Elric of Melnibone by Michael Moorcock
Book One of the Elric Saga

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BOOK ONE

On the island kingdom of Melnibone all the old rituals are still observed, though the nation's power has waned for five hundred years, and now her way of life is maintained only by her trade with the Young Kingdoms and the fact that the city of Imryr has become the meeting place of merchants. Are those rituals no longer useful; can the rituals be denied and doom avoided? One who would rule in Emperor Elric's stead prefers to think not. He says that Elric will bring destruction to Melnibone by his refusal to honour all the rituals (Elric honours many). And now opens the tragedy which will close many years from now and precipitate the destruction of this world.
IT IS THE colour of a bleached skull, his flesh; and the long hair which flows below his shoulders is milk-white. From the tapering, beautiful head stare two slanting eyes, crimson and moody, and from the loose sleeves of his yellow gown emerge two slender hands, also the colour of bone, resting on each arm of a seat which has been carved from a single, massive ruby.

The crimson eyes are troubled and sometimes one hand will rise to finger the light helm which sits upon the white locks: a helm made from some dark, greenish alloy and exquisitely moulded into the likeness of a dragon about to take wing. And on the hand which absently caresses the crown there is a ring in which is set a single rare Actorios stone whose core sometimes shifts sluggishly and reshapes itself, as if it were sentient smoke and as restless in its jewelled prison as the young albino on his Ruby Throne.

He looks down the long flight of quartz steps to where his court disports itself, dancing with such delicacy and whispering grace that it might be a court of ghosts. Mentally he debates moral issues and in itself this activity divides him from the great majority of his subjects, for these people are not human.

These are the people of Melnibone, the Dragon Isle, which ruled the world for ten thousand years and has ceased to rule it for less than five hundred years. And they are cruel and clever and to them 'morality' means little more than a proper respect for the traditions of a hundred centuries.

To the young man, four hundred and twenty-eighth in direct line of descent from the first Sorcerer Emperor of Melnibone, their assumptions seem not only arrogant but foolish; it is plain that the Dragon Isle has lost most of her power and will soon be threatened, in another century or two, by a direct conflict with the emerging human nations whom they call, somewhat patronisingly, the Young Kingdoms. Already pirate fleets have made unsuccessful attacks on Imrryr the Beautiful, the Dreaming City, capital of the Dragon Isle of Melnibone.

Yet even the emperor's closest friends refuse to discuss the prospect of Melnibone's fall. They are not pleased when he mentions the idea, considering his remarks not only unthinkable, but also a singular breach of good taste.

So, alone, the emperor broods. He mourns that his father, Sadric the Eighty-Sixth, did not sire more children, for then a more suitable monarch might have been available to take his place on the Ruby Throne. Sadric has been dead a year; whispering a glad welcome to that which came to claim his soul. Through most of his life Sadric had never known another woman than his wife, for the Empress had died bringing her sole thin-blooded issue into the world. But, with Melnibonean emotions (oddly different from those of the human newcomers), Sadric had loved his wife and had been unable to find pleasure in any other company, even that of the son who had killed her and who was all that was left of her. By magic potions and the chanting of runes, by rare herbs had her son been nurtured, his strength sustained artificially by every art known to the Sorcerer Kings of Melnibone. And he had lived--still lives--thanks to sorcery alone, for he is naturally lassitudinous and, without his drugs, would barely be able to raise his hand from his side through most of a normal day.

If the young emperor has found any advantage in his lifelong weakness it must be in that, perforce, he has read much. Before he was fifteen he had read every book in his father's library, some more than once. His sorcerous powers, learned initially from Sadric, are now greater than any possessed by his ancestors for many a generation. His knowledge of the world beyond the shores of Melnibone is profound, though he has as yet had little direct experience of it. If he wishes he could resurrect the Dragon Isle's former might and rule both his own land and the Young Kingdoms as an invulnerable tyrant. But his reading has also taught him to question the uses to which power is put, to question his motives, to question whether his own power should be used at all, in any cause. His reading has led him to this 'morality', which, still, he barely understands. Thus, to his subjects, he is an enigma and, to some,
he is a threat, for he neither thinks nor acts in accordance with their conception of how a true Melnibonean (and a Melnibonean emperor, at that) should think and act. His cousin Yyrkoon, for instance, has been heard more than once to voice strong doubts concerning the emperor's right to rule the people of Melnibone. 'This feeble scholar will bring doom to us all,' he said one night to Dyvim Tvar, Lord of the Dragon Caves.

Dyvim Tvar is one of the emperor's few friends and he had duly reported the conversation, but the youth had dismissed the remarks as 'only a trivial treason', whereas any of his ancestors would have rewarded such sentiments with a very slow and exquisite public execution.

The emperor's attitude is further complicated by the fact that Yyrkoon, who is even now making precious little secret of his feelings that he should be emperor, is the brother of Cymoril, a girl whom the albino considers the closest of his friends, and who will one day become his empress.

Down on the mosaic floor of the court Prince Yyrkoon can be seen in all his finest silks and furs, his jewels and his brocades, dancing with a hundred women, all of whom are rumoured to have been mistresses of his at one time or another. His dark features, at once handsome and saturnine, are framed by long black hair, waved and oiled, and his expression, as ever, is sardonic while his bearing is arrogant. The heavy brocade cloak swings this way and that, striking other dancers with some force. He wears it almost as if it is armour or, perhaps, a weapon. Amongst many of the courtiers there is more than a little respect for Prince Yyrkoon. Few resent his arrogance and those who do keep silent, for Yyrkoon is known to be a considerable sorcerer himself. Also his behaviour is what the court expects and welcomes in a Melnibonean noble; it is what they would welcome in their emperor.

The emperor knows this. He wishes he could please his court as it strives to honour him with its dancing and its wit, but he cannot bring himself to take part in what he privately considers a wearisome and irritating sequence of ritual posturings. In this he is, perhaps, somewhat more arrogant than Yyrkoon who is, at least, a conventional boor.

From the galleries, the music grows louder and more complex as the slaves; specially trained and surgically operated upon to sing but one perfect note each, are stimulated to more passionate efforts. Even the young emperor is moved by the sinister harmony of their song which in few ways resembles anything previously uttered by the human voice. Why should their pain produce such marvellous beauty? he wonders. Or is all beauty created through pain? Is that the secret of great art, both human and Melnibonean?

The Emperor Elric closes his eyes.

There is a stir in the hall below. The gates have opened and the dancing courtiers cease their motion, drawing back and bowing low as soldiers enter. The soldiers are clad all in light blue, their ornamental helms cast in fantastic shapes, their long, broad-bladed lances decorated with jewelled ribbons. They surround a young woman whose blue dress matches their uniforms and whose bare arms are encircled by five or six bracelets of diamonds, sapphires and gold. Strings of diamonds and sapphires are wound into her hair. Unlike most of the women of the court, her face has no designs painted upon the eyelids or cheekbones. Elric smiles. This is Cymoril. The soldiers are her personal ceremonial guard who, according to tradition, must escort her into the court. They ascend the steps leading to the Ruby Throne. Slowly Elric rises and stretches out his hands.

'Cymoril. I thought you had decided not to grace the court tonight?'

She returns his smile. 'My emperor, I found that I was in the mood for conversation, after all.'

Elric is grateful. She knows that he is bored and she knows, too, that she is one of the few people of Melnibone whose conversation interests him. If protocol allowed, he would offer her the throne, but as it is she must sit on the topmost step at his feet.

'Please sit, sweet Cymoril.' He resumes his place upon the throne and leans forward as she seats herself and looks into his eyes with a mixed expression of humour and tenderness. She speaks softly as her guard withdraws to mingle at the sides of the steps with Elric's own guard. Her voice can be heard
only by Elric.

'Would you ride out to the wild region of the island with me tomorrow, my lord?'

'There are matters to which I must give my attention...' He is attracted by the idea. It is weeks since he left the city and rode with her, their escort keeping a discreet distance away.

'Are they urgent?'

He shrugs. 'What matters are urgent in Melnibone? After ten thousand years, most problems may be seen in a certain perspective.' His smile is almost a grin, rather like that of a young scholar who plans to play truant from his tutor. 'Very well--early in the morning, we'll leave, before the others are up.'

'The air beyond Imrryr will be clear and sharp. The sun will be warm for the season. The sky will be blue and unclouded.'

Elric laughs. 'Such sorcery you must have worked!'

Cymoril lowers her eyes and traces a pattern on the marble of the dais. 'Well, perhaps a little. I am not without friends among the weakest of the elementals...'

Elric stretches down to touch her fine, fair hair. 'Does Yyrkoon know?'

'No.'

Prince Yyrkoon has forbidden his sister to meddle in magical matters. Prince Yyrkoon's friends are only among the darker of the supernatural beings and he knows that they are dangerous to deal with; thus he assumes that all sorcerous dealings bear a similar element of danger. Besides this, he hates to think that others possess the power that he possesses. Perhaps this is what, in Elric, he hates most of all.

'Let us hope that all Melnibone needs fine weather for tomorrow,' says Elric. Cymoril stares curiously at him. She is still a Melnibonean. It has not occurred to her that her sorcery might prove unwelcome to some. Then she shrugs her lovely shoulders and touches her lord lightly upon the hand.

'This "guilt",' she says. 'This searching of the conscience. Its purpose is beyond my simple brain.'

'And mine, I must admit. It seems to have no practical function. Yet more than one of our ancestors predicted a change in the nature of our earth. A spiritual as well as a physical change. Perhaps I have glimmerings of this change when I think my stranger, un-Melnibonean, thoughts?'

The music swells. The music fades. The courtiers dance on, though many eyes are upon Elric and Cymoril as they talk at the top of the dais. There is speculation. When will Elric announce Cymoril as his empress-to-be? Will Elric revive the custom that Sadric dismissed, of sacrificing twelve brides and their bridegrooms to the Lords of Chaos in order to ensure a good marriage for the rulers of Melnibone? It was obvious that Sadric's refusal to allow the custom to continue brought misery upon him and death upon his wife; brought him a sickly son and threatened the very continuity of the monarchy. Elric must revive the custom. Even Elric must fear a repetition of the doom which visited his father. But some say that Elric will do nothing in accordance with tradition and that he threatens not only his own life, but the existence of Melnibone itself and all it stands for. And those who speak thus are often seen to be on good terms with Prince Yyrkoon who dances on, seemingly unaware of their conversation or, indeed, unaware that his sister talks quietly with the cousin who sits on the Ruby Throne; who sits on the edge of the seat, forgetful of his dignity, who exhibits none of the ferocious and disdainful pride which has, in the past, marked virtually every-other emperor of Melnibone; who chats animatedly, forgetful that the court is supposed to be dancing for his entertainment.

And then suddenly Prince Yyrkoon freezes in midpirouette and raises his dark eyes to look up at his emperor. In one corner of the hall, Dyvim Tvar's attention is attracted by Yyrkoon's calculated and dramatic posture and the Lord of the Dragon Caves frowns. His hand falls to where his sword would normally be, but no swords are worn at a court ball. Dyvim Tvar looks warily and intently at Prince Yyrkoon as the tall nobleman begins to ascend the stairs to the Ruby Throne. Many eyes follow the emperor's cousin and now hardly anyone dances, though the music grows wilder as the masters of the music slaves goad their charges to even greater exertions.

Elric looks up to see Yyrkoon standing one step below that on which Cymoril sits. Yyrkoon makes a bow which is subtly insulting.
'I present myself to my emperor,' he says.

An Upstart Prince:
He Confronts His Cousin

'AND HOW DO you enjoy the ball, cousin?' Elric asked, aware that Yyrkoon's melodramatic presentation had been designed to catch him off-guard and, if possible, humiliate him. 'Is the music to your taste?'

Yyrkoon lowered his eyes and let his lips form a secret little smile. 'Everything is to my taste, my liege. But what of yourself?. Does something displease you? You do not join the dance.'

Elric raised one pale finger to his chin and stared at Yyrkoon's hidden eyes. 'I enjoy the dance, cousin, nonetheless. Surely it is possible to take pleasure in the pleasure of others?'

Yyrkoon seemed genuinely astonished. His eyes opened fully and met Elric's. Elric felt a slight shock and then turned his own gaze away, indicating the music galleries with a languid hand. 'Or perhaps it is the pain of others which brings me pleasure. Fear not, for my sake, cousin. I am pleased. I am pleased. You may dance on, assured that your emperor enjoys the ball.'

But Yyrkoon was not to be diverted from his object. 'Surely, if his subjects are not to go away saddened and troubled that they have not pleased their ruler, the emperor should demonstrate his enjoyment...?'

'I would remind you, cousin,' said Elric quietly, 'that the emperor has no duty to his subjects at all, save to rule them. Their duty is to him. That is the tradition of Melnibone.'

Yyrkoon had not expected Elric to use such arguments against him, but he rallied with his next retort. 'I agree, my lord. The emperor's duty is to rule his subjects. Perhaps that is why so many of them do not, themselves, enjoy the ball as much as they might.'

'I do not follow you, cousin.'

Cymoril had risen and stood with her hands clenched on the step above her brother. She was tense and anxious, worried by her brother's bantering tone, his disdainful bearing.

'Yyrkoon...' she said.

