, rather than continue on his way by land.



Unhappily, the seabear had ripped away Ronan’s purse, well-stocked with jewels from his previous adventure in Oi Oi, City of the Pearl Kings. He kept a few gold pieces in the folds of his belt, but he wanted to preserve them as long as possible. The boat had been blown off course, into the path of the seabear and ultimately to the shore of Eerin, this island. Here, he had been surprised that no-one had heard of Phum, let alone the city of Tana Lorn which he sought partly from curiosity and partly because he had heard he might find rest from his soldiering there. He had been told that gods dwelt in the city—gods willing to debate with mortals on the nature of the Seven Spheres, which, apart from the realm of Man, were those of Chaos, Law, Limbo, Dwarves, Giants and Eternals. Only Phum’s paramount god, Krim, existed in all those spheres. Throughout his conscious life Rackhir had brooded

upon these seven realms and had entered the priesthood, accepting the harsh training administered to all would-be adepts, in order to learn whatever there was to know, read whatever had been written. And, though they disagreed on many things, all agreed that it was Tana Lorn, where Law and Chaos were forever held in balance, that guarded the secrets of the Seven Spheres. The great wise lords who ruled there would be able, he was sure, to impart the knowledge he desired.

For almost five years, since leaving Phum, Rackhir had sought that city. He had been sure he was nearing it when he had taken bad advice and decided to shorten his journey by the sea route. Instead of growing closer to Tana Lorn, he was borne further away. Now, he was becoming convinced, this was not even his own sphere, though it closely resembled it. Could there be *eight* realms of existence, as some in Phum believed? Or were there even more? And was this one of those? Or had he died in his own world, slain by the seabear? It would be his bad luck if this realm was some deceptively familiar version of limbo...

While the people of Eerin island were willing to drink at his expense, teach him their language and debate his ideas until much of his remaining gold was exhausted, he met no-one who knew any more than did he. Now his silver, too, was running low. With the hasty departure for the mainland of his last merchant master, Rackhir could find no further work for an itinerant archer. The priests of Eerin being already over-employed, he had decided to retrace his journey, on a fresh-bought horse. He would see if he could hire a boat to take him back to the general area of ocean where he had first encountered the seabear.

There was now a further complication. In the last village where he had stopped, others had seen his money when his tired fingers had fumbled his belt. Next day, he quickly became aware of being followed by six or seven wolfsheads who clearly intended to enrich themselves at his expense. Thus, rather than shelter when the storm came up, he had ridden into its teeth, anxious to put distance between himself and the ruffians. He had enjoyed the satisfaction of seeing them pull back, over in the far valley as he had neared the dense, dark green wood. At the last moment he had instinctively skirted those old, heavy trees, feeling eyes upon him. Had it been his imagination, or had the trees themselves seemed to be watching? Only now he felt he could afford to rest a little.

Pushing open the heavy side door of the tavern, Ronan found himself in a familiar enough place, with rough-hewn benches and tables at which sat a handful of farmers who, for reasons best known to themselves, had armed themselves with old swords and felling axes. When they saw him they became visibly relaxed and greeted him pleasantly enough. He ordered ale and meat in his strange, lilting accent. To their questions he gave them the answer he had learned satisfied them most readily.

"I'm from France," he explained, "lately in the service of the O'Dowd, who trades between here and there."

"And what brings ye to Ballycogub?" one red-faced cowman wanted to know. "Since ye're the wrong side of the water for England and so too for France?"

"I was followed by robbers, though I've precious little to steal. Seeking to escape them, I lost my bearings. Now I'm heading coast-wards to find a boat."

"Ah, then ye'll want to head east," growled the landlord, putting down before him a mug of porter and a plate of coarse bread and half-raw meat. "But be careful, for English reivers plague the waters between here and that damned godless land. Ye'll serve yerself well if ye take a ship that travels with a fleet. What's more, there's the Roaming Forest to fear. Will ye be staying with us for the night, sir?"

Rackhir shook his head, incurious about any fearsome forest. All country people feared dense trees,

which their superstitions populated with every kind of imp and demon. He did not wish to spend a night at the inn because the more speed he made, the less chance there would be of any pursuing thieves catching him. "I'll rest for a few hours here," he said, "and give my horse time to recover himself, then I'll be riding on."

"This is not the best time of the year for that, sir." The landlord glanced at the other shifty-eyed customers. "Which is why we are all gathered here to wait until it's safe to travel again."

"What's the danger?" Narrowing his eyes, for he suspected them of wanting him to stay so that they could rob him in his sleep, he sipped on his ale-pot.

"Did ye pass by a forest on the way to our valley?" Another farmer turned troubled features towards him.

"I skirted it. I know outlaws prefer the deeps of a wood for their hiding places. I took the high road, but I passed near it. I think that's where I lost the would-be thieves pursuing me."

"Ah, well, that's as maybe, my master." The landlord gestured with his rag. "We call that forest *Huntingwood*."

"What do you hunt there?"

"It's not what's hunted among those trees but what the trees and their creatures hunt," declared the cattle-herder. "For these are the nights when the forest seeks fresh sustenance. And the wood-serpent, which guards the old treasure, must have blood, as must the witch who is the serpent's mistress. These are the nights when the forest roams..."

But when Rackhir tried to question them further, they would tell him no more. One or two of the farm people clearly wanted to talk, but others forced them to silence. The idea of a forest which could uproot itself and travel where it willed was so nonsensical that Rackhir gave it not a minute of his thoughts. He himself had seen trees sliding down a loose embankment, seeming to march, but he knew that had to do with the shallowness of their roots. He shook his head at these credulous provincials and longed to be back in some familiar city, even in the Young Kingdoms.

Thus it was before sunset the Red Archer mounted his refreshed horse, tipped the ostler handsomely, tied a bundle of food and beer to his saddle-bow, and continued the journey east, up the shallow flank of the valley towards the distant ridge which, he'd been told, marked the highway to the coast. The moon was full when he crested the peak and looking back he was surprised to see no lights. It was as if the village had vanished completely from the valley and where it had stood was the thick foliage of summer trees. The moon was high in a cloudless sky. He knew a sudden thrill of superstitious fear. There was no doubt that it was a wood he saw. Somehow, he decided, he had lost his bearings. Search where he could, he saw no village. He needed sleep more than he realized. Rackhir decided he could afford to rest for a couple of hours before moving on. He lit no fire but, wrapping himself in a blanket, was soon snoring gently in a shallow slumber, one hand on his sword-hilt, the other on his bow-staff.

## CHAPTERTWO

### *Reivers in Green*

Out of that surrounding forest they came, shrieking through the moonlight, their faces painted with indigo dye, their bodies clothed in fur. They had big, round wooden shields. Their fists were full of bronze and iron. Moonlight glanced off axeblade, sword and spear. Rackhir had time to note with astonishment that he had somehow made camp in the middle of a forest glade, when he had been sure he had settled on a bare hillside, then he was fighting for his life, bow used as a quarter staff, slender sword darting in and out, quick as a cobra, to send another soul to hell.