He acknowledged her presence. 'Sister. I see you share our emperor's reluctance to dance.'

'Yyrkoon,' she murmured, 'you are going too far. The emperor is tolerant, but...'

'Tolerant? Or is he careless? Is he careless of the traditions of our great race? Is he contemptuous of that race's pride?'

Dyvim Tvar was now mounting the steps. It was plain that he, too, sensed that Yyrkoon had chosen this moment to test Elric's power.

Cymoril was aghast. She said urgently: 'Yyrkoon. If you would live...'

'I would not care to live if the soul of Melnibone perished. And the guardianship of our nation's soul is the responsibility of the emperor. And what if we should have an emperor who failed in that responsibility? An emperor who was weak? An emperor who cared nothing for the greatness of the Dragon Isle and its folk?'

'A hypothetical question, cousin.' Elric had recovered his composure and his voice was an icy drawl. 'For such an emperor has never sat upon the Ruby Throne and such an emperor never shall.'

Dyvim Tvar came up, touching Yyrkoon on the shoulder. 'Prince, if you value your dignity and your life...'

Elric raised his hand. 'There is no need for that, Dyvim Tvar. Prince Yyrkoon merely entertains us with an intellectual debate. Fearing that I was bored by the music and the dance--which I am not--he thought he would provide the subject for a stimulating discourse. I am certain that we are most
stimulated, Prince Yyrkoon.' Elric allowed a patronising warmth to colour his last sentence.

Yyrkoon flushed with anger and bit his lip.

'But go on, dear cousin Yyrkoon,' Elric said. 'I am interested. Enlarge further on your argument.'

Yyrkoon looked around him, as if for support. But all his supporters were on the floor of the hall. Only Elric's friends, Dyvim Tvar and Cymoril, were nearby. Yet Yyrkoon knew that his supporters were hearing every word and that he would lose face if he did not retaliate. Elric could tell that Yyrkoon would have preferred to have retired from this confrontation and choose another day and another ground on which to continue the battle, but that was not possible. Elric, himself, had no wish to continue the foolish banter which was, no matter how disguised, a little better than the quarrelling of two little girls over who should play with the slaves first. He decided to make an end to it.

Yyrkoon began: 'Then let me suggest that an emperor who was physically weak might also be weak in his will to rule as befitted...'

And Elric raised his hand. 'You have done enough, dear cousin. More than enough. You have wearied yourself with this conversation when you would have preferred to dance. I am touched by your concern. But now I, too, feel weariness steal upon me.' Elric signaled for his old servant Tanglebones who stood on the far side of the throne dais, amongst the soldiers: 'Tanglebones! My cloak.'

Elric stood up. 'I thank you again for your thoughtfulness, cousin.' He addressed the court in general. 'I was entertained. Now I retire.'

Tanglebones brought the cloak of white fox fur and placed it around his master's shoulders. Tanglebones was very old and much taller than Elric, though his back was stooped and all his limbs seemed knotted and twisted back on themselves, like the limbs of a strong, old tree.

Elric walked across the dais and through the door which opened onto a corridor which led to his private apartments.

Yyrkoon was left fuming. He whirled round on the dais and opened his mouth as if to address the watching courtiers. Some, who did not support him, were smiling quite openly. Yyrkoon clenched his fists at his sides and glowered. He glared at Dyvim Tvar and opened his thin lips to speak. Dyvim Tvar coolly returned the glare, daring Yyrkoon to say more.

Then Yyrkoon flung back his head so that the locks of his hair, all curled and oiled, swayed against his back. And Yyrkoon laughed.

The harsh sound filled the hall. The music stopped. The laughter continued.

Yyrkoon stepped up so that he stood on the dais. He dragged his heavy cloak round him so that it engulfed his body.

Cymoril came forward. 'Yyrkoon, please do not...' He pushed her back with a motion of his shoulder.

Yyrkoon walked stiffly towards the Ruby Throne. It became plain that he was about to seat himself in it and thus perform one of the most traitorous actions possible in the code of Melnibone. Cymoril ran the few steps to him and pulled at his arm.

Yyrkoon's laughter grew. 'It is Yyrkoon they would wish to see on the Ruby Throne,' he told his sister. She gasped and looked in horror at Dyvim Tvar whose face was grim and angry.

Dyvim Tvar signed to the guards and suddenly there were two ranks of armoured men between Yyrkoon and the throne.

Yyrkoon glared back at the Lord of the Dragon Caves. 'You had best hope you perish with your master,' he hissed.

'This guard of honour will escort you from the hall,' Dyvim Tvar said evenly. 'We were all stimulated by your conversation this evening, Prince Yyrkoon.'

Yyrkoon paused, looked about him, then relaxed. He shrugged. 'There's time enough. If Elric will not abdicate, then he must be deposed.'

Cymoril's slender body was rigid. Her eyes blazed. She said to her brother:
"If you harm Elric in any way, I will slay you myself, Yyrkoon."

He raised his tapering eyebrows and smiled. At that moment he seemed to hate his sister even more than he hated his cousin. 'Your loyalty to that creature has ensured your own doom, Cymoril. I would rather you died than that you should give birth to any progeny of his. I will not have the blood of our house diluted, tainted—even touched—by his blood. Look to your own life, sister, before you threaten mine.'

And he stormed down the steps, pushing through those who came up to congratulate him. He knew that he had lost and the murmur of his sycophants only irritated him further.

The great doors of the hall crashed together and closed. Yyrkoon was gone from the hall.

Dyvim Tvar raised both his arms. 'Dance on, courtiers. Pleasure yourselves with all that the hall provides. It is what will please the emperor most.'

But it was plain there would be little more dancing done tonight. Courtiers were already deep in conversation as, excitedly, they debated the events.

Dyvim Tvar turned to Cymoril. 'Elric refuses to understand the danger, Princess Cymoril. Yyrkoon's ambition could bring disaster to all of us."

'Including Yyrkoon.' Cymoril sighed.

'Aye, including Yyrkoon. But how can we avoid this, Cymoril, if Elric will not give orders for your brother's arrest?'

'He believes that such as Yyrkoon should be allowed to say what they please. It is part of his philosophy. I can barely understand it, but it seems integral to his whole belief. If he destroys Yyrkoon, he destroys the basis on which his logic works. That at any rate, Dragon Master, is what he has tried to explain to me.'

Dyvim Tvar sighed and he frowned. Though unable to understand Elric, he was afraid that he could sometimes sympathise with Yyrkoon's viewpoint. At least Yyrkoon's motives and arguments were relatively straightforward. He knew Elric's character too well, however, to believe that Elric acted from weakness or lassitude. The paradox was that Elric tolerated Yyrkoon's treachery because he was strong, because he had the power to destroy Yyrkoon whenever he cared. And Yyrkoon's own character was such that he must constantly be testing that strength of Elric's, for he knew instinctively that if Elric did weaken and order him slain, then he would have won. It was a complicated situation and Dyvim Tvar dearly wished that he was not embroiled in it. But his loyalty to the royal line of Melnibone was strong and his personal loyalty to Elric was great. He considered the idea of having Yyrkoon secretly assassinated, but he knew that such a plan would almost certainly come to nothing. Yyrkoon was a sorcerer of immense power and doubtless would be forewarned of any attempt on his life.

'Princess Cymoril,' said Dyvim Tvar, 'I can only pray that your brother swallows so much of his rage that it eventually poisons him.'

'I will join you in that prayer, Lord of the Dragon Caves.'

Together, they left the hall.

3

Riding Through the Morning:
A Moment of Tranquillity

THE LIGHT OF the early morning touched the tall towers of Imrryr and made them scintillate. Each tower was of a different hue; there were a thousand soft colours. There were rose pinks and pollen yellows, there were purples and pale greens, mauves and browns and oranges, hazy blues, whites and powdery golds, all lovely in the sunlight. Two riders left the Dreaming City behind them and rode away from the walls, over the green turf towards a pine forest where, among the shadowy trunks, a little of the
night seemed to remain. Squirrels were stirring and foxes crept homeward; birds were singing and forest flowers opened their petals and filled the air with delicate scent. A few insects wandered sluggishly aloft. The contrast between life in the nearby city and this lazy rusticity was very great and seemed to mirror some of the contrasts existing in the mind of at least one of the riders who now dismounted and led his horse, walking knee-deep through a mass of blue flowers. The other rider, a girl, brought her own horse to a halt but did not dismount. Instead, she leaned casually on her: high Melnibonean pommel and smiled at the man, her lover.

'Elric? Would you stop so near to Imryr?'

He smiled back at her, over his shoulder. 'For the moment. Our flight was hasty. I would collect my thoughts before we ride on.'

'How did you sleep last night?'

'Well enough, Cymoril, though I must have dreamed without knowing it, for there were--there were little intimations in my head when I awoke. But then, the meeting with Yyrkoon was not pleasant...'

'Do you think he plots to use sorcery against you?'

Elric shrugged. 'I would know if he brought a large sorcery against me. And he knows my power, I doubt if he would dare employ wizardry.'

'He has reason to believe you might not use your power. He has worried at your personality for so long--is there not a danger he will begin to worry at your skills? Testing your sorcery as he has tested your patience?'

Elric frowned. 'Yes, I suppose there is that danger. But not yet, I should have thought.'

'He will not be happy until you are destroyed, Elric.'

'Or is destroyed himself, Cymoril.' Elric stooped and picked one of the flowers. He smiled. 'Your brother is inclined to absolutes, is he not? How the weak hate weakness.'

Cymoril took his meaning. She dismounted and came towards him. Her thin gown matched, almost perfectly, the color of the flowers through which she moved. He handed her the flower and she accepted it, touching its petals with her perfect lips. 'And how the strong hate strength, my love. Yyrkoon is my kin and yet I give you this advice--use your strength against him.'

'I could not slay him. I have not the right.' Elric's face fell into familiar, brooding lines.

'You could exile him.'

'Is not exile the same as death to a Melnibonean?'

'You, yourself, have talked of travelling in the lands of the Young Kingdoms.'

Elric laughed somewhat bitterly. 'But perhaps I am not a true Melnibonean. Yyrkoon has said as much--and others echo his thoughts.'

'He hates you because you are contemplative. Your father was contemplative and no one denied that he was a fitting emperor.'

'My father chose not to put the results of his contemplation into his personal actions. He ruled as an emperor should. Yyrkoon, I must admit, would also rule as an emperor should. He, too, has the opportunity to make Melnibone great again. If he were emperor, he would embark on a campaign of conquest to restore our trade to its former volume, to extend our power across the earth. And that is what the majority of our folk would wish. Is it my right to deny that wish?'

'It is your right to do what you think, for you are the emperor. All who are loyal to you think as I do.'

Perhaps their loyalty is misguided. Perhaps Yyrkoon is right and I will betray that loyalty, bring doom to the Dragon Isle?' His moody, crimson eyes looked directly into hers. 'Perhaps I should have died as I left my mother's womb. Then Yyrkoon would have become emperor. Has Fate been thwarted?'

'Fate is never thwarted. What has happened has happened because Fate willed it thus--if, indeed, there is such a thing as Fate and if men's actions are not merely a response to other men's actions.'

Elric drew a deep breath and offered her an expression tinged with irony. 'Your logic leads you close to heresy, Cymoril, if we are to believe the traditions of Melnibone. Perhaps it would be better if
you forgot your friendship with me.'
   She laughed. 'You begin to sound like my brother. Are you testing my love for you, my lord?'
   He began to remount his horse. 'No, Cymoril, but I would advise you to test your love yourself, for I
   sense there is tragedy implicit in our love.'
   As she swung herself back into her saddle she smiled and shook her head. 'You see doom in all
   things, Can you not accept the good gifts granted you? They are few enough, my lord.'
   'Aye. I'll agree with that.'
   They turned in their saddles, hearing hoofbeats behind them. Some distance away they saw a
   company of yellow-clad horsemen riding about in confusion. It was their guard, which they had left
   behind, wishing to ride alone.
   'Come!' cried Elric. 'Through the woods and over yonder hill and they'll never find us!'
   They spurred their steeds through the sun-speared wood and up the steep sides of the hill beyond,
   racing down the other side and away across a plain where noidel bushes grew, their lush, poison fruit
   glimmering a purplish blue, a night-colour which even the light of day could not disperse. There were
   many such peculiar berries and herbs on Melnibone and it was to some of them that Elric owed his life.
   Others were used for sorcerous potions and had been sown generations before by Elric's ancestors. Now
   few Melniboneans left Imrryr even to collect these harvests. Only slaves visited the greater part of the
   island, seeking the roots and the shrubs which made men dream monstrous and magnificent dreams, for
   it was in their dreams that the nobles of Melnibone found most of their pleasures; they had ever been a
   moody, inward-looking race and it was for this quality that Imrryr had come to be named the Dreaming
   City. There, even the meanest slaves chewed berries to bring them oblivion and thus were easily
   controlled, for they came to depend on their dreams. Only Elric himself refused such drugs, perhaps
   because he required so many others simply to ensure his remaining alive.
   The yellow-clad guards were lost behind them and once across the plain where the noidel bushes
   grew they slowed their flight and came at length to cliffs and then the sea.
   The sea shone brightly and languidly washed the white beaches below the cliffs. Seabirds wheeled
   in the clear sky and their cries were distant, serving only to emphasise the sense of peace which both
   Elric and Cymoril now had. In silence the lovers guided their horses down steep paths to the shore and
   there they tethered the steeds and began to walk across the sand, their hair--his white, hers jet black--
   waving in the wind which blew from the east.
   They found a great, dry cave which caught the sounds the sea made and replied in a whispering
   echo. They removed their silken garments and made love tenderly in the shadows of the cave. They lay
   in each other's arms as the day warmed and the wind dropped. Then they went to bathe in the waters,
   filling the empty sky with their laughter.
   When they were dry and were dressing themselves they noticed a darkening of the horizon and Elric
   said: 'We shall be wet again before we return to Imrryr. No matter how fast we ride, the storm will catch
   us.'
   Perhaps we should remain in the cave until it is past?' she suggested, coming close and holding her
   soft body against him.
   'No,' he said. 'I must return soon, for there are potions in Imrryr I must take if my body is to retain
   its strength. An hour or two longer and I shall begin to weaken. You have seen me weak before,
   Cymoril.'
   She stroked his face and her eyes were sympathetic. 'Aye. I've seen you weak before, Elric. Come,
   let's find the horses.'
   By the time they reached the horses the sky was grey overhead and full of boiling blackness not far
   away in the east. They heard the grumble of thunder and the crash of lightning. The sea was threshing as
   if infected by the sky's hysteria. The horses snorted and pawed at the sand, anxious to return. Even as
Elric and Cymoril climbed into their saddles large spots of rain began to fall on their heads and spread over their cloaks.

Then, suddenly, they were riding at full tilt back to Imrryr while the lightning flashed around them and the thunder roared like a furious giant, like some great old Lord of Chaos attempting to break through, unbidden, into the Realm of Earth.

Cymoril glanced at Elric's pale face, illuminated for a moment by a flash of sky-fire, and she felt a chill come upon her then and the chill had nothing to do with the wind or the rain, for it seemed to her in that second that the gentle scholar she loved had been transformed by the elements into a hell-driven demon, into a monster with barely a semblance of humanity. His crimson eyes had flared from the whiteness of his skull like the very flames of the Higher Hell; his hair had been whipped upward so that it had become the crest of a sinister warhelm and, by a trick of the stormlight, his mouth had seemed twisted in a mixture of rage and agony.

And suddenly Cymoril knew.

She knew, profoundly, that their morning's ride was the last moment of peace the two of them would ever experience again. The storm was a sign from the gods themselves--a warning of storms to come.

She looked again at her lover. Elric was laughing. He had turned his face upward so that the warm rain fell upon it, so that the water splashed into his open mouth. The laughter was the easy, unsophisticated laughter of a happy child.

Cymoril tried to laugh back, but then she had to turn her face away so that he should not see it. For Cymoril had begun to weep.

She was weeping still when Imrryr came in sight a black and grotesque silhouette against a line of brightness which was the as yet untainted western horizon.

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4

Prisoners:
Their Secrets Are Taken from Them

THE MEN IN yellow armour saw Elric and Cymoril as the two approached the smallest of the eastern gates.

"They have found us at last," smiled Elric through the rain, "but somewhat belatedly, eh, Cymoril?"

Cymoril, still embattled with her sense of doom, merely nodded and tried to smile in reply.

Elric took this as an expression of disappointment, nothing more, and called to his guards: "Ho, men! Soon we shall all be dry again!"

But the captain of the guard rode up urgently, crying: "My lord emperor is needed at Monshanjik Tower where spies are held."

"Spies?"

"Aye, my lord." The man's face was pale. Water cascaded from his helm and darkened his thin cloak. His horse was hard to control and kept sidestepping through pools of water, which had gathered wherever the road was in disrepair. 'Caught in the maze this morning. Southern barbarians, by their chequered dress. We are holding them until the emperor himself can question them.'

Elric waved his hand. 'Then lead on, captain. Let's see the brave fools who dare Melnibone's sea-maze.'

The Tower of Monshanjik had been named for the wizard-architect who had designed the sea-maze millennia before. The maze was the only means of reaching the great harbour of Imrryr and its secrets had been carefully guarded, for it was their greatest protection against sudden attack. The maze was complicated and pilots had to be specially trained to steer ships through it. Before the maze had been
built, the harbour had been a kind of ‘inland lagoon, fed by the sea which swept in through a system of
natural caverns in the towering cliff which rose between lagoon and ocean. There were five separate
routes through the sea-maze and any individual pilot knew but one. In the outer wall of the cliff there
were five entrances. Here Young Kingdom ships waited until a pilot came aboard. Then one of the gates
to one of the entrances would be lifted, all aboard the ship would be blindfolded and sent below save for
the oar-master and the steersman who would also be masked in heavy steel helms so that they could see
nothing, do nothing but obey the complicated instructions of the pilot. And if a Young Kingdom ship
should fail to obey any of those instructions and should crush itself against the rock walls, well
Melnibone did not mourn for it and any survivors from the crew would be taken as slaves. All who
sought to trade with the Dreaming City understood the risks, but scores of merchants came every month
to dare the dangers of the maze and trade their own poor goods for the splendid riches of Melnibone.

The Tower of Monshanjik stood overlooking the harbour and the massive mole which jutted out
into the middle of the lagoon. It was a sea-green tower and was squat compared with most of those in
Imrryr, though still a beautiful and tapering construction, with wide windows so that the whole of the
harbour could be seen from it. From Monshanjik Tower most of the business of the harbour was done
and in its lower cellars were kept any prisoners who had broken any of the myriad rules governing the
functioning of the harbour. Leaving Cymoril to return to the palace with a guard, Elric entered the tower,
riding through the great archway at the base, scattering not a few merchants who were waiting for
permission to begin their bartering, for the whole of the ground floor was full of sailors, merchants and
Melnibonean officials engaged in the business of trade, though it was not here that the actual wares were
displayed. The great echoing babble of a thousand voices engaged in a thousand separate aspects of
bargaining slowly stilled as Elric and his guard rode arrogantly through to another dark arch at the far
end of the hall. This arch opened onto a ramp which sloped and curved down into the bowels of the
tower.

Down this ramp clattered the horsemen, passing slaves, servants and officials who stepped hastily
aside, bowing low as they recognised the emperor. Great brands illuminated the tunnel, guttering and
smoking and casting distorted shadows onto the smooth, obsidian walls. A chill was in the air now, and a
dampness, for water washed about the outer walls below the quays of Imrryr. And still the emperor rode
on and still the ramp struck lower through the glassy rock. And then a wave of heat rose to meet them
and shifting light could be seen ahead and they passed into a chamber that was full of smoke and the
scent of fear. From the low ceiling hung chains and from eight of the chains, swinging by their feet, hung
four people. Their clothes had been torn from them, but their bodies were clothed in blood from tiny
wounds, precise but severe, made by the artist who stood, scalpel in hand, surveying his handiwork.
The artist was tail and very thin, almost like a skeleton in his stained, white garments. His lips were
thin, his eyes were slits, his fingers were thin, his hair was thin and the scalpel he held was thin, too,
almost invisible save when it flashed in the light from the fire which erupted from a pit on the far side of
the cavern. The artist was named Doctor Jest and the art he practised was a performing art rather than a
creative one (though he could argue otherwise with some conviction): the art of drawing secrets from
those who kept them. Doctor Jest was the Chief Interrogator of Melnibone. He turned sinuously as Elric
entered, the scalpel held between the thin thumb and the thin forefinger of his fight hand; he stood poised
and expectant, almost like a dancer, and then bowed from the waist.

'My sweet emperor!' His voice was thin. It rushed from his thin throat as if bent on escape and one
was inclined to wonder if one had heard the words at all, so quickly had they come and gone.

'Doctor. Are these the southlanders caught this morning?'

'Indeed they are, my lord.' Another sinuous bow. 'For your pleasure.'

Coldly Elric inspected the prisoners. He felt no sympathy for them. They were spies. Their actions
had led them to this pass. They had known what would happen to them if caught. But one of them was a
boy and another a woman, it appeared, though they writhed so in their chains it was quite difficult to tell
at first. It seemed a shame. Then the woman snapped what remained of her teeth at him and hissed:
'Demon!' And Elric stepped back, saying:

'Have they informed you of what they were doing in our maze, doctor?'

'They still tantalise me with hints. They have a fine sense of drama. I appreciate that. They are here, I would say, to map a route through the maze which a force of raiders might then follow: But they have so far withheld the details. That is the game. We all understand how it must be played.'

'And when will they tell you, Doctor Jest?'

'Oh, very soon, my lord.'

'It would be best to know if we are to expect attackers. The sooner we know, the less time we shall lose dealing with the attack when it comes. Do you not agree, doctor?'

'I do, my lord.'

'Very well.' Elric was irritated by this break in his day. It had spoiled the pleasure of the ride, it had brought him face to face with his duties too quickly.

Doctor Jest returned to his charges and, reaching out with his free hand, expertly seized the genitals of one of the male prisoners. The scalpel flashed. There was a groan. Doctor Jest tossed something onto the fire. Elric sat in the chair prepared for him. He was bored rather than disgusted by the rituals attendant upon the gathering of information and the discordant screams, the clash of the chains, the thin whisperings of Doctor Jest, all served to ruin the feeling of well-being he had retained even as he reached the chamber. But it was one of his kingly duties to attend such rituals and attend this one he must until the information was presented to him and he could congratulate his Chief Interrogator and issue orders as to the means of dealing with any attack and even when that was over he must confer with admirals and with generals, probably through the rest of the night, choosing between arguments, deciding on the deposition of men and ships. With a poorly disguised yawn he leaned back and watched as Doctor Jest ran fingers and scalpel, tongue, tongs and pincers over the bodies. He was soon thinking of other matters: philosophical problems which he had still failed to resolve.

It was not that Elric was inhumane; it was that he was, still, a Melnibonean. He had been used to such sights since childhood. He could not have saved the prisoners, even if he had desired, without going against every tradition of the Dragon Isle. And in this case it was a simple matter of a threat being met by the best methods available. He had become used to shutting off those feelings which conflicted with his duties as emperor. If there had been any point in freeing the four who danced now at Doctor Jest's pleasure he would have freed them, but there was no point and the four would have been astonished if they had received any other treatment than this. Where moral decisions were concerned Elric was, by and large, practical. He would make his decision in the context of what action he could take. In this case, he could take no action. Such a reaction had become second nature to him. His desire was not to reform Melnibone but to reform himself, not to initiate action but to know the best way of responding to the actions of others. Here, the decision was easy to make. A spy was an aggressor. One defended oneself against aggressors in the best possible way. The methods employed by Doctor Jest were the best methods.

'My lord?'

Absently, Elric looked up.

'We have the information now, my lord.' Doctor Jest's thin voice whispered across the chamber. Two sets of chains were now empty and slaves were gathering things up from the floor and flinging them on the fire. The two remaining shapeless lumps reminded Elric of meat carefully prepared by a chef.

One of the lumps still quivered a little, but the other was still.

Doctor Jest slid his instruments into a thin case he carried in a pouch at his belt. His white garments were almost completely covered in stains.

'It seems there have been other spies before these,' Doctor Jest told his master. 'These came merely to confirm the route. If they do not return in time, the barbarians will still sail.'

'But surely they will know that we expect them?' Elric said.

'Probably not, my lord. Rumours have been spread amongst the Young Kingdom merchants and
sailors that four spies were seen in the maze and were speared--slain whilst trying to escape."
'I see.' Elric frowned. 'Then our best plan will be to lay a trap for the raiders.'
'Aye, my lord.'
'You know the route they have chosen?'
'Aye, my lord.'
Elric turned to one of his guards. 'Have messages sent to all our generals and admirals. What's the hour?'
'The hour of sunset is just past, my liege.'
'Tell them to assemble before the Ruby Throne at two hours past sunset.'
Wearily, Elric rose. 'You have done well, as usual, Doctor Jest.'
The thin artist bowed low, seeming to fold himself in two. A thin and somewhat unctuous sigh was his reply.