Outnumbered as he was, Rackhir the Red Archer had been trained from childhood in the arts of war and even as he stabbed his second man he reached forward to grab the war-axe from a now-useless hand. The bow-staff was dropped. The axe split a head from crown to jaw. For a fleeting moment, he could have sworn he recognized the face of the man he slew. Though this one had no warpaint, his skin bore a green tinge. Rackhir was sure he had seen the man at the tavern in that last village where he'd rested. And there were others, now he realized—all with faintly glowing green complexions! Had they posed as honest country workers to deceive him, to discover where he was headed? Was it those apparent cow-herders who had brought the forest to him?

There was no time to consider any of these questions as the men pressed closer. For one of Rackhir's subtle skills this was butcher's work. He sheathed his slender sword as he fought, snatching up a well-balanced claymore and using it one handed. Axe in the other fist, he swung them together and two more barbarians died, yelling their terror as death engulfed them. To his horror, eerie green blood splattered his skin, drenching his archer's clothing, making the turf slippery beneath his feet. His terrified disgust gave him still greater strength. He ducked and swung, severing limbs and slicing into necks and thighs until the attackers had become little more than a pile of green, writhing meat. But, however many of them Rackhir slew, more kept coming at him. Weariness, if nothing else, must eventually defeat him. Still his heavy axe and sword rose and fell. Streams of blood gushed and glittered in the yellow light of the full moon. His heavy sword swung in an arc, first before him, then behind him, and every time more warriors dropped before that deadly arc. He leapt this way and that. For a moment it seemed he walked up the trunk of a tree to stand on a limb before leaping again into the thick of his enemies. He had no time to pause to think, no time to wonder how he had reached this forest or how the men had known where to find him.

Gradually, they began to press in on him, blue painted faces grinning with triumphant expectation, green eyes glaring in the moonlight, full of fierce blood-lust; glowing green bodies tensed to spring at him. He cursed the bad luck which had brought him to this alien land, to die without benefit of his own deities, the grim gods of Phum, without ever knowing where he was or whether he might ever have found the city he sought. And he called out to Krim, Lord of the Seven Spheres, to aid him. But Krim, as was conventional, sent no aid. Indeed, he might not have existed in this sphere at all.

His sword arm was painful now, increasingly less able to swing the great two-handed blade. The pile of disgusting meat grew, but so, it seemed, did the numbers of his attackers.

Then, suddenly, the moonlight disappeared and glancing up he saw that clouds spread across it. It would be even harder to fight in darkness, but he was determined to take as many with him as he could.

To his astonishment, they began to fall back, muttering amongst themselves. They were conferring in a language he had never heard before. Not the now-familiar tongues of Eerin. Taking advantage of this lull, Rackhir stepped back and saw his bow where he had dropped it. Quickly, he bent to snatch it up and string it. From the quiver that never left his belt he drew four arrows, sending one after another, with unerring speed into their ranks. This seemed to be enough to cause them to fall back, slinking into the darkness of the trees.

“Stand, you painted cowards!” he cried in his own language, letting fly another brace of arrows. “Stand!” (In truth, this was pure braggartism, for he could barely stand himself.) But as the two men fell, their companions grunted, yelled, then stumbled off into the undergrowth. He heard them crashing through the wood. Then there was sudden silence. He waited, keeping his guard as best he could. In the darkness, he heard the rasping breath of the dying, the thump of his own heart and—something else...

It was a woman’s voice, sweet, almost a whisper. “I admire you for your courage, stranger. What are you called?”

“I am Rackhir, the Red Archer, Warrior Priest of Phum.” Without thinking, he had answered in his own language. Realizing this, he added, “Men call me in these parts Ronan the Red.”

“Ah, Phum,” murmured the unseen woman in a third tongue altogether. “Such redness there is in Phum. They say it’s a city built of blood, do they not?”

“Those who do not know us, aye.” Rackhir was suspicious. He understood her words perfectly.

The woman’s voice was mellow, slightly mocking. “It’s centuries since I last saw her rust-coloured towers rising from the desert like a mirage. Do her terraces still drip with crimson orchids? Do the ruby fountains still play in her squares, and do her scarlet-maned maidens still bathe themselves there on the Night of the Nomad Nuptials?”

“You know Phum?” He turned, seeking the source of the voice.

“I know all the lands called by my kin the Young Kingdoms. But it is nigh on a millennium since I last saw them. For I am O’Indura of Imrryr, the Dreaming City, and it is my doom to dream for ever, trapped in this place which the folk of Eerin call the Roaming Forest.”

Now he recalled the language she spoke. It was High Melnibonéan, the common speech of all educated dwellers in his own sphere. It had been years since he had used it but the tongue came surprisingly easily to him. “Who were those men?”

“They belong to a tribe called the Nishut, which means “No tribe.” They are slaves, unwilling miners of emeralds, and some say their skins take on the hue of the jewels with which they pay their mistress not to take their souls. They are the milkers of blood, who feed she who guards the Original Seed. They belong to this forest defending her and doing her bidding.”

“And you are their mistress? Guardian of that seed?”

She laughed then. Her voice was sweet silver. “If only I were, Red Archer. I am sustained by what the forest herself grows. For centuries now I have lived on bloodberries, sap and dew. But those warriors are kept alive by moonlight and when the moon is dark, they must seek the comfort of the great barrow. For they are not truly alive as you are alive. Like me, they are vitalized by dreams. But where their fellows dream of them, I dream only of myself.” Her voice was wistful, self-mocking. “I am kept from complete annihilation by the power of my own mind.”

An almost primeval growl rose in Rackhir’s throat. Though trained in the mystic arts, he yet felt deep suspicion of unexplained supernatural things. “Show yourself, madam,” he demanded. “Show yourself or, by Krim, I’ll...” But his voice trailed off, for he knew there was no threat he could offer her while she remained invisible to him.



And then it seemed sudden silver blossomed on the edge of the glade; a silver light which all but blinded him. With an oath, he covered his eyes. Then she stepped out of the light and he gasped at her beauty. She was tall, slender and her hair was the colour of polished brass. Her blue-grey eyes were slightly slanted and she had the finest cheekbones he had ever seen. Almost too beautiful to be real, she stepped towards him, her white garments drifting in a faint breeze, and he could easily believe that she was the figment of a dream. At her side, however, was a scabbarded longsword and matching it on her other hip, a thin dagger in a silver filigree sheath. Both looked real, and useful, weapons.

Keeping his eyes on her, the archer instinctively bowed, a tribute to her beauty as much as to her femininity.

“My lady.”

“Well, Sir Rackhir of Phum, what mischance brings you to the Roaming Forest? Or do you, as I once did, travel the dream-roads, seeking a return to your homeland?”

“I assume this is not the sphere where Melniboné yet rules the world?”

“By your answer, I understand that you traveled to Eerin unwillingly. I cannot say the same for myself. I was foolish enough to take a dream quest. Melniboné never existed here and maybe never will. My corporeal body is as real, if not more real, than this one. It still lies on the dream couches of the Dreaming City. We have a skill, unknown to you humans, which allows us to send a form, as real in blood, bones and flesh as our own, into other spheres. One hour might pass on the dream couches, but centuries go by elsewhere. That is how we learn so much and why our sorcerers are so powerful, for they carry the knowledge of a hundred lifetimes. As a cousin to Melniboné’s empress, I was allowed access to the dream couches. I longed to explore all the realms of what our wise men call ‘the multiverse’ and which an adept can investigate only by traveling the moonbeam roads, the roads *between* the worlds. But in my multiplicity of dreams, I became confused and lost the secrets of how to gain those paths. I made the mistake of trusting a local minor deity who said she would help me. Instead, she stole much of my memory and trapped me here in the Roaming Forest. Where I move, the forest moves. If I seek the sanctuary of a temple, the forest engulfs that temple. If I try to find safety in a village, that village is—eaten. Her inhabitants are slain or made into slave-warriors serving the semi-sentient creature which lives in the deep barrow. So, if I do not wish to destroy those whose help I need, I can only move when the Roaming Forest moves. Moreover, even when I have been able to escape its confines by some trick of my magic, I grow less and less substantial. The closer I stay within the forest, the more my flesh feels like real flesh, the more alive I am.”