5

A Battle: The King Proves His War-Skill

Yyrkoon was the first to arrive, all clad in martial finery, accompanied by two massive guards, each holding one of the prince's ornate war-banners.
'My emperor!' Yyrkoon's shout was proud and disdainful. 'Would you let me command the warriors? It will relieve you of that care when, doubtless, you have many other concerns with which to occupy your time.'
Elric replied impatiently: 'You are most thoughtful, Prince Yyrkoon, but fear not for me. I shall command the armies and the navies of Melnibone, for that is the duty of the emperor.'
Yyrkoon glowered and stepped to one side as Dyvim Tvar, Lord of the Dragon Caves, entered. He had no guard whatsoever with him and it seemed he had dressed hastily. He carried his helmet under his arm.
'My emperor--I bring news of the dragons...'
'I thank you, Dyvim Tvar, but wait until all my commanders are assembled and impart that news to them, too.'
Dyvim Tvar bowed and went to stand on the opposite side of the hall to that on which Prince Yyrkoon stood.
Gradually the warriors arrived until a score of great captains waited at the foot of the steps which led to the Ruby Throne where Elric sat. Elric himself still wore the clothes in which he had gone riding that morning. He had not had time to change and had until a little while before been consulting maps of the mazes--maps which only he could read and which, at normal times, were hidden by magical means from any who might attempt to find them.
'Southlanders would steal Imrryr's wealth and slay us all,' Elric began. 'They believe they have found a way through our sea-maze. A fleet of a hundred warships sails on Melnibone even now. Tomorrow it will wait below the horizon until dusk, then it will sail to the maze and enter. By midnight it expects to reach the harbour and to have taken the Dreaming City before dawn. Is that possible, I wonder?'
'No!' Many spoke the single word.
'No.' Elric smiled. 'But how shall we best enjoy this little war they offer us?'
Yyrkoon, as ever, was first to shout. 'Let us go to meet them now, with dragons and with battle-barges. Let us pursue them to their own land and take their war to them. Let us attack their nations and burn their cities! Let us conquer them and thus ensure our own security!'
Dyvim Tvar spoke up again:
'No dragons,' he said.
'What?' Yyrkoon whirled. 'What?'
'No dragons, prince. They will not be awakened. The dragons sleep in their caverns, exhausted by their last engagement on your behalf.'
'Mine?'
'You would use them in our conflict with the Vilmirian pirates. I told you that I would prefer to save them for a larger engagement. But you flew them against the pirates and you burned their little boats and now the dragons sleep.'
Yyrkoon glowered. He looked up at Elric. 'I did not expect...'
Elric raised his hand. 'We need not use our dragons until such a time as we really need them. This attack from the southlander fleet is nothing. But we will conserve our strength if we bide our time. Let them think we are unready. Let them enter the maze. Once the whole hundred are through, we close in, blocking off all routes in or out of the maze. Trapped, they will be crushed by us.'
Yyrkoon looked pettishly at his feet, evidently wishing he could think of some flaw in the plan.
Tall, old Admiral Magum Colim in his sea-green armour stepped forward and bowed. 'The golden battle-barges of Imrryr are ready to defend their city, my liege. It will take time, however, to manoeuvre them into position. It is doubtful if all will fit into the maze at once.'
'Then sail some of them out now and hide them around the coast, so that they can wait for any survivors that may escape our attack,' Elric instructed him.
'A useful plan, my liege.' Magum Colim bowed and sank back into the crowd of his peers.
The debate continued for some time and then they were ready and about to leave. But then Prince Yyrkoon bellowed once more:
'I repeat my offer to the emperor. His person is too valuable to risk in battle. My person--it is worthless. Let me command the warriors of both land and sea while the emperor may remain at the palace, untroubled by the battle, confident that it will be won and the southlanders trounced--perhaps there is a book he wishes to finish?'
Elric smiled. 'Again I thank you for your concern, Prince Yyrkoon. But an emperor must exercise his body as well as his mind. I will command the warriors tomorrow.'
When Elric arrived back at his apartments it was to discover that Tanglebones had already laid out his heavy, black wargear. Here was the armour which had served a hundred Melnibonean emperors; an armour which was forged by sorcery to give it a strength unequalled on the Realm of Earth, which could, so rumour went, even withstand the bite of the mythical runeblades, Stormbringer and Mournblade, which had been wielded by the wickedest of Melnibone's many wicked rulers before being seized by the Lords of the Higher Worlds and hidden forever in a realm where even those Lords might rarely venture.
The face of the tangled man was full of joy as he touched each piece of armour, each finely balanced weapon, with his long, gnarled fingers. His seamed face looked up to regard Elric's care-ravaged features. 'Oh, my lord! Oh, my king! Soon you will know the joy of the fight!'
'Aye, Tanglebones--and let us hope it will be a joy.'
'I taught you all the skills--the art of the sword and the poignard--the art of the bow--the art of the spear, both mounted and on foot. And you learned well, for all they say you are weak. Save one, there's no better swordsman in Melnibone.'
'Prince Yyrkoon could be better than me,' Elric said reflectively. 'Could he not?'
'I said "save one", my lord.'
'And Yyrkoon is that one. Well, one day perhaps we'll be able to test the matter. I'll bathe before I don all that metal.'
'Blest make speed, master. From what I hear, there is much to do.'
'And I'll sleep after I've bathed.' Elric smiled at his old friend's consternation. 'It will be better thus, for I cannot personally direct the barges into position. I am needed to command the fray--and that I will
do better when I've rested.'

'If you think it good, lord king, then it is good.'

'And you are astonished. You are too eager, Tanglebones, to get me into all that stuff and see me strut about in it as if I were Arioch himself...'

Tanglebones's hand flew to his mouth as if he had spoken the words, not his master, and he was trying to block them. His eyes widened.

Elric laughed. 'You think I speak bold heresies, eh? Well, I've spoken worse without any ill befalling me. On Melnibone, Tanglebones, the emperors control the demons, not the reverse.'

'So you say, my liege.'

'It is the truth.' Elric swept from the room, calling for his slaves. The war-fever filled him and he was jubilant.

Now he was in all his black gear: the massive breastplate, the padded jerkin, the long greaves, the mail gauntlets. At his side was a five-foot broadsword which, it was said, had belonged to a human hero called Aubec. Resting on the deck against the golden rail of the bridge was the great round warboard, his shield, bearing the sign of the swooping dragon. And a helm was on his head; a black helm, with a dragon's head craning over the peak, and dragon's wings flaring backward above it, and a dragon's tail curling down the back. All the helm was black, but within the helm there was a white shadow from which glared two crimson orbs, and from the sides of the helm strayed wisps of milk-white hair, almost like smoke escaping from a burning building. And, as the helm turned in what little light came from the lantern hanging at the base of the mainmast, the white shadow sharpened to reveal features--fine, handsome features--a straight nose, curved lips, up-slanting eyes. The face Of Emperor Elric of Melnibone peered into the gloom of the maze as he listened for the first sounds of the sea-raider's approach.

He stood on the high bridge of the great golden battle-barge which, like all its kind, resembled a floating ziggurat equipped with masts and sails and oars and catapults. The ship was called The Son of the Pyaray and it was the flagship of the fleet. The Grand Admiral Magum Colim stood beside Elric. Like Dyvim Tvar, the admiral was one of Elric's few close friends. He had known Elric all his life and had encouraged him to learn all he could concerning the running of fighting ships and fighting fleets. Privately Magum Colim might fear that Elric was too scholarly and introspective to rule Melnibone, but he accepted Elric's right to rule and was made angry and impatient by the talk of the likes of Yyrkoon. Prince Yyrkoon was also aboard the flagship, though at this moment he was below, inspecting the war-engines.

The Son of the Pyaray lay at anchor in a huge grotto, one of hundreds built into the walls of the maze when the maze itself was built, and designed for just this purpose--to hide a battle-barge. There was just enough height for the masts and enough width for the oars to move freely. Each of the golden battle-barges was equipped with banks of oars, each bank containing between twenty and thirty oars on either side. The banks were four, five or six decks high and, as in the case of The Son of the Pyaray, might have three independent steering systems, fore and aft. Being armoured all in gold, the ships were virtually indestructible, and, for all their massive size, they could move swiftly and manoeuvre delicately when occasion demanded. It was not the first time they had waited for their enemies in these grottoes. It would not be the last (though when next they waited it would be in greatly different circumstances).

The battle-barges of Melnibone were rarely seen on the open seas these days, but once they had sailed the oceans of the world like fearsome floating mountains of gold and they had brought terror whenever they were sighted. The fleet had been larger then, comprising hundreds of craft. Now there were less than forty ships. But forty would suffice. Now, in damp darkness, they awaited their enemies.

Listening to the hollow slap of the water against the sides of the ship, Elric wished that he had been able to conceive a better plan than this. He was sure that this one would work, but he regretted the waste of lives, both Melnibonean and barbarian. It would have been better if some way could have been
devised of frightening the barbarians away rather than trapping them in the sea-maze. The southlander fleet was not the first to have been attracted by Imrryr's fabulous wealth. The southlander crews were not the first to entertain the belief that the Melniboneans, because they never now ventured far from the Dreaming City, had become decadent and unable to defend their treasures. And so the southlanders must be destroyed in order to make the lesson clear. Melnibone was still strong. She was strong enough, in Yyrkoon's view, to resume her former dominance of the world--strong in sorcery if not in soldiery.

'Hist!' Admiral Magum Colim craned forward.

'Was that the sound of an oar?'

Elric nodded. 'I think so.'

Now they heard regular splashes, as of rows of oars dipping in and out of the water, and they heard the creak of timbers. The southlanders were corning. The Son of the Pyaray was the ship nearest to the entrance and it would be the first to move out, but only when the last of the southlanders' ships had passed them. Admiral Magum Colim bent and extinguished the lantern, then, quickly, quietly, he descended to inform his crew of the raiders' coming.

Not long before, Yyrkoon had used his sorcery to summon a peculiar mist, which hid the golden barges from view, but through which those on the Melnibonean ships could peer. Now Elric saw torches burning in the channel ahead as carefully the reavers negotiated the maze. Within the space of a few minutes ten of the galleys had passed the grotto. Admiral Magum Colim rejoined Elric on the bridge and now Prince Yyrkoon was with him. Yyrkoon, too, wore a dragon helm, though less magnificent than Elric's, for Elric was chief of the few surviving Dragon Princes of Melnibone. Yyrkoon was grinning through the gloom and his eyes gleamed in anticipation of the bloodletting to come. Elric wished that Prince Yyrkoon had chosen another ship than this, but it was Yyrkoon's right to be aboard the flagship and he could not deny it.

Now half the hundred vessels had gone past.

Yyrkoon's armour creaked as, impatiently, he waited, pacing the bridge, his gauntletted hand on the hilt of his broadsword. 'Soon' he kept saying to himself. 'Soon.'

And then their anchor was groaning upwards and their oars were plunging into the water as the last southland ship went by and they shot from the grotto into the channel ramming the enemy galley amidships and smashing it in two.

A great yell went up from the barbarian crew. Men were flung in all directions. Torches danced erratically on the remains of the deck as men tried to save themselves from slipping into the dark, chill waters of the channel. A few brave spears rattled against the sides of the Melnibonean flag-galley as it began to turn amongst the debris it had created. But Imrryrian archers returned the shots and the few survivors went down.

The sound of this swift conflict was the signal to the other battle-barges. In perfect order they came from both sides of the high rock walls and it must have seemed to the astonished barbarians that the great golden ships had actually emerged from solid stone--ghost ships filled with demons who rained spears, arrows and brands upon them. Now the whole of the twisting channel was confusion and a medley of war-shouts echoed and boomed and the clash of steel upon steel was like the savage hissing of some monstrous snake, and the raiding fleet itself resembled a snake which had been broken into a hundred pieces by the tall, implacable golden ships of Melnibone. These ships seemed almost serene as they moved against their enemies, their grappling irons flashing out to catch wooden decks and rails and draw the galleys nearer so that they might be destroyed.

But the southlanders were brave and they kept their heads after their initial astonishment. Three of their galleys headed directly for The Son of the Pyaray, recognising it as the flagship. Fire arrows sailed high and dropped down into the decks which were wooden and not protected by the golden armour, starting fires wherever they fell, or else bringing blazing death to the men they struck. Elric raised his shield above his head and two arrows struck it, bouncing, still flaring, to a lower deck. He leapt over the rail, following the arrows, jumping down to the widest and most exposed deck
where his warriors were grouping, ready to deal with the attacking galleys. Catapults thudded and balls of blue fire swished through the blackness, narrowly missing all three galleys. Another volley followed and one mass of flame struck the far galley's mast and then burst upon the deck, scattering huge flames wherever it touched. Grapples snaked out and seized the first galley, dragging it close and Elric was amongst the first to leap down onto the deck, rushing forward to where he saw the southland captain, dressed all in crude, chequered armour, a chequered surcoat over that, a big sword in both his huge hands, bellowing at his men to resist the Melnibonean dogs.

As Elric approached the bridge three barbarians armed with curved swords and small, oblong shields ran at him. Their faces were full of fear, but there was determination there as well, as if they knew they must die but planned to wreak as much destruction as they could before their souls were taken.

Shifting his war-board onto his arm, Elric took his own broadsword in both hands and Charged the sailors, knocking one off his feet with the lip of the-shield and smashing the collar-bone of another. The remaining barbarian skipped aside and thrust his curved sword at Elric's face. Elric barely escaped the thrust and the sharp edge of the sword grazed his cheek, bringing out a drop or two of blood. Elric swung the broadsword like a scythe and it bit deep into the barbarian's waist, almost cutting him in two. He struggled for a moment, unable to believe that he was dead but then, as Elric yanked the sword free, he closed his eyes and dropped. The man who had been struck by Elric's shield was staggering to his feet as Elric whirled, saw him, and smashed the broadsword into his skull. Now the way was clear to the bridge. Elric began to climb the ladder, noting that the captain had seen him and was waiting for him at the top.

Elric raised his shield to take the captain's first blow. Through all the noise he thought he heard the man shouting at him.

'Die, you white-faced demon! Die! You have no place in this earth any longer!'