As an adept of Phum, Rackhir understood more of this than most men would. “And what of these?” he asked, pointing at the heaps of green bodies which still surrounded him. “Why have they not killed you?”

“They dare not. Their superstitions have made me their goddess. They believe that if I die, so will the forest die. And if the forest dies, so will they.”

Rackhir wondered privately if there was more to what she said. What if the forest could only move when she moved? What if she herself sought villages whose inhabitants would feed these unholy trees.

She moved a step or two closer. “We are all of a supernatural piece, you see, Sir Rackhir.”

When she used his true name, the archer’s suspicion of her increased. He had heard of the wiles of these humanlike, alien people who ruled over the so-called Young Kingdoms of the West. He had been taught not to trust them, that reptilian blood, the blood of the ancient dragon folk called the Ph’oorn, ran in their

veins, that they had the power to converse with serpents. Yet she was very beautiful and he wanted very much to believe her. He looked hard into her blue-grey eyes. She stared back frankly. He could do nothing, he realized, but believe her.

“Lady, I would rescue you from this if I could,” he said.

“And I would be rescued. We both belong to the same realm. Believe me, I have waited for centuries in the hope that such a one as you would come to the Roaming Forest and save me, make me real again.”

“How may I do that, lady?”

“There is only one way I know. You must find the Original Seed and destroy it. That will have the effect of destroying both the forest and its natives and opening up the moonbeam path which, with my guidance, we can cross back to our own realm again.”

“And have you tried yourself to find and destroy this seed?”

“Of course. And you are not the only man—or, indeed, woman—whose help I have sought. All died or were otherwise destroyed in pursuit of the Original Seed.”

“And why should I have any better chance of succeeding?”

“Because you are a Warrior Priest of Phum and I am an Imperial Princess of Melniboné.”

Rackhir had discovered the corpse of his horse. What kind of barbarians slew a horse for no good reason? A valuable horse? He stood over the beast, frowning. His saddle bags were untouched. There had been no attempt to rob him. What had they wanted? He turned, putting this question to O’Indura.

“They wanted your blood,” she said. “They wanted your blood to feed the Seed. That was why they fought so cautiously and why you defeated so many with such relative ease. They killed the horse to hamper your escape.”

This made sense to Rackhir. Then another question came to him. “Do you live amongst these people?”

“I do not. I have to maintain their superstition, their fear of me, or they would use my blood, too, to feed the Seed. Yet they believe I am the spirit of the Seed. Its personification, if you like. With a variety of allies I have made many attempts to get close to it, but it lies deep underground, in a chamber I have never been able to negotiate and it is guarded by the creature who lured me here in the first place, whose language I spoke, a monstrous three-eyed serpent, one bite from which entails an agonized death. She claimed to be the forest’s victim, but now I understand she is its life.”

“You do not make the prospect attractive,” he declared.

“I have no intention of doing so. You are still able to leave this forest and you would best leave while the moon is hidden. I, however, cannot do so, as I’ve explained. Unless I can make a moonbeam road to lead us out of here, I am trapped for ever. If you go, go soon. For you can be sure that, while the moon stays high, the forest will follow you now that it has your scent.”

Rackhir sighed. Thinking deeply, he went from corpse to corpse, skillfully removing his arrows, wiping them and replacing them in his quiver. How he longed for home. And he knew he must believe most of her story, since she spoke the common tongue of his world. For some odd reason his spirits were lifting.

He turned to the silver princess, a strange battle-humour playing over his handsome features.

“Very well, lady. I am mightily tired of this island and would continue on my way to Tana Lorn. If you know a way to escape and return to our own sphere, we have a mutual motive. Let’s rest in the shelter of the trees for a short while and then we’ll seek this seed of yours or die in the attempt.”

### CHAPTER THREE

#### *The Original Seed*

Later that morning Ronan awoke to a rustling in the trees and reached for his bow, but then he realized the sound was made by birds, a black flock with strange, golden eyes, which hopped along the lower branches, heads to one side as they regarded him, he thought, with a certain hunger.

The forest had not moved. Waking, the silver woman, O’Indura, stretched and wiped her hands in the dew. She yawned, pushing back her long hair to expose the slightly pointed, delicate ears of her race. Rackhir-called-Ronan knew the appearance of Melnibonéans. They appeared on bas-reliefs in the temples of Phum. In the daylight her almost translucent skin seemed to shine and he drew a sharp breath when he saw her full beauty. She turned and smiled at him, as if she knew she had entranced him.

From his purse the archer-priest took a packet of dried sheep meat and offered some to her, but she shook her head, patiently waiting for him to chew the tough stuff before she stepped closer to him across the dark green turf.

“Tonight the moon will still be strong enough to move the forest,” she said. “So we must do what we can during the day. Come nightfall, it will be more dangerous. We should act quickly. I will lead you to the Place of the Seed.” She stretched out her hand.

Rackhir took the soft fingers in his own hard, suspicious grasp. He wondered how many warriors like him had been lured to their deaths or worse by this sorceress...

“Tell me,” he said, as she led him past all the corpses of those he had slain in last night’s battle. They were black with the same golden-eyed birds which filled the trees, no doubt waiting their own turn to feast. “Tell me, lady. How many others sought to help you find this seed?”

“Oh, I forget,” she replied. “A score, maybe. Two score?”

“And they have all perished?”

“They were not archer-priests of Phum,” she told him. Her reply gave him little comfort as he padded beside her, looking hard at the old trunks and wondering if they had any means of harming him. More than once, he felt he saw a branch move in an unnatural way, but when he stared back, there seemed nothing amiss.

“Who are these warriors who move with the forest?” he asked her. “What’s their bargain with it?”

“They guard and feed the Seed and for this they are repaid with a form of life. Did you pass through a village a night or so ago?”

“I did.”

“Few of those villagers lived. They became the most recent Feast of Blood. It was my fault, I fear. I saw you from the trees and thought to seek your help. I had hoped the forest would not follow, that I could reach you before my form faded to nothing. But the forest did follow. And she dined, sparing some who elected to serve her and were amongst the warriors who attacked you.” O’Indura’s voice broke and she stopped speaking, lowering her head. But Rackhir had seen what he thought was genuine agony in her eyes. For the first time, he let himself be convinced by what she told him.

The undergrowth grew thick and the two of them were forced to use their captured broadswords to cut a way through. A path became faintly visible beneath the shrubs and saplings.

“We are almost at the Barrow of the Seed,” she murmured. “A few days ago this path was cleared. That’s how quickly the forest grows when it has blood to feed it.”

And then they had passed through a narrow gap and entered a gloomy glade, an arena of heaped earthworks in which red clay lay exposed from the turf like the wounds of battle and on which low bushes grew, like patches of hair.

“This is the Barrow,” she said. “Now we go underground.”

But Rackhir hesitated, every instinct in him refusing further movement. Surely, once he descended into the earth, into the very bowels of this beast that adopted the appearance of a forest, he would be trapped for ever?

“I am not certain—” he began.

She lifted her silvery arm and put soft fingers to his lips, staring hard into his face. “You must be certain, Red Archer. Your eye must be as steady as never before. Your aim must be true and your confidence complete. For unless we possess the Seed we shall both of us doubtless die here today. My faith in you causes me to risk all the life I have left. We cannot hold off such a weight of fighting men for more than another night. And if we fail? We die and are already buried. But if we succeed, we walk the moonbeam roads. I will lead you back to your own realm—our own world—and set you on the path to Tana Lorn. This I promise.”

So he took hold of his strength and his courage and he said: “Lady, I believe your promise and my heart aches for home. So I will do this thing.”

At her bidding they approached the tallest part of the earthworks and there, hidden from casual view, they found a mouth of a cave into which a great stone arch had been built. The arch was fitted with ancient oaken gates. He guessed this was a familiar action for her as she leaned to push upon the gates. They swung back with an unnatural slithering sound. A profound, impenetrable lightlessness was revealed. A horrible, waiting blackness.

This time Rackhir did not hesitate, but, while the woman held tight to his arm, strode forward with an almost animal growl. He smelled blood and filth—the stink of men and other, fouler, things—and again he was forced to control his fear. Then the gates swung shut behind them and they stood in pitchy silence. He realized with surprise that her scent was stronger than all the terrible stench assailing his nostrils. Her warm softness pressed against him and he knew suddenly that even if this were, indeed, an inescapable hell, he would follow her anywhere. But he took a tighter grip on his captured broadsword and was glad he had decided to stick that captured war-axe in his belt.

The tunnel twisted like a beast in pain, back and forth. The Red Archer knew that, should he have to find his way back alone, he would be lost here for ever. A new, unidentifiable stink blended with that of men, damp, rooty soil and ordure until every breath he caught was thick in his throat, threatening to choke him. Yet her soft hand led him further and further into the belly of the earth.

At last he sensed rather than saw light ahead and he began to identify the smell. He had not experienced it on this island, but it was yet familiar and the strongest he had ever known. The stink was reptilian. And it raised his hackles. What was the story? That Melnibonéans were part-reptile, blood brothers to the legendary Ph'oom? Every instinct told him to turn back. But he knew he could not. His only choice was to continue and pray the Melnibonéan woman had not lied to him.

She was hissing in his ear now. "We are nearing the Chamber of the Seed. Remember that its guardians know only how to die protecting it. There will be no parleying with them. But you are an archer. This is your advantage over all the others who have come here. The first chance you have you must string your bow and let fly three arrows."

"Three? Why..."

"You will see."

Then they were in the chamber, a sphere whose walls curved beneath their feet. The source of the light came from three spots near the centre—a steady, greenish glow. But now, emerging from the floor were the silhouettes of men and the archer readied himself as they began to lumber towards him. He glimpsed glittering green eyes, open green mouths, bared green-grey teeth and he knew these were the hardened warriors who had sent the others forward to be killed during his first fight.

Reaching for the axe, he prepared to stand against them, but she murmured in his ear. "Quick! Your bow. Those three points of light! While you can. Three arrows!"

And reluctantly he stuck the axe in his belt and strung his bow, nocking one arrow to the string, the other two held against the staff. In that darkness he wondered how he could possibly strike his targets. The first arrow flew and, to his astonished relief, struck true in the central glowing orb. Immediately the chamber was filled with an horrific shrieking and wailing, a hissing and thrashing. Rackhir wanted to cover his ears, but did not dare. That warm hand touched him, strengthening his resolve. The green warriors paused, as if uncertain.

"Let fly!" she cried. "Now! Now!"

He obeyed.

A second arrow whispered from the thrumming string, and a second orb was pierced. Again came that terrible noise, half-howl, half-shriek. And the darkness of the barrow shook to the thing's massive convulsions. The noise grew, at once deafening and deep, shrill as the cry of some enormous seabird.

Then the warriors were upon him and he was forced to tug the axe free of his belt and strike two down, ducking beneath the sweep of their swords. A third fell, head split in two by the bright, bronze blade. He grew aware of her back against his as her own deadly sword and poignard whispered and shivered in the darkness. Blood spattered against the Red Archer's face. He spat it out in disgust, carrying the attack to two more of the warriors. He was encouraged suddenly by the realization that they could see hardly better than he could. The pressure on his back was gone, however. He had lost contact with the woman.

Where was she? Had she betrayed him? Had she left him to his death? Was this what she had done with all the others who had ventured here to steal what she called the Original Seed?

Again, he had no time to call out, to demand her continuing aid. With astonishing speed, one brilliant viridian orb came closer and closer. It was almost upon him. Yet still all around him he felt the press of the warriors defending the Seed. Stinking breath struck his face. He continued to hack blindly, this way and that. His arm cut an arc of death. He was soaked in that thick, green, unnatural blood.

“Rackhir!” She no longer whispered. There was tangible terror in her voice. “Shoot! Shoot! If you do not, we are both doomed!”

He stepped to one side, slammed his battle axe into another body and, using it as a temporary shield, raised his bow and his remaining arrow.

“Rackhir! Let fly!”

Drawing the long shaft back, he aimed and loosed in one fluid, instinctive movement.

There came a pause. A terrible, threatening silence.

Now an unhuman scream shrilled loud enough to threaten both his hearing and his sanity. He saw the outline of the arrow quivering above him, then to his right, then his left, then below. Light streamed behind it, veining the darkness everywhere. Filthy liquid stung his skin. The stench grew stronger and stronger and he staggered, retching, fearing he must surely pass out. Then he would certainly die...

“Now, Ronan! Guard my back!”

Black shadows moved towards him and he sensed red rage threatening again. He had a glimpse of her lithe body against the failing light and once more resisted an urge to clap his hand over his ears. Again his hand gripped the long-shafted war-axe. Again he buried the blade deep into flesh, then swung backwards to catch the warrior threatening him from behind. He feared he might strike her by mistake. There arose a strange, pulsing green fog, outlining the huge, reptilian body thrashing from side to side now, flinging corpses and living men indiscriminately about the earthen sphere. And all the while came the noise, that deafening, hellish screaming.

Then she was beside him and he smelled something infinitely sweet. In the dying light of the last orb he saw her pale features and knew she had succeeded in getting what she sought.

“They are distracted by the beast’s death-throes now, if indeed she does die. They hardly know whether to fight or flee. This is our moment—our only moment—to leave.”

She took his arm and he backed along the serpentine corridor, striking out at more shadows as they approached.

The labyrinth narrowed, becoming marginally easier to defend. His eyes were better accustomed to the gloom. He could glimpse his enemies by the faint, reflected green light in their eyes.

And then at last they had reached the oaken gates. She pulled them open and they burst from the mound into air that was heavy with dense rain. Rackhir was glad of the rain. It washed the worst of the viridian blood from his body. He lifted his head and let the water pour down on him. But she was still in haste. He saw that she cradled in her arms a tall, wooden beaker carved with strange, alien forms. The thing did not

appear to have been designed for human hands.