Elric was almost diverted from defending himself by these words. They rang true to him. Perhaps he really had no place on the earth, perhaps that was why Melnibone was slowly collapsing, why fewer children were born every year, why the dragons themselves were no longer breeding. He let the captain strike another blow at the shield, then he reached under it and swung at the man's legs. But the captain had anticipated the move and jumped backwards. This, however, gave Elric time to run up the few remaining steps and stand on the deck, facing the captain.

The man's face was almost as pale as Elric's. He was sweating and he was panting and his eyes had misery in them as well as a wild fear.

'You should leave us alone,' Elric heard himself saying. 'We offer you no harm, barbarian. When did Melnibone last sail against the Young Kingdoms?'

'You offer us harm by your very presence, Whiteface. There is your sorcery. There are your customs. And there is your arrogance.'

'Is that why you came here? Was your attack motivated by disgust for us? Or would you help yourselves to our wealth? Admit it, captain--greed brought you to Melnibone.'

'At least greed is an honest quality, an understandable one. But you creatures are not human. Worse--you are not gods, though you behave as if you were. Your day is over and you must be wiped out, your city destroyed, your sorceries forgotten.'

Elric nodded. 'Perhaps you are right, captain.'

'I am right. Our holy men say so. Our seers predict your downfall. The Chaos Lords whom you serve will themselves bring about that downfall.'

'The Chaos Lords no longer have any interest in the affairs of Melnibone. They took away their power nearly a thousand years since.' Elric watched the captain carefully, judging the distance between them. 'Perhaps that is why our own power waned. Or perhaps we merely became tired of power.'

'Be that as it may,' the captain said, wiping his sweating brow, 'your time is over. You must be destroyed once and for all.' And then he groaned, for Elric's broadsword had come under his chequered breastplate and gone up through his stomach and into his lungs.
One knee bent, one leg stretched behind him, Elric began to withdraw the long sword, looking up into the barbarian's face which had now assumed an expression of reconciliation. 'That was unfair, Whiteface. We had barely begun to talk and you cut the conversation short. You are most skillful. May you writhe forever in the Higher Hell. Farewell.'

Elric hardly knew why, after the captain had fallen face down on the deck, he hacked twice at the neck until the head rolled off the body, rolled to the side of the bridge and was then kicked over the side so that it sank into the cold, deep water.

And then Yyrkoon came up behind Elric and he was still grinning.

'You fight fiercely and well, my lord emperor. That dead man was right.'

'Right?' Elric glared at his cousin. 'Right?'

'Aye—in his assessment of your prowess.' And, chuckling, Yyrkoon went to supervise his men who were finishing off the few remaining raiders.

Elric did not know why he had refused to hate Yyrkoon before. But now he did hate Yyrkoon. At that moment he would gladly have slain him. It was as if Yyrkoon had looked deeply into Elric's soul and expressed contempt for what he had seen there.

Suddenly Elric was overwhelmed by an angry misery and he wished with all his heart that he was not a Melnibonean, that he was not an emperor and that Yyrkoon had never been born.

6

Pursuit:
A Deliberate Treachery

LIKE HAUGHTY Leviathans the great golden battle-barges swam through the wreckage of the reaver fleet. A few ships burned and a few were still sinking, but most had sunk into the unplumbable depths of the channel. The burning ships sent strange shadows dancing against the dank walls of the sea-caverns, as if the ghosts of the slain offered a last salute before departing to the sea-depths where, it was said, a Chaos king still ruled, crewing his eerie fleets with the souls of all who died in conflict upon the oceans of the world. Or perhaps they went to a gentler doom, serving Straasha, Lord of the Water Elementals, who ruled the upper reaches of the sea.

But a few had escaped. Somehow the southland sailors had got past the massive battle-barges, sailed back through the channel and must even now have reached the open sea. This was reported to the flagship where Elric, Magum Colim and Prince Yyrkoon now stood together again on the bridge, surveying the destruction they had wreaked.

'Then we must pursue them and finish them,' said Yyrkoon. He was sweating and his dark face glistened; his eyes were alight with fever. 'We must follow them.'

Elric shrugged. He was weak. He had brought no extra drugs with him to replenish his strength. He wished to go back to Imrryr and rest. He was tired of bloodletting, tired of Yyrkoon and tired, most of all, of himself. The hatred he felt for his cousin was draining him still further—and he hated the hatred; that was the worst part. 'No,' he said. 'Let them go.'

'Let them go? Unpunished? Come now, my lord king! That is not our way!' Prince Yyrkoon turned to the aging admiral. 'Is that our way, Admiral Magum Colim?'

Magum Colim shrugged. He, too, was tired, but privately he agreed with Prince Yyrkoon. An enemy of Melnibone should be punished for daring even to think of attacking the Dreaming City. Yet he said: 'The emperor must decide.'

'Let them go,' said Elric again. He leant heavily against the rail. 'Let them carry the news back to their own barbarian land. Let them say how the Dragon Princes defeated them. The news will spread. I believe we shall not be troubled by raiders again for some time.'
'The Young Kingdoms are full of fools,' Yyrkoon replied. 'They will not believe the news. There will always be raiders. The best way to warn them will be to make sure that not one southlander remains alive or uncaptured.'

Elric drew a deep breath and tried to fight the faintness which threatened to overwhelm him. 'Prince Yyrkoon, you are trying my patience...'

'But, my emperor, I think only of the good of Melnibone. Surely you do not want your people to say that you are weak, that you fear a fight with but five southland galleys?'

This time Elric's anger brought him strength. 'Who will say that Elric is weak? Will it be you, Yyrkoon?' He knew that his next statement was senseless, but there was nothing he could do to stop it. 'Very well, let us pursue these poor little boats and sink them. And let us make haste. I am weary of it all.'

There was a mysterious light in Yyrkoon's eyes as he turned away to relay the orders.

The sky was turning from black to grey when the Melnibonean fleet reached the open sea and turned its prows south towards the Boiling Sea and the southern continent beyond. The barbarian ships would not sail through the Boiling Sea—no mortal ship could do that, it was said—but would sail around it. Not that the barbarian ships would even reach the edges of the Boiling Sea, for the huge battle-barges were fast-sailing vessels. The slaves who pulled the oars were full of a drug which increased their speed and their strength for a score or so of hours, before it slew them. And now the sails billowed out, catching the breeze. Golden mountains, skimming rapidly over the sea, these ships; their method of construction was a secret lost even to the Melniboneans (who had forgotten so much of their lore). It was easy to imagine how men of the Young Kingdoms hated Melnibone and its inventions, for it did seem that the battle-barges belonged to an older, alien age, as they bore down upon the fleeing galleys now sighted on the horizon.

The Son of the Pyaray was in the lead of the rest of the fleet and was priming its catapults well before any of its fellows had seen the enemy. Perspiring slaves gingerly manhandled the viscous stuff of the fireballs, getting them into the bronze cups of the catapults by means of long, spoon-ended tongs. It flickered in the pre-dawn gloom.

Now slaves climbed the steps to the bridge and brought wine and food on platinum platters for the three Dragon Princes who had remained there since the pursuit had begun. Elric could not summon the strength to eat, but he seized a tall cup of yellow wine and drained it. The stuff was strong and revived him a trifle. He had another cup poured and drank that as swiftly as the other. He peered ahead. It was almost dawn. There was a line of purple light on the horizon. 'At the first sign of the sun's disc,' Elric said, 'let loose the fireballs.'

'I will give the order,' said Magum Colim, wiping his lips and putting down the meat bone on which he had been chewing. He left the bridge. Elric heard his feet striking the steps heavily. All at once the albino felt surrounded by enemies. There had been something strange in Magum Colim's manner during the argument with Prince Yyrkoon. Elric tried to shake off such foolish thoughts. But the weariness, the self-doubt, the open mockery of his cousin, all succeeded in increasing the feeling that he was alone and without friends in the world. Even Cymoril and Dyvim Tvar were, finally, Melniboneans and could not understand the peculiar concerns which moved him and dictated his actions. Perhaps it would be wise to renounce everything Melnibonean and wander the world as an anonymous soldier of fortune, serving whoever needed his aid?

The dull red semicircle of the sun showed above the black line of the distant water. There came a series of booming sounds from the forward decks of the flagship as the catapults released their fiery shot; there was a whistling scream, fading away, and it seemed that a dozen meteors leapt through the sky, hurtling towards the five galleys which were now little more than thirty ship-lengths away.

Elric saw two galleys flare, but the remaining three began to sail a zig-zag course and avoided the fireballs which landed on the water and burned fitfully for a while before sinking (still burning) into the
depths.

More fireballs were prepared and Elric heard Yyrkoon shout from the other side of the bridge, ordering the slaves to greater exertions. Then the fleeing vessels changed their tactics, evidently realising that they could not save themselves for long, and, spreading out, sailed towards The Son of the Pyaray, just as the other ships had done in the sea-maze. It was not merely their courage that Elric admired but their manoeuvring skill and the speed at which they had arrived at this logical, if hopeless, decision.

The sun was behind the southland ships as they turned. Three brave silhouettes drew nearer to the Melnibonean flagship as scarlet stained the sea, as if in anticipation of the bloodletting to come.

Another volley of fireballs was flung from the flagship and the leading galley tried to tack round and avoid it, but two of the fiery globes spattered directly on its deck and soon the whole ship was alive with flame. Burning men leapt into the water. Burning men shot arrows at the flagship. Burning men fell slowly from their Positions in the rigging. The burning men died, but the burning ship came on; someone had lashed the steering arm and directed the galley at The Son of the Pyaray. It crashed into the golden side of the battle- barge and some of the fire splashed on the deck where the main catapults were in position. A cauldron containing the fire-stuff caught and immediately men were running from all quarters of the ship to try to douse the flame. Elric grinned as he saw what the barbarians had done. Perhaps that ship had deliberately allowed itself to be fired. Now the majority of the flagship's complement was engaged with putting out the blaze--while the southland ships drew alongside, threw up their own grapples, and began to board.

'Ware boarders!' Elric shouted, long after he might have warned his crew. 'Barbarians attack.'

He saw Yyrkoon whirl round, see the situation, and rush down the steps from the bridge. 'You stay there, my lord king,' he flung at Elric as he disappeared. 'You are plainly too weary to fight.'

And Elric summoned all that was left of his strength and stumbled after his cousin, to help in the defense of the ship.

The barbarians were not fighting for their lives--they knew those to be taken already. They were fighting for their pride. They wanted to take one Melnibonean ship down with them and that ship must be the flagship itself. It was hard to be contemptuous of such men. They knew that even if they took the flagship the other ships of the golden fleet would soon overwhelm them.

But the other ships were still some distance away. Many lives would be lost before they reached the flagship.

On the lowest deck Elric found himself facing a pair of tall barbarians, each armed with a curved blade and a small, oblong shield. He lunged forward, but his armour seemed to drag at his limbs, his own shield and sword were so heavy that he could barely lift them. Two swords struck his helm, almost simultaneously. He lunged back and caught a man in the arm, rammed the other with his shield. A curved blade clanged on his backplate and he all but lost his footing. There was choking smoke everywhere, and heat, and the tumult of battle. Desperately he swung about him and felt his broadsword bite deep into flesh. One of his opponents fell, gurgling, with blood spouting from his mouth and nose. The other lunged. Elric stepped backwards, fell over the corpse of the man he had slain, and went down, his broadsword held out before him in one hand. And as the triumphant barbarian leapt forward to finish the albino, Elric caught him on the point of the broadsword, running him through. The dead man fell towards Elric who did not feel the impact, for he had already fainted. Not for the first time had his deficient blood, no longer enriched by drugs, betrayed him.

He tasted salt and thought at first it was blood. But it was sea water. A wave had risen over the deck and momentarily revived him. He struggled to crawl from under the dead man and then he heard a voice he recognised. He twisted his head and looked up.

Prince Yyrkoon stood there. He was grinning. He was full of glee at Elric's plight. Black, oily smoke still drifted everywhere, but the sounds of the fight had died.

'Are--are we victorious, cousin?' Elric spoke painfully.
'Aye. The barbarians are all dead now. We are about to sail for Imrryr.'

Elric was relieved. He would begin to die soon if he could not get to his store of potions.

His relief must have been evident, for Yyrkoon laughed. 'It is as well the battle did not last longer, my lord, or we should have been without our leader.'

'Help me up, cousin.' Elric hated to ask Prince Yyrkoon any favour, but he had no choice. He stretched out his empty hand. 'I am fit enough to inspect the ship.'

Yyrkoon came forward as if to take the hand, but then he hesitated, still grinning. 'But, my lord, I disagree. You will be dead by the time this ship turns eastward again.'

'Nonsense. Even without the drugs I can live for a considerable time, though movement is difficult. Help me up, Yyrkoon, I command you.'

'You cannot command me, Elric. I am emperor now, you see.'

'Be wary, cousin. I can overlook such treachery, but others will not. I shall be forced to...'

Yyrkoon swung his legs over Elric's body and went to the rail. Here were bolts which fixed one section of the rail in place when it was not used for the gangplank. Yyrkoon slowly released the bolts and kicked the section of rail into the water.

Now Elric's efforts to free himself became more desperate. But he could hardly move at all.

Yyrkoon, on the other hand, seemed possessed of unnatural strength. He bent and easily flung the corpse away from Elric.

'Yyrkoon,' said Elric, 'this is unwise of you.'