Now the remaining warriors were gathering under the stone arch of the entrance. Rackhir felt almost sorry for them as they looked in wonder at the cup O'Indura held. They could not believe it was being taken from them by the woman they had worshipped as its spirit. He nocked another arrow to his bow and shot an attacker through the throat. This did not stop the warrior at once. He came stumbling forward, bronze sword raised, his free hand reaching for the beaker, then his feet gradually moved faster and faster over the ground as his body fell and he died sprawling at Ronan's feet. But more warriors were pouring from the entrance. Too many for him to fight in this natural arena.

The archer still did not wholly trust the Melnibonéan woman. He kept half an eye on her as he watched the warriors. He had no arrows left in his quiver. He felt a knot in his stomach, a sense of deep failure. Had he done all this just to become a meal for some predatory supernatural?

Then she was at his side again, clutching his arm and leading him backwards. "We have the Seed," she said. "With it we can return to our home realm." She reached into the beaker and took out something about the size of a walnut.

"What's that?" He flung a battle-axe. A green-skinned warrior fell. How many more had filled that horrible chamber?

"The Seed," she said. "Put it into your mouth. But be sure not to swallow."

He could hardly believe what he heard. "Put that in my mouth? Why, by Krim, would I do that?"

"Have I failed you yet, Red Archer?"

"Why don't you—?"

"I am not a man, nor a warrior. Nor am I human as you are human. Do it, Priest of Phum. You'll not regret this!"

So, against all reason, he took the Seed and placed it gingerly in his mouth. He expected the taste to be unpleasant, but it was strangely sweet and delicate. He began to feel an entirely unfamiliar energy coursing through him. He recalled how he had felt, almost dying of thirst, as he crossed the Sighing Desert, questing for Tana Lorn. He had seen mirage after mirage as his fevered brain imposed its visions on the barren wastes. He was hallucinating again, surely?

He felt a sudden, euphoric kinship with the surrounding trees. He was one of them. He had more than two legs, more than two arms. He had instead countless numbers of sturdy roots and branches. And each branch ended in something like a weapon. He swung one of his branches, knowing at once that if he were hallucinating, then so were the green warriors. Clubbed, the man went flying back towards the entrance of the barrow. He swung again. Another warrior was sent hurtling backwards. He sensed that the silver Melnibonéan had climbed onto his back as he gradually moved out of the glade, killing and scattering warriors as a terrier killed rats, until at last their antagonists became afraid and followed them no longer. As he paused, resting, her long, warm fingers reached into his mouth. He thought to resist, but it was too late...

And he was a mortal man again, standing beside her as she replaced the Seed in the cup and then spat into it. Suddenly her other hand, which did not hold the cup, shot out and in it was her silver knife.

“So—you’d betray me, after all,” he growled, lurching to seize her wrist, but she was too swift for him. He yelled in sudden, extraordinary pain as the cold knife sliced through his wrist and she held the cup to catch his gushing blood. “You hell-bitch! I’ll—”

She grinned into his face. “You’ll do nothing. I am saving your life, Red Archer!”

With the speed of a striking snake she sliced through her own wrist and her blood mingled with his in the cup.

“The Seed needs our nourishment. It will take us home!”

The warriors were regrouping now. He saw them through the trees.

“Look,” she murmured. He saw that, even as he stanching his own blood with his kerchief, some crimson shape was forming in the cup. The Seed was glowing like a ruby and pulsing within the beaker. It was growing bigger. Her widening eyes reflected its light.

He heard a creaking groan as a huge tree fell suddenly into the glade, pinning several warriors to the ground. Before his sickened gaze the men began to sink into the earth, absorbed like the water. Then another tree fell. Then another. And this time when a tree collapsed it sent up a vast cloud of dust into the rainy air. The dust danced like freed souls. The trees around him were petrifying, crumbling. In what should have taken centuries, the whole forest was dying before their eyes.

O’Indura looked down. He followed her gaze. The grass itself was turning to dust. The blood which had kept the forest alive had lost all power. Whatever she had done to the Seed had sucked the very essence from the predatory forest and its creatures.

Then the Melnibonéan woman dashed the cup through the air and the liquid within streamed out in a great arc, turning from scarlet to green and then to gold before their eyes.

The thing spread into the air and hung there like a long-veined leaf, shimmering and curling in the cool rain. The forest continued to collapse, slowly becoming as tangible as smoke. The great leaf, however, remained, almost more substantial than themselves.

“Climb onto it,” she said. “Help me.”

With his remaining strength, he handed her up until she was standing on the leaf, which curled its edges to support her. Then with her help, letting the axe and the sword fall into the grey dust, he clambered to join her. She said something quietly in a language he did not recognize and made a motion with her hand causing the world around him to fade while the leaf stretched further and further ahead of them until it was like a long, many-tendrilled vine sending its shoots into the dark blue depths surrounding them.

Rackhir, the Warrior Priest of Phum, looked ahead at the wide tendrils, thick as the thickest tree trunks, which now stretched in all directions.

“Lady,” he murmured, “what sorcery is this? What have you created?”

She smiled, linking her arm in his. “I have made a path,” she said. “With a little luck, Red Archer, it will carry us to the moonbeam roads and from there we shall find a way which, with inspiration, courage and intelligence, will take me to Melniboné and you to your Tana Lorn... See?”

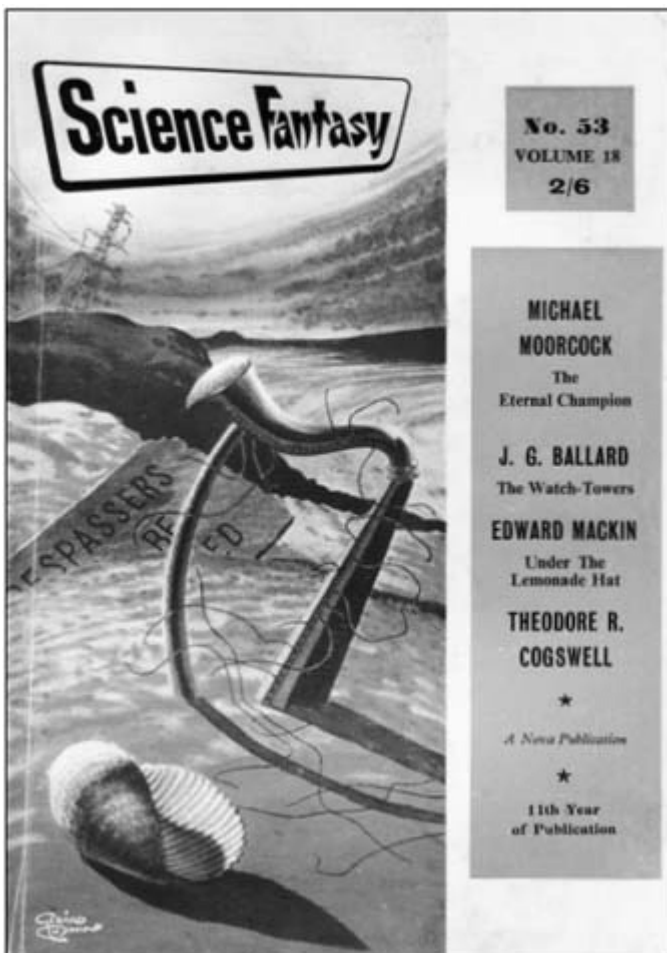


And he saw indeed that there were many more long roads, like tendrils of a vine spreading in all directions through the dark blue depths. And there were other beings, not every one of them human, walking on those wide, thick vines, back and forth at every level, above and below, walking through the multiverse.