'I was never a cautious man, cousin, as well as you know.' Yyrkoon placed a booted foot against Elric's ribs and began to shove. Elric slid towards the gap in the rail. He could see the black sea heaving below. 'Farewell, Elric. Now a true Melnibonean shall sit upon the Ruby Throne. And, who knows, might even make Cymoril his queen? It has not been unheard of...'

And Elric felt himself rolling, felt himself fall, felt himself strike the water, felt his armour pulling him below the surface. And Yyrkoon's last words drummed in Elric's ears like the persistent booming of the waves against the sides of the golden battle-barge.

BOOK TWO

Less certain of himself or his destiny than ever, the albino king must perforce bring his powers of sorcery into play, conscious that he has embarked upon a course of action by no means at one with his original conception of the way he wished to live his life. And now matters must be settled. He must begin to rule. He must become cruel. But even in this he will find himself thwarted.

The Caverns of the Sea King

ELRIC SANK RAPIDLY, desperately trying to keep the last of his breath in his body. He had no strength to swim and the weight of the armour denied any hope of his rising to the surface and being sighted by Magum Colim or one of the others still loyal to him.

The roaring in his ears gradually faded to a whisper so that it sounded as if little voices were speaking to him, the voices of the water elementals with whom, in his youth, he had had a kind of friendship. And the pain in his lungs faded; the red mist cleared from his eyes and he thought he saw the face of his father, Sadric, of Cymoril and, fleetingly, of Yyrkoon. Stupid Yyrkoon: for all that he prided himself that he was a Melnibonean, he lacked the Melnibonean subtlety. He was as brutal and direct as
some of the Young Kingdom barbarians he so much despised. And now Elric began to feel almost grateful to his cousin. His life was over. The conflicts which tore his mind would no longer trouble him. His fears, his torments, his loves and his hatreds all lay in the past and only oblivion lay before him. As the last of his breath left his body, he gave himself wholly to the sea; to Straasha, Lord of all the Water Elementals, once the comrade of the Melnibonean folk. And as he did this he remembered the old spell which his ancestors had used to summon Straasha. The spell came unbidden into his dying brain.

Waters of the sea, thou gave us birth  
And were our milk and mother both  
In days when skies were overcast  
You who were first shall be the last.

Sea-rulers, fathers of our blood,  
Thine aid is sought, thine aid is sought,  
Your salt is blood, our blood your salt,  
Your blood the blood of Man.

Straasha, eternal king, eternal sea  
Thine aid is sought by me;  
For enemies of thine and mine  
Seek to defeat our destiny, and drain away our sea.

Either the words had an old, symbolic meaning or they referred to some incident in Melnibonean history which even Elric had not read about. The words meant very little to him and yet they continued to repeat themselves as his body sank deeper and deeper into the green waters. Even when blackness overwhelmed him and his lungs filled with water, the words continued to whisper through the corridors of his brain. It was strange that he should be dead and still hear the incantation.

It seemed a long while later that his eyes opened and revealed swirling water and, through it, huge, indistinct figures gliding towards him. Death, it appeared, took a long time to come and, while he died, he dreamed. The leading figure had a turquoise beard and hair, pale green skin that seemed made of the sea itself and, when he spoke, a voice that was like a rushing tide. He smiled at Elric.

Straasha answers thy summons, mortal. Our destinies are bound together. How may I aid thee, and, in aiding thee, aid myself?

Elric's mouth was filled with water and yet he still seemed capable of speech (thus proving he dreamed).

He said:

'King Straasha. The paintings in the Tower of D'a'rputna--in the library. When I was a boy I saw them, King Straasha.'

The sea-king stretched out his sea-green hands. 'Aye. You sent the summons. You need our aid. We honour our ancient pact with your folk.'

'No. I did not mean to summon you. The summons came unbidden to my dying mind. I am happy to drown, King Straasha.'

'That cannot be. If your mind summoned us it means you wish to live. We will aid you.' King Straasha's beard streamed in the tide and his deep, green eyes were gentle, almost tender, as they regarded the albino.

Elric closed his own eyes again. 'I dream,' he said. 'I deceive myself with fantasies of hope.' He felt the water in his lungs and he knew he no longer breathed. It stood to reason, therefore, that he was dead. 'But if you were real, old friend, and you wished to aid me, you would return me to Melnibone so that I
might deal with the usurper, Yyrkoon, and save Cymoril, before it is too late. That is my only regret--the torment which Cymoril will suffer if her brother becomes Emperor of Melnibone.'

'Is that all you ask of the water elementals?' King Straasha seemed almost disappointed.
'I do not even ask that of you. I only voice what I would have wished, had this been reality and I was speaking, which I know is impossible. Now I shall die.'

'That cannot be, Lord Elric, for our destinies are truly intertwined and I know that it is not yet your destiny to perish. Therefore I will aid you as you have suggested.'

Elric was surprised at the sharpness of detail of this fantasy. He said to himself. 'What a cruel torment I subject myself to. Now I must set about admitting my death...'

'You cannot die. Not yet.'

Now it was as if the sea-king's gentle hands had picked him up and bore him through twisting corridors of a delicate coral pink texture, slightly shadowed, no longer in water. And Elric felt the water vanish from his lungs and stomach and he breathed. Could it be that he had actually been brought to the legendary plane of the elemental folk--a plane which intersected that of the earth and in which they dwelled, for the most part?

In a huge, circular cavern, which shone with pink and blue mother-of-pearl, they came to rest at last. The sea-king laid Elric down upon the floor of the cavern, which seemed to be covered with fine, white sand which was yet not sand for it yielded and then sprang back when he moved.

When King Straasha moved, it was with a sound like the tide drawing itself back over shingle. The sea-king crossed the white sand, walking towards a large throne of milky jade. He seated himself upon this throne and placed his green head on his green fist, regarding Elric with puzzled, yet compassionate eyes.

Elric was still physically weak, but he could breathe. It was as if the sea water had filled him and then cleansed him when it was driven out. He felt clear-headed. And now he was much less sure that he dreamed.

'I still find it hard to know why you saved me, King Straasha,' he murmured from where he lay on the sand.

'The rune. We heard it on this plane and we came. That is all.'

'Aye. But there is more to sorcery-working than that. There are chants, symbols, rituals of all sorts. Previously that has always been true."

'Perhaps the rituals take the place of urgent need of the kind which sent out your summons to us. Though you say you wished to die, it was evident you did not really want to die or the summoning would not have been so clear and have reached us so swiftly. Forget all this now. When you have rested, we shall do what you have requested of us.'

Painfully, Elric raised himself into a sitting position. 'You spoke earlier of "intertwined destinies". Do you, then, know something of my destiny?'

'A little, I think. Our world grows old. Once the elementals were powerful on your plane and the people of Melnibone all shared that power. But now our power wanes, as does yours. Something is changing. There are intimations that the Lords of the Higher Worlds are again taking an interest in your world. Perhaps they fear that the folk of the Young Kingdoms have forgotten them. Perhaps the folk of the Young Kingdoms threaten to bring in a new age, where gods and beings such as myself no longer shall have a place. I suspect there is a certain unease upon the planes of the Higher Worlds.'

'You know no more?'

King Straasha raised his head and looked directly into Elric's eyes. 'There is no more I can tell you, son of my old friends, save that you would be happier if you gave yourself up entirely to your destiny when you understand it.'

Elric sighed. 'I think I know of what you speak, King Straasha. I shall try to follow your advice.'

'And now that you have rested, it is time to return.'

The sea-king rose from his throne of milky jade and flowed towards Elric, lifting him up in strong,
green arms.

'We shall meet again before your life ends, Elric. I hope that I shall be able to aid you once more. And remember that our brothers of the air and of fire will try to aid you also. And remember the beasts—they, too, can be of service to you. There is no need to suspect their help. But beware of gods, Elric. Beware of the Lords of the Higher Worlds and remember that their aid and their gifts must always be paid for.'

These were the last words Elric heard the sea-king speak before they rushed again through the sinuous tunnels of this other plane, moving at such a speed that Elric could distinguish no details and, at times, did not know whether they remained in King Straasha's kingdom or had returned to the depths of his own world's sea.

2

A New Emperor and an Emperor Renewed

Strange clouds filled the sky and the sun hung heavy and huge and red behind them and the ocean was black as the golden galleys swept homeward before their battered flagship The Son of the Pyaray which moved slowly with dead slaves at her oars and her tattered sails limp at their masts and smoke-begrimed men on her decks and a new emperor upon her war-wrecked bridge. The new emperor was the only jubilant man in the fleet and he was jubilant indeed. It was his banner now, not Elric's, which took pride of place on the flagmast, for he had lost no time in proclaiming Elric slain and himself ruler of Melnibone.

To Yyrkoon, the peculiar sky was an omen of change, of a return to the old ways and the old power of the Dragon Isle. When he issued orders, his voice was a veritable croon of pleasure, and Admiral Magum Colim, who had ever been wary of Elric but who now had to obey Yyrkoon's orders, wondered if, perhaps, it would not have been preferable to have dealt with Yyrkoon in the manner in which (he suspected) Yyrkoon had dealt with Elric.

Dyvim Tvar leaned on the rail of his own ship, Terhali's Particular Satisfaction, and he also paid attention to the sky, though he saw omens of doom, for he mourned for Elric and considered how he might take vengeance on Prince Yyrkoon; should it emerge that Yyrkoon had murdered his cousin for possession of the Ruby Throne.

Melnibone appeared on the horizon, a brooding silhouette of crags, a dark monster squatting in the sea, calling her own back to the heated pleasures of her womb, the Dreaming City of Imrryr. The great cliffs loomed, the central gate to the sea-maze opened, water slapped and gasped as the golden prows disturbed it and the golden ships were swallowed into the murky dankness of the tunnels where bits of wreckage still floated from the previous night's encounter; where white, bloated corpses could still be seen when the brandlight touch them. The prows nosed arrogantly through the remains of their prey, but there was no joy aboard the golden battle-barges, for they brought news of their old emperor's death in battle (Yyrkoon had told them what had happened). Next night and for seven nights in all the Wild Dance of Melnibone would fill the streets. Potions and petty spells would ensure that no one slept, for sleep was forbidden to any Melnibonean, old or young, while a dead emperor was mourned. Naked, the Dragon Princes would prowl the city, taking any young woman they found and filling her with their seed for it was traditional that if an emperor died then the nobles of Melnibone must create as many children of aristocratic blood as was possible. Music-slaves would howl from the top of every tower. Other slaves would be slain and some eaten. It was a dreadful dance, the Dance of Misery, and it took as many lives as it created. A tower would be pulled down and a new one erected during those seven days and the tower would be called for Elric VIII, the Albino Emperor, slain upon the sea, defending Melnibone
against the southland pirates.

Slain upon the sea and his body taken by the waves. That was not a good portent, for it meant that Elric had gone to serve Pyaray, the Tentacled Whisperer of Impossible Secrets, the Chaos Lord who commanded the Chaos Fleet--dead ships, dead sailors, forever in his thrall--and it was not fitting that such a fate should befall one of the Royal Line of Melnibone. Ah, but the mourning would be long, thought Dyvim Tvar. He had loved Elric, for all that he had sometimes disapproved of his methods of ruling the Dragon Isle. Secretly he would go to the Dragon Caves that night and spend the period of mourning with the sleeping dragons who, now that Elric was dead, were all he had left to love. And Dyvim Tvar then thought of Cymoril, awaiting Elric's return.

The ships began to emerge into the half-light of the evening. Torches and braziers already burned on the quays of Imrryr which were deserted save for a small group of figures who stood around a chariot which had been driven out to the end of the central mole. A cold wind blew. Dyvim Tvar knew that it was the Princess Cymoril who waited, with her guards, for the fleet.

Though the flagship was the last to pass through the maze, the rest of the ships had to wait until it could be towed into position and dock first. If this had not been the required tradition, Dyvim Tvar would have left his ship and gone to speak to Cymoril, escort her from the quay and tell her what he knew of the circumstances of Elric's death. But it was impossible. Even before Terhali's Particular Satisfaction had dropped anchor, the main gangplank of The Son of the Pyaray had been lowered and the Emperor Yyrkoon, all swaggering pride, had stepped down it, his arms raised in triumphant salute to his sister who could be seen, even now, searching the decks of the ships for a sign of her beloved albino.

Suddenly Cymoril knew that Elric was dead and she suspected that Yyrkoon had, in some way, been responsible for Elric's death. Either Yyrkoon had allowed Elric to be borne down by a group of southland reavers or else he had managed to slay Elric himself. She knew her brother and she recognised his expression. He was pleased with himself as he always had been when successful in some form of treachery or another. Anger flashed in her tear-filled eyes and she threw back her head and shouted at the shifting, ominous sky:

'Oh! Yyrkoon has destroyed him!'
Her guards were startled. The captain spoke solicitously. 'Madam?'
'He is dead--and that brother slew him. Take Prince Yyrkoon, captain. Kill Prince Yyrkoon, captain.'

Unhappily, the captain put his right hand on the hilt of his sword. A young warrior, more impetuous, drew his blade, murmuring: 'I will slay him, princess, if that is your desire.' The young warrior loved Cymoril with considerable and unthinking intensity.

The captain offered the warrior a cautionary glance, but the warrior was blind to it. Now two others slid swords from scabbards as Yyrkoon, a red cloak wound about him, his dragon crest catching the light from the brands guttering in the wind, stalked forward and cried:

'Yyrkoon is emperor now!'
'No!' shrieked Yyrkoon's sister. 'Elric! Elric! Where are you?'
'Serving his new master, Pyaray of Chaos. His dead hands pull at the sweep of a Chaos ship, sister. His dead eyes see nothing at all. His dead ears hear only the crack of Pyaray's whips and his dead flesh cringes, feeling nought but that unearthly scourge. Elric sank in his armour to the bottom of the sea."
'Murderer! Traitor!' Cymoril began to sob.

The captain, who was a practical man, said to his warriors in a low voice: 'Sheath your weapons and salute your new emperor.'

Only the young guardsman who loved Cymoril disobeyed. 'But he slew the emperor! My lady Cymoril said so!'

'What of it? He is emperor now. Kneel or you'll be dead within the minute.'

The young warrior gave a wild shout and leapt towards Yyrkoon, who stepped back, trying to free his arms from the folds of his cloak. He had not expected this.
But it was the captain who leapt forward, his own sword drawn; and hacked down the youngster so that he gasped, half-turned, then fell at Yyrkoon's feet.

This demonstration of the captain's was confirmation of his real power and Yyrkoon almost smirked with satisfaction as he looked down at the corpse. The captain fell to one knee, the bloody sword still in his hand. 'My emperor,' he said.

'You show a proper loyalty, captain.'

'My loyalty is to the Ruby Throne.'

' Quite so.'

Cymoril shook with grief and rage, but her rage was impotent. She knew now that she had no friends.

Leering, the Emperor Yyrkoon presented himself before her. He reached out his hand and he caressed her neck, her cheek, her mouth. He let his hand fall so that it grazed her breast. 'Sister,' he said, 'thou art mine entirely now.'

And Cymoril was the second to fall at his feet, for she had fainted.

'Pick her up,' Yyrkoon said to the guard. 'Take her back to her own tower and there be sure she remains. Two guards will be with her at all times, in even her most private moments they must observe her, for she may plan treachery against the Ruby Throne.'

The captain bowed and signed to his men to obey the emperor. 'Aye, my lord. It shall be done.'

Yyrkoon looked back at the corpse of the young warrior. 'And feed that to her slaves tonight, so that he can continue serving her.' He smiled.

The captain smiled, too, appreciating the joke. He felt it was good to have a proper emperor in Melnibone again. An emperor who knew how to behave, who knew how to treat his enemies and who accepted unswerving loyalty as his right. The captain fancied that fine, martial times lay ahead for Melnibone. The golden battle-barges and the warriors of Imrryr could go a-spoiling again and instil in the barbarians of the Young Kingdoms a sweet and satisfactory sense of fear. Already, in his mind, the captain helped himself to the treasures of Lormyr, Argimiliar and Pikarayd, of Ilmiora and Jadmar. He might even be made governor, say, of the Isle of the Purple Towns. What luxuries of torment would he bring to those upstart sealords, particularly Count Smiorgan Baldhead who was even now beginning to try to make the isle a rival to Melnibone as a trading port. As he escorted the limp body of the Princess Cymoril back to her tower, the captain looked on that body and felt the swellings of lust within him. Yyrkoon would reward his loyalty, there was no doubt of that. Despite the cold wind, the captain began to sweat in his anticipation. He, himself, would guard the Princess Cymoril. He would relish it.

Marching at the head of his army, Yyrkoon strutted for the Tower of D'arputna, the Tower of Emperors, and the Ruby Throne within. He preferred to ignore the litter which had been brought for him and to go on foot, so that he might savour every small moment of his triumph. He approached the tower, tall among its fellows at the very centre of Imrryr, as he might approach a beloved woman. He approached it with a sense of delicacy and without haste, for he knew that it was his.

He looked about him. His army marched behind him. Magum Colim and Dyvim Tvar led the army. People lined the twisting streets and bowed low to him. Slaves prostrated themselves. Even the beasts of burden were made to kneel as he strode by. Yyrkoon could almost taste the power as one might taste a luscious fruit. He drew deep breaths of the air. Even the air was his. All Imrryr was his. All Melnibone, soon would all the world be his. And he would squander it all. How he would squander it! Such a grand terror would he bring back to the earth; such a munificence of fear! In ecstasy, almost blindly, did the Emperor Yyrkoon enter the tower. He hesitated at the great doors of the throne room. He signed for the doors to be opened and as they opened he deliberately took in the scene tiny bit by tiny bit. The walls, the banners, the trophies, the galleries, all were his. The throne room was empty now, but soon he would fill it with colour and celebration and true, Melnibonean entertainments. It had been too long since blood had sweetened the air of this hall. Now he let his eyes linger upon the steps leading up to the Ruby
Throne itself, but, before he looked at the throne, he heard Dyvim Tvar gasp behind him and his gaze went suddenly to the Ruby Throne and his jaw slackened at what he saw. His eyes widened in incredulity.

'An illusion!'

'An apparition,' said Dyvim Tvar with some satisfaction.

'Heresy!' cried the Emperor Yyrkoon, staggering forward, finger pointing at the robed and cowled figure which sat so still upon the Ruby Throne. 'Mine! Mine!'

The figure made no reply.

'Mine! Begone! The throne belongs to Yyrkoon. Yyrkoon is emperor now! What are you? Why would you thwart me thus?'

The cowl fell back and a bone-white face was revealed, surrounded by flowing, milk-white hair. Crimson eyes looked coolly down at the shrieking, stumbling thing which came towards them.

'You are dead, Elric! I know that you are dead!'

The apparition made no reply, but a thin smile touched the white lips.

'You could not have survived. You drowned. You cannot come back. Pyaray owns your soul!'

'There are others who rule in the sea, said the figure on the Ruby Throne. 'Why did you slay me, cousin?'

Yyrkoon's guile had deserted him, making way for terror and confusion. 'Because it is my right to rule! Because you were not strong enough, nor cruel enough, nor humorous enough...'

'Is this not a good joke, cousin?'

'Begone! Begone! Begone! I shall not be ousted by a spectre! A dead emperor cannot rule Melnibone!'

'We shall see,' said Elric, signing to Dyvim Tvar and his soldiers.

3

A Traditional Justice

'NOW INDEED I shall rule as you would have had me rule, cousin.' Elric watched as Dyvim Tvar's soldiers surrounded the would-be usurper and seized his arms, relieving him of his weapons.

Yyrkoon panted like a captured wolf. He glared around him as if hoping to find support from the assembled warriors, but they stared back at him either neutrally or with open contempt.

'And you, Prince Yyrkoon, will be the first to benefit from this new rule of mine. Are you pleased?'

Yyrkoon lowered his head. He was trembling now. Elric laughed, 'Speak up, cousin.'

'May Arioch and all the Dukes of Hell torment you for eternity,' growled Yyrkoon. He flung back his head, his wild eyes rolling, his lips curling: 'Arioch! Arioch! Curse this feeble albino! Arioch! Destroy him or see Melnibone fall!'

Elric continued to laugh. 'Arioch does not hear you. Chaos is weak upon the earth now. It needs a greater sorcery than yours to bring the Chaos Lords back to aid you as they aided our ancestors. And now, Yyrkoon, tell me--where is the Lady Cymoril?'

But Yyrkoon had lapsed, again, into a sullen silence.

'She is at her own tower, my emperor,' said Magum Colim.

'A creature of Yyrkoon's took her there,' said Dyvim Tvar. 'The captain of Cymoril's own guard, he slew a warrior who tried to defend his mistress against Yyrkoon. It could be that Princess Cymoril is in danger, my lord.'

'Then go quickly to the tower. Take a force of men. Bring both Cymoril and the captain of her guard to me.'

'And Yyrkoon, my lord?' asked Dyvim Tvar.
'Let him remain here until his sister returns.'

Dyvim Tvar bowed and, selecting a body of warriors, left the throne room. All noticed that Dyvim Tvar's step was lighter and his expression less grim than when he had first approached the throne room at Prince Yyrkoon's back.

Yyrkoon straightened his head and looked about the court. For a moment he seemed like a pathetic and bewildered child. All the lines of hate and anger had disappeared and Elric felt sympathy for his cousin growing again within him. But this time Elric quelled the feeling.

'Be grateful, cousin, that for a few hours you were totally powerful, that you enjoyed domination over all the folk of Melnibone.'

Yyrkoon said in a small, puzzled voice: 'How did you escape? You had no time for making a sorcery, no strength for it. You could barely move your limbs and your armour must have dragged you deep to the bottom of the sea so that you should have drowned. It is unfair, Elric. You should have drowned.'

Elric shrugged, 'I have friends in the sea. They recognise my royal blood and my right to rule if you do not.'

Yyrkoon tried to disguise the astonishment he felt. Evidently his respect for Elric had increased, as had his hatred for the albino emperor. 'Friends.'

'Aye,' said Elric with a thin grin.

'I--I thought, too, you had vowed not to use your powers of sorcery.'

'But you thought that a vow which was unbefitting for a Melnibonean monarch to make, did you not? Well, I agree with you. You see, Yyrkoon, you have won a victory, after all.'

Yyrkoon stared narrowly at Elric, as if trying to divine a secret meaning behind Elric's words. 'You will bring back the Chaos Lords?'

'No sorcerer, however powerful, can summon the Chaos Lords or, for that matter, the Lords of Law, if they do not wish to be summoned. That you know. You must know it, Yyrkoon. Have you not, yourself, tried. And Arioch did not come, did he? Did he bring you the gift you sought--the gift of the two black swords?'

'You know that?'

'I did not. I guessed. Now I know.'

Yyrkoon tried to speak but his voice would not form words, so angry was he. Instead, a strangled growl escaped his throat and for a few moments he struggled in the grip of his guards.

Dyvim Tvar returned with Cymoril. The girl was pale but she was smiling. She ran into the throne room. 'Elric!'

'Cymoril! Are you harmed?'

Cymoril glanced at the crestfallen captain of her guard who had been brought with her. A look of disgust crossed her fine face. Then she shook her head. 'No. I am not harmed.'

The captain of Cymoril's guard was shaking with terror. He looked pleadingly at Yyrkoon as if hoping that his fellow prisoner could help him. But Yyrkoon continued to stare at the floor.

'Have that one brought closer.' Elric pointed at the captain of the guard. The man was dragged to the foot of the steps leading to the Ruby Throne. He moaned. 'What a petty traitor you are,' said Elric. 'At least Yyrkoon had the courage to attempt to slay me. And his ambitions were high. Your ambition was merely to become one of his pet curs. So you betrayed your mistress and slew one of your own men. What is your name?'

The man had difficulty speaking, but at last he murmured, 'It is Valharik, my name. What could I do? I serve the Ruby Throne, whoever sits upon it.'

'So the traitor claims that loyalty motivated him. I think not.'

'It was, my lord. It was.' The captain began to whine. He fell to his knees. 'Slay me swiftly. Do not punish me more.'
Elric's impulse was to heed the man's request, but he looked at Yyrkoon and then remembered the expression on Cymoril's face when she had looked at the guard. He knew that he must make a point now, whilst making an example of Captain Valharik. So he shook his head. 'No. I will punish you more. Tonight you will die here according to the traditions of Melnibone, while my nobles feast to celebrate this new era of my rule.'

Valharik began to sob. Then he stopped himself and got slowly to his feet, a Melnibonean again. He bowed low and stepped backward, giving himself into the grip of his guards.

'I must consider a way in which your fate may be shared with the one you wished to serve,' Elric went on. 'How did you slay the young warrior who sought to obey Cymoril?'

'With my sword. I cut him down. It was a clean stroke. But one.'

'And what became of the corpse.'

'Prince Yyrkoon told me to feed it to Princess Cymoril's slaves.'

'I understand. Very well, Prince Yyrkoon, you may join us at the feast tonight while Captain Valharik entertains us with his dying.'

Yyrkoon's face was almost as pale as Elric's. 'What do you mean?'

'The little pieces of Captain Valharik's flesh which our Doctor Jest will carve from his limbs will be the meat on which you feast. You may give instructions as to how you wish the captain's flesh prepared. We should not expect you to eat it raw, cousin.'

Even Dyvim Tvar looked astonished at Elric's decision. Certainly it was in the spirit of Melnibone and a clever irony improving on Prince Yyrkoon's own idea, but it was unlike Elric-- or, at least, it was unlike the Elric he had known up until a day earlier.

As he heard his fate, Captain Valharik gave a great scream of terror and glared at Prince Yyrkoon as if the would-be usurper were already tasting his flesh. Yyrkoon tried to turn away, his shoulders shaking.

'And that will be the beginning of it,' said Elric. 'The feast will start at midnight. Until that time, confine Yyrkoon to his own tower.'

After Prince Yyrkoon and Captain Valharik had been led away, Dyvim Tvar and Princess Cymoril came and stood beside Elric who had sunk back in his great throne and was staring bitterly into the middle-distance.

'That was a clever cruelty,' Dyvim Tvar said. Cymoril said: 'It is what they both deserve.'