“We have reached the moonbeam paths,” she said. “We have found the roads between the worlds. Now comes the final task.”

His face grew taut with weariness, with something close to despair, for he could fight no more. “What is that, lady?”


Seeing his expression, she laughed and pressed her warmth and her softness against his hard warrior’s body. “To discover which of these roads, Rackhir the Red Archer, will carry us home.”



Cover artwork by Gerard Quinn, for *Science Fantasy*, no. 53, June 1962; lead story: “The Eternal Champion”



“Captains of Chaos” sketch by James Cawthorn, 1963, previously unpublished



## *Master of Chaos*

By **MICHAEL MOORCOCK**  
Illustrator **FINLAY**

*At the world's edge, the mists of  
Chaos swirled. Only a man whose weakness lay  
in his own strength could  
conquer the demons of Kaneloon.*

**F**ROM the glassless window of the stone tower it was possible to see the wide river winding off between loose, brown banks, through the heaped terrain of solid green copses which blended very gradually into the mass of the forest proper. And from out of the forest, the cliff rose, grey and light green, up and up, the rock darkening, lichen-covered, to merge with the lower, and even more massive, stones of the castle. It was the castle which dominated the countryside in three directions, drawing the eye from river, rock or forest. Its walls were high and of thick granite, with towers; a dense field of towers, grouped so as to shadow one another.

Aubec of Malador marvelled and wondered how human builders could ever have constructed it, save by sorcery. Brooding and mysterious, the castle seemed to have a defiant air, for it stood on the very edge of the world.

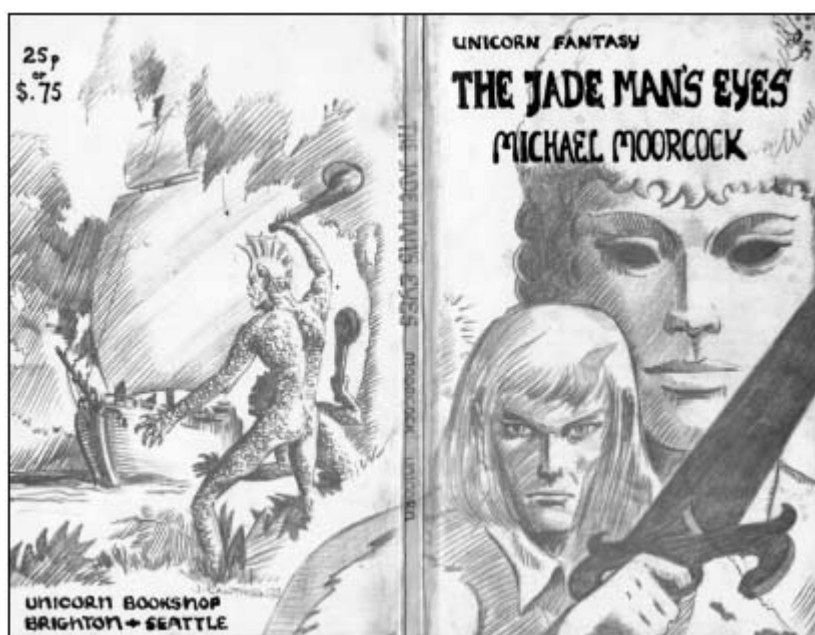
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Title-page illustration by Virgil Finlay for “Master of Chaos,” *Fantastic Stories of Imagination*, May 1964



Cover artwork by Bob Haberfield for *The Singing Citadel*, first edition, Mayflower Books, 1970, comprising “The Singing Citadel,” “Master of Chaos,” “The Greater Conqueror” and “To Rescue Tanelorn...”



Front and back cover artwork by James Cawthorn for *The Jade Man's Eyes*, Unicorn Books, 1973



Interior artwork by Rodney Matthews from *Elric at the End of Time* , Paper Tiger, 1987



Cover artwork by Eric Parker for “Zenith the Albino!” by Anthony Skene, *Detective Weekly*, no. 323, April 1939

*Elric To Rescue Tanelornis* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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“Elric at the End of Time,” illustrated by Rodney Matthews, was written for Big O Books in 1977 but did not appear until 1981, without illustrations, in Ace Books’ *Elsewhere*, edited by Terri Windling and Mark Alan Arnold; it was subsequently published with Matthews’s illustrations by Paper Tiger, 1987.

“The Black Blade’s Song,” under a different title, first appeared in *Elric: Tales of the White Wolf*, edited by Edward E. Kramer and Richard Gilliam, White Wolf Books, 1994.

“Crimson Eyes” first appeared in *New Statesman & Society*, December 1994.

“Sir Milk-and-Blood” first appeared in *Pawn of Chaos: Tales of the Eternal Champion*, edited by Edward E. Kramer, White Wolf Books, 1996.

“The Roaming Forest” first appeared in *Cross Plains Universe: Texans Celebrate Robert E. Howard*, edited by Scott A. Cupp and Joe R. Lansdale, MonkeyBrain Books/FACT, Inc., 2006.



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## FOREWORD

### **MY ETERNAL CHAMPION**

by Walter Mosley

My first experience with Michael Moorcock was at a little newspaper kiosk at the entrance of a tube station in London, 1968. There I saw the bright, psychedelic colors of the paperback edition of the first volume of the Corum chronicles. I was on a tour with a bunch of high school kids from California. We were supposed to be broadening our cultural awareness. But instead I spent every available moment reading that book and at least six other Moorcock masterpieces while others *ooh* ed and *aah* ed at the Tate Gallery, Carnaby Street and a dozen other places that I never gave a second glance.

Michael Moorcock was the beginning of my literary education. He has maintained that role ever since.

Moorcock's writing is intricate, fabulous and mellifluous. Reading his words I was, and am, reminded of music. His novels are symphonic experiences. They dance and cry and bleed and make promises that can only live in the moment of their utterance.

In the early works there was a lot of swordplay and magicks, Shakespearean villains (and heroes) locked in struggles that were both unwinnable and unending.

But these brilliant facades were only the beginning of the power Moorcock exerted over me. Reading his books I understood, for the first time (and most clearly), that a novel is only a movement, an act, a scene in the greater theme of a master fiction writer.

Moorcock's mind encompasses not one world but a whole, and expanding, galaxy of possibilities, fates and second chances.

He understands destiny, lives under its unforgiving logic but never accepts it. Instead he rebels for us like the knight in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*.

Each story expands our possibilities, but in the end we hit a wall and are given the existential choice that Camus's Mersault faced on the morning of his execution.

Michael Moorcock refuses to be guided by the dead hand of history. His lively intelligence and his spirit, hardened by the German bombing of London, makes him a beacon of hope and, oddly, a realist who tells you, "You will die, my friend, and that death may be terrible and tragic. But today you live and this is your only chance to be somebody real and tangible in the malleable, seemingly meaningless movement that some people mistake for time."

It is a great honor for me to be given the chance to introduce Michael Moorcock in this book. It is a gift to the world that he and his writing still map our hubris and folly, our hope and our ecstatic demolition.

## INTRODUCTION

Strictly speaking, not all these stories are being presented here in the order in which they were published. While the main body of the Elric novels are appearing as I first wrote them, the short stories and novellas are a bit of an exception. I wrote most of them, of course, during that prolific period of the early 1960s when I was publishing a lead story virtually every month in one of the Nova magazines, all edited by E. J. "Ted" Carnell.

"The Last Enchantment" was actually written after the story "The Caravan of Forgotten Dreams," published as "The Flame Bringers." It was, as the story implies, supposed to be the last Elric story. After I had submitted it, Carnell asked me to write the sequence which became the serial published in book form as *Stormbringer*. He was also an agent, so he suggested he send the story to one of the American magazines. I forgot about it. Many years later, after Ted had died tragically early, his successor found the story and sent it to me. In 1978 a young man called Armand Eising, who with Thomas Durwood planned

to publish *Ariel*, an ambitious fantasy magazine in large size with full colour, asked me for an Elric story and since I had recently received “The Last Enchantment” back, I gave it to him to be illustrated by Frank Frazetta, one of the many great graphic artists who have over the years embellished my work. (Frazetta’s cover for *The Silver Warriors*, aka *Phoenix in Obsidian*, the second Eternal Champion tale, became pretty iconographic, being turned into a snow globe and then imitated in this century by the poster designer for the first Narnia film!)

By 1964 Cele Goldsmith, the brilliant editor of *Amazing* and *Fantastic* magazines, was publishing epic fantasy stories and, because Carnell was overinventoried with my work, I submitted “Earl Aubec and the Golem” to her. It appeared as “Master of Chaos.” To my astonished pleasure, it was illustrated by the great Virgil Finlay, whose work had embellished so many of the magazines I had admired as a boy, including *Weird Tales* and *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*. This story developed the idea of Chaos being acted upon by the human imagination, a recurring theme in my fantastic fiction. “To Rescue Tanelorn...” was written in a slightly different manner for me, echoing Dunsany more than my work usually did, and introducing Rackhir, the Red Archer, who, as well as enjoying his own adventures, became a stalwart friend of Elric.

The concepts which have been the backbone of most of my science fantasies appeared pretty rapidly, one after the other. “The Eternal Champion” offered the notion of a hero constantly reincarnated to fight for the Balance, no matter what other loyalties he might possess, and *The Sundered Worlds*, which will not be published in this series since it was pretty much pure science fiction, first offered the idea of “the multiverse,” a quasi-infinite number of universes, any one of which is only marginally different from the next.

Both ideas seemed to inspire other writers (and physicists!) almost immediately. What was original to them also captured the imagination of games creators and graphic novelists until within only a few years my own work was somewhat lost amongst all the material it had inspired. Even the symbol representing Chaos, which I had created in a doodle meant to represent the opposite of Law (a single arrow), became universal to the degree that people now regard it as an ancient sign. I suppose it *is* ancient to many younger readers born after 1963. I myself, of course, had been similarly inspired by what had gone before me—for instance, the “alternate world” tales of L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, whose Harold Shea stories graced the pages of *Unknown Worlds* and remain some of the best examples of their kind, in turn inspiring writers like Poul Anderson to write his magnificent *Three Hearts and Three Lions*.

Both de Camp and Anderson were, at least as fantasy writers, fellow spirits. Sprague and I became good friends and it was he, of course, who first encouraged me to write epic fantasy, when the magazine *Fantastic Universe*, edited by Hans Stefan Santesson, a much-loved anthologist, wanted to bring such fiction back to the ordinary newsstands. Hans commissioned me to write, with de Camp’s blessing, a new Conan story which, in the end, never materialized, as I have explained elsewhere. While I now have to agree with the purists who have rejected the Conan tales by other hands, we were working in a somewhat different context in which we were a handful of enthusiasts attempting to present Howard’s enduring character to a wider audience.

Pretty much all the ideas which formed the backbone of my fantastic fiction (and indeed were later developed for my literary fiction) came out in a year or two. I was developing very rapidly as a writer, expanding in many directions at once, rather like Chaos itself. I wrote all kinds of journalism and, in researching many of my features, added material to my fiction (for instance, a feature on Alexander the Great led to my writing “The Greater Conqueror” for a painting by Gerard Quinn, the star artist of *Science Fantasy*, intended for the cover but ironically used on another issue).

“The Eternal Champion” was an idea I had originally begun to write as a serial for a fanzine I produced when I was seventeen called *Avilion* which scarcely made it into reality, since I only had a chance to run off a few copies before my arrangement with the firm that allowed me to print my fanzines for free came to an end. Both the magazine and the serial were set aside as my work with Amalgamated Press took up most of my time, and I had to devote myself to the detective adventures of Sexton Blake (whose battle with the albino Zenith had been one of my boyhood enthusiasms) and the graphic tales of Robin Hood, Kit Carson, Dick Turpin, Buck Jones or Dogfight Dixon RFC that we turned out monthly. Most of my taste for red-blooded pseudo-historical fiction went into producing scripts for the great Don Lawrence, with whom I collaborated on many stories for *Olac the Gladiator* and *Karl the Viking*, some of which had the fantasy elements I would later begin to incorporate into the stories I wrote for Carnell’s magazines. With Lawrence, I produced features on Alexander the Great and Constantine the Great for magazines like *Look and Learn* and its companion *Bible Story*, for which I also wrote features on the great cathedrals of England, as well as the exploits of various colourful biblical figures. All this taught me, I believe, how to present a fast-paced fantasy adventure and also helped me research the story for which I won an early Nebula Award, “Behold the Man.” For a liberal humanist I read the Bible more thoroughly, as I’ve since discovered, than many professed Christians!

A year or two before I published “Behold the Man” in the Easter number of *New Worlds*, which by then I was editing, I had, in the winter of 1964, begun to wonder how it would be possible to turn my talent for writing mythic stories of eternal heroes to address more immediately the issues of the modern world which were increasingly beginning to concern me. I believed that what modernist fiction had become was no longer capable of addressing these issues and I was frustrated because, for me, most science fiction seemed to dodge the implications also. I wanted to find a form which confronted those issues as squarely as possible.

I felt I could do this somehow by using what I had learned while writing Elric, and in the end I came up with Jerry Cornelius, whose original I had seen in Notting Hill while I ate at my local café. This beautiful young man, with his ascetic features, elegant clothes and floating long hair, had suddenly appeared as I looked up. Behind him was the name of one of our local greengrocer’s shops, Cornelius of London. And so I had, in one moment, both the image of my modern-day hero and his name. That, unlikely as it seems, is exactly how Jerry Cornelius was conceived. All I had to do then was try to develop a technique which did the same thing I had been doing with the Elric stories.

Rather than produce a thinned-down version of Elric, I realized I could create something out of the Elric mythos but make it relate thoroughly to modern times. The answer was simple. I took the first Elric short stories back to what had first inspired them (including my sojourn in Lapland climbing mountains) and adapted the plots to the story which was to become the first Cornelius novel, *The Final Programme*. Parts of this novel were cut up and appeared in *New Worlds*, and “Phase 1,” harking back to “The Dreaming City,” the first Elric story, was intended to be one of these fragments but is actually published here in this form for the first time, to show how that transition came about. I was, of course, to return to both Elric and Jerry when the occasion demanded or the mood was on me, and when Sprague de Camp asked for an Elric story for his sword-and-sorcery anthology *The Fantastic Swordsmen*, I obliged with “The Singing Citadel.” A later anthology would include “The Sleeping Sorceress,” which I would develop eventually into a full-blown novel. I seemed to have been inspired to develop a certain sibilliance in my titles by 1967!

A few years later, around the summer of 1973, my enthusiasm for the fin de siècle, Art Nouveau, the aesthetes and so on began to form the ideas which would eventually go into my sequence generally known as *The Dancers at the End of Time*. I eventually finished this sequence in the middle seventies and by then was working regularly with the artist Rodney Matthews producing a vast series of posters, cards, notelets and calendars. Our publisher, Peter Ledebøer of Big O Graphics, asked me if I could write a

story for Rodney to illustrate. This eventually became the rather strange blend of Elric and the Dancers called, obviously enough, *Elric at the End of Time*.

This magnificently illustrated book, with picture after picture in gorgeous colour, was eventually published by Paper Tiger. It shows Our Hero, of course, in an entirely different situation from his usual ones! The idea was inspired by M. John Harrison's suggestion that the denizens of the End of Time would be seen very much as the Gods of Chaos by the likes of Elric and his kind. Some readers weren't too happy about my writing what was, after all, primarily a humorous story, but it seemed to me that there was a chance to offer an aspect of Elric which was not one of unrelieved gloom! There's always a danger, as one's work grows in popularity, of taking oneself too seriously. That's why from time to time it's worth writing a bit of self-parody like "The Stone Thing," which I originally wrote for a friend of mine Eric Bentcliffe, who put out some very funny fanzines a few years ago.

*The Jade Man's Eyes* was done for my friend Bill Butler, a bookseller and poet who also published a number of offbeat books from his shop in Brighton. Most of the books he published were typically done for love rather than profit and, since he was an Elric fan, this was one of several projects I did with him in the hope of making him a little money! Sadly, he died in 1977, and I wrote a rock song about him (since he had always wanted me to write a rock song about him) called "The Great Sun Jester," which was recorded a year or two after his death by Blue Öyster Cult (who also did a version of an Elric song, "Black Blade").

In the early 1990s Ed Kramer proposed an anthology of Elric stories written by other hands, such as Neil Gaiman, Tad Williams and Karl Edward Wagner. I wrote "The Black Blade's Song," published as "The White Wolf's Song," for this, linking it into my stories of the moonbeam roads and the Second Ether, while the story I did for the anthology's sequel, "Sir Milk-and-Blood," takes Elric into the sequence of modern-dress stories I wrote which links him back to Monsieur Zenith, who originally inspired him. I wrote "Crimson Eyes," for instance, for the *New Statesman*'s special Christmas issue, and Elric/Zenith's other adventures in conflict with *The Metatemporal Detective* have recently been published in the volume of that name. I wanted to bring my hero back to his origins in homage to the stories which originally excited me as a boy.

There is one further homage here. Because Rackhir was in this volume, it seemed reasonable to include a fairly recent story concerning him. I wrote it as a firm nod to Robert E. Howard for an anthology, *Cross Plains Universe*, done in 2006 for the World Fantasy Convention held in Austin, the nearest large town to where I live in Texas. The book was intended to celebrate and commemorate Howard, and I was flattered to be asked to join in. Readers of Howard, as well as myself, will see a few nods to Conan as well as my own cosmology and its heroes.

I have written almost all my Elric stories because I was asked to do so, either by commissioning editors or by readers. My affection for the crimson-eyed albino has never waned. Since I began writing I have always maintained a close relationship with my readers and have done my best, whenever possible, to accommodate them when they have asked for a certain kind of story. While I retired from writing long epic fantasy stories or, for that matter, science fantasy novels with the most recent sequence involving Elric and others of my own heroic pantheon, ending with "The White Wolf's Son," I still take great pleasure in producing the occasional shorter story or graphic tale, and I suspect I shall continue to write these until my career comes at last to an end. Meanwhile, we have these, so wonderfully, gloriously, handsomely illustrated by Michael Kaluta. I hope you enjoy them.

Michael Moorcock,  
Lost Pines, Texas,  
May 2007

NB: In addition to the appearance of “Phase 1” as an independent story, three other stories appear here for the first time in one of my own collections: “The Eternal Champion,” “The Jade Man’s Eyes” and “The Roaming Forest.”

## THE ETERNAL CHAMPION



*In the Cycle of Time many things may repeat themselves, especially in the lives of men and halflings. This is a story of the dim and distant past—or the far-flung future, whichever way you look at it.*

—John Carnell, *SCIENCE FANTASY* No. 53, June 1962

## TO RESCUE TANELORN...



*The Age of the Young Kingdoms, which came after the Age of the Bright Empire, was an age of heroes. There were many of these and Elric of Melniboné, of course, was chief among them. But there were others and many of the hero tales of that Age centre upon a mysterious city, which some doubt really existed. This city was named Tanelorn...*

—John Carnell, *SCIENCE FANTASY* No. 56, December 1962

## THE LAST ENCHANTMENT

(JESTING WITHCHAOS)



*The albino warrior Elric is the last of the emperors of Melniboné, a dying kingdom. A grim, melancholy man, he wanders in exile from land to land, adventure to adventure, accompanied by his demon sword Stormbringer and his own haunted dreams.*

—Thomas Durwood, *ARIEL: THE BOOK OF FANTASY Vol. 3*, 1978

## THE GREATER CONQUEROR



*Just how “great” was Alexander? Considering his ultimate destiny, were there other agencies at work using him as a springboard for a vaster design?*

—John Carnell, *SCIENCE FANTASY No. 58*, April 1963

## MASTER OF CHAOS

(EARLAUBEC)



*At the world's edge, the mists of Chaos swirled. Only a man whose weakness lay in his own strength could conquer the demons of Kaneloon.*

—Cele Goldsmith, *FANTASTIC STORIES OF IMAGINATION*, May 1964

## **PHASE 1**

A JERRY CORNELIUS STORY



## **THE SINGING CITADEL**



## **THE JADE MAN'S EYES**





**THE STONE THING**



**ELRIC AT THE END OF TIME**



**THE BLACK BLADE'S SONG**  
(THE WHITEWOLF'S SONG)



## **CRIMSON EYES**



## **SIR MILK-AND-BLOOD**



## **THE ROAMING FOREST**



## **ORIGINS**

*Early artwork associated with Elric's first appearances in magazines and books*



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— *Time Out*

“Elric is back! Herald the event!”

— *Los Angeles Daily News*, on *The Fortress of the Pearl*

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—J. G. BALLARD, author of *Crash*

“A giant of fantasy.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

“A superb writer.”

— *Locus*

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# ELRIC TO RESCUE TANELORN

CHRONICLES OF THE  
LAST EMPEROR OF MELNIBONÉ

— VOLUME 2 —

MICHAEL MOORCOCK  
ILLUSTRATED BY MICHAEL WM. KALUTA



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