'Aye,' murmured Elric. 'It is what my father would have done. It is what Yyrkoon would have done had our positions been reversed. I but follow the traditions. I no longer pretend that I am my own man. Here I shall stay until I die, trapped upon the Ruby Throne--serving the Ruby Throne as Valharik claimed to serve it.'

'Could you not kill them both quickly?' Cymoril asked. 'You know that I do not plead for my brother because he is my brother. I hate him most of all. But it might destroy you, Elric, to follow through with your plan.'

'What if it does? Let me be destroyed. Let me merely become an unthinking extension of my ancestors. The puppet of ghosts and memories, dancing to strings which extend back through time for ten thousand years.'

'Perhaps if you slept...' Dyvim Tvar suggested.

'I shall not sleep, I feel, for many nights after this. But your brother is not going to die, Cymoril. After his punishment--after he has eaten the flesh of Captain Valharik--I intend to send him into exile. He will go alone into the Young Kingdoms and he will not be allowed to take his grimoires with him. He must make his way as best he can in the lands of the barbarian. That is not too severe a punishment, I think.'

'It is too lenient,' said Cymoril. 'You would be best advised to slay him. Send soldiers now. Give him no time to consider counterplots.'

'I do not fear his counterplots.' Elric rose wearily. 'Now I should like it if you would both leave me,
until an hour or so before the feasting begins. I must think.'

'T will return to my tower and prepare myself for tonight,' said Cymoril. She kissed Elric lightly upon his pale forehead. He looked up, filled with love and tenderness for her. He reached out and touched her hair and her cheek. 'Remember that I love you, Elric,' she said.

'I will see that you are safely escorted homeward,' Dyvim Tvar said to her. 'And you must choose a new commander of your guard. Can I assist in that?'

'I should be grateful, Dyvim Tvar.'

They left Elric still upon the Ruby Throne, still staring into space. The hand that he lifted from time to time to his pale head shook a little and now the torment showed in his strange, crimson eyes.

Later, he rose up from the Ruby Throne and walked slowly, head bowed, to his own apartments, followed by his guards. He hesitated at the door which led onto the steps going up to the library. Instinctively he sought the consolation and forgetfulness of a certain kind of knowledge, but at that moment he suddenly hated his scrolls and his books. He blamed them for his ridiculous concerns regarding 'morality' and 'justice'; he blamed them for the feelings of guilt and despair which now filled him as a result of his decision to behave as a Melnibonean monarch was expected to behave. So he passed the door to the library and went on to his apartments, but even his apartments displeased him now. They were austere. They were not furnished according to the luxurious tastes of all Melniboneans (save for his father) with their delight in lush mixtures of colour and bizarre design. He would have them changed as soon as possible. He would give himself up to those ghosts who ruled him. For some time he stalked from room to room, trying to push back that part of him which demanded he be merciful to Valharik and to Yyrkoon— at very least to slay them and be done with it or, better, to send them both into exile. But it was impossible to reverse his decision now.

At last he lowered himself to a couch which rested beside a window looking out over the whole of the city. The sky was still full of turbulent cloud, but now the moon shone through, like the yellow eye of an unhealthy beast. It seemed to stare with a certain triumphant irony at him, as if relishing the defeat of his conscience. Elric sank his head into his arms.

Later the servants came to tell him that the courtiers were assembling for the celebration feast. He allowed them to dress him in his yellow robes of state and to place the dragon crown upon his head and then he returned to the throne room to be greeted by a mighty cheer, more wholehearted than any he had ever received before. He acknowledged the greeting and then seated himself in the Ruby Throne, looking out over the banqueting tables which now filled the hall. A table was brought and set before him and two extra seats were brought, for Dyvim Tvar and Cymoril would sit beside him. But Dyvim Tvar and Cymoril were not yet here and neither had the renegade Valharik been brought. And where was Yyrkoon? They should, even now, be at the centre of the hall—Valharik in chains and Yyrkoon seated beneath him. Doctor Jest was there, heating his brazier on which rested his cooking pans, testing and sharpening his knives. The hall was filled with excited talk as the court waited to be entertained. Already the food was being brought in, though no one might eat until the emperor ate first.

Elric signed to the commander of his own guard. 'Has the Princess Cymoril or Lord Dyvim Tvar arrived at the tower yet?'

'No, my lord.'

Cymoril was rarely late and Dyvim Tvar never. Elric frowned. Perhaps they did not relish the entertainment.

'And what of the prisoners?'

'They have been sent for, my lord.'

Doctor Jest looked up expectantly, his thin body tensed in anticipation.

And then Elric heard a sound above the din of the conversation. A groaning sound which seemed to come from all around the tower. He bent his head and listened closely.

Others were hearing it now. They stopped talking and also listened intently. Soon the whole hall was in silence and the groaning increased.
Then, all at once, the doors of the throne room burst open and there was Dyvim Tvar, gasping and bloody, his clothes slashed and his flesh gashed. And following him in came a mist—a swirling mist of dark purples and unpleasant blues and it was this mist that groaned.

Elric sprang from his throne and knocked the table aside. He leapt down the steps towards his friend. The groaning mist began to creep further into the throne room, as if reaching out for Dyvim Tvar.

Elric took his friend in his arms. ‘Dyvim Tvar! What is this sorcery?’

Dyvim Tvar’s face was full of horror and his lips seemed frozen until at last he said:
‘It is Yyrkoon’s sorcery. He conjured the groaning mist to aid him in his escape. I tried to follow him from the city but the mist engulfed me and I lost my senses. I went to his tower to bring him and his accessory here, but the sorcery had already been accomplished.’

‘Cymoril? Where is she?’

‘He took her, Elric. She is with him. Valharik is with him and so are a hundred warriors who remained secretly loyal to him.’

‘Then we must pursue him. We shall soon capture him.’

‘You can do nothing against the groaning mist. Ah! It comes!’

And sure enough the mist was beginning to surround them. Elric tried to disperse it by waving his arms, but then it had gathered thickly around him and its melancholy groaning filled his ears, its hideous colours blinded his eyes. He tried to rush through it, but it remained with him. And now he thought he heard words amongst the groans. ‘Elric is weak. Elric is foolish. Elric must die!’

‘Stop this!’ he cried. He bumped into another body and fell to his knees. He began to crawl, desperately trying to peer through the mist. Now faces formed in the mist—frightful faces, more terrifying than any he had ever seen, even in his worst nightmares.

‘Cymoril!’ he cried. ‘Cymoril!’

And one of the faces became the face of Cymoril—a Cymoril who leered at him and mocked him and whose face slowly aged until he saw a filthy crone and, ultimately, a skull on which the flesh rotted. He closed his eyes, but the image remained.

‘Cymoril,’ whispered the voices. ‘Cymoril,’

And Elric grew weaker as he became more desperate. He cried out for Dyvim Tvar, but heard only a mocking echo of the name, as he had heard Cymoril’s. He shut his lips and he shut his eyes and, still crawling, tried to free himself from the groaning mist. But hours seemed to pass before the groans became whines and the whines became faint strands of sound and he tried to rise, opening his eyes to see the mist fading, but then his legs buckled and he fell down against the first step which led to the Ruby Throne. Again he had ignored Cymoril’s advice concerning her brother—and again she was in danger.

Elric’s last thought was a simple one:

‘I am not fit to live,’ he thought.

To Call the Chaos Lord

AS SOON AS he recovered from the blow which had knocked him unconscious and thus wasted even more time, Elric sent for Dyvim Tvar. He was eager for news. But Dyvim Tvar could report nothing. Yyrkoon had summoned sorcerous aid to free him, sorcerous aid to effect his escape. ‘He must have had some magical means of leaving the island, for he could not have gone by ship,’ said Dyvim Tvar.

‘You must send out expeditions,’ said Elric. ‘Send a thousand detachments if you must. Send every man in Melnibone. Strive to wake the dragons that they might be used. Equip the golden battle-barges. Cover the world with our men if you must, but find Cymoril.’
'All those things I have already done,' said Dyvim Tvar, 'save that I have not yet found Cymoril.'

A month passed and Imrryrian warriors marched and rode through the Young Kingdoms seeking news of their renegade countrymen.

'I worried more for myself than for Cymoril and I called that "morality' thought the albino. 'I tested my sensibilities, not my conscience.'

A second month passed and Imrryrian dragons sailed the skies to South and East, West and North, but though they flew across mountains, and seas, and forests and plains and, unwittingly, brought terror to many a city, they found no sign of Yyrkoon and his band.

'For, finally, one can only judge oneself by one's actions,' thought Elric. 'I have looked at what I have done, not at what I meant to do or thought I would like to do, and what I have done has, in the main, been foolish, destructive and with little point. Yyrkoon was right to despise me and that was why I hated him so.'

A fourth month came and Imrryrian ships stopped in remote ports and Imrryrian sailors questioned other travelers and explorers for news of Yyrkoon. But Yyrkoon's sorcery had been strong and none had seen him (or remembered seeing him).

'I must now consider the implications of all these thoughts,' said Elric to himself.

Wearily, the swiftest of the soldiers began to return to Melnibone, bearing their useless news. And as faith disappeared and hope faded, Elric's determination increased. He made himself strong, both physically and mentally. He experimented with new drugs which would increase his energy rather than replenish the energy he did not share with other men. He read much in the library, though this time he read only certain grimoires and he read those over and over again.

These grimoires were written in the High Speech of Melnibone--the ancient language of sorcery with which Elric's ancestors had been able to communicate with the supernatural beings they had summoned. And at last Elric was satisfied that he understood them fully, though what he read sometimes threatened to stop him in his present course of action.

And when he was satisfied--for the dangers of misunderstanding the implications of the things described in the grimoires were catastrophic--he slept for three nights in a drugged slumber.

And then Elric was ready. He ordered all slaves and servants from his quarters. He placed guards at the doors with instructions to admit no one, no matter how urgent their business. He cleared one great chamber of all furniture so that it was completely empty save for one grimoire which he had placed in the very centre of the room. Then he seated himself beside the book and began to think.

When he had meditated for more than five hours Elric took a brush and a jar of ink and began to paint both walls and floor with complicated symbols, some of which were so intricate, that they seemed to disappear at an angle to the surface on which they had been laid. At last this was done and Elric spreadeagled himself in the very centre of his huge rune, face down, one hand upon his grimoire, the other (with the Actorios upon it) stretched palm down. The moon was full. A shaft of its light fell directly upon Elric's head, turning the hair to silver. And then the Summoning began.

Elric sent his mind into twisting tunnels of logic, across endless plains of ideas, through mountains of symbolism and endless universes of alternate truths; he sent his mind out further and further and as it went he sent with it the words which issued from his writhing lips--words that few of his contemporaries would understand, though their very sound would chill the blood of any listener. And his body heaved as he forced it to remain in its original position and from time to time a groan would escape him. And through all this a few words came again and again.

One of these words was a name. 'Arioch'.

Arioch, the patron demon of Elric's ancestors; one of the most powerful of all the Dukes of Hell, who was called Knight of the Swords, Lord of the Seven Darks, Lord of the Higher Hell and many more names besides.

'Arioch!' It was on Arioch whom Yyrkoon had called, asking the Lord of Chaos to curse Elric. It was Arioch
whom Yyrkoon had sought to summon to aid him in his attempt upon the Ruby Throne. It was Arioch who was known as the Keeper of the Two Black Swords—the swords of unearthly manufacture and infinite power which had once been wielded by emperors of Melnibone.

'Arioch! I summon thee.'

Runes, both rhythmic and fragmented, howled now from Elric's throat. His brain had reached the plane on which Arioch dwelt. Now it sought Arioch himself.

'Arioch! It is Elric of Melnibone who summons thee.'

Elric glimpsed an eye staring down at him. The eye floated, joined another. The two eyes regarded him.

'Arioch! My Lord of Chaos! Aid me!'

The eyes blinked—and vanished.

'Oh, Arioch! Come to me! Come to me! Aid me and I will serve you!'

A silhouette that was not a human form, turned slowly until a black, faceless head looked down upon Elric. A halo of red light gleamed behind the head.

Then that, too, vanished.

Exhausted, Elric let the image fade. His mind raced back through plane upon plane. His lips no longer chanted the runes and the names. He lay exhausted upon the floor of his chamber, unable to move, in silence.

He was certain that he had failed.

There was a small sound. Painfully he raised his weary head.

A fly had come into the chamber. It buzzed about erratically, seeming almost to follow the lines of the runes Elric had so recently painted.

The fly settled first upon one rune and then on another.

It must have come in through the window, thought Elric. He was annoyed by the distraction but still fascinated by it.

The fly settled on Elric's forehead. It was a large, black fly and its buzz was loud, obscene. It rubbed its forelegs together, and it seemed to be taking a particular interest in Elric's face as it moved over it. Elric shuddered, but he did not have the strength to swat it. When it came into his field of vision, he watched it. When it was not visible he felt its legs covering every inch of his face. Then it flew up and, still buzzing loudly, hovered a short distance from Elric's nose. And then Elric could see the fly's eyes and recognise something in them. They were the eyes—and yet not the eyes—he had seen on that other plane.

It began to dawn on him that this fly was no ordinary creature. It had features that were in some way faintly human.

The fly smiled at him.

From his hoarse throat and through his parched lips Elric was able to utter but one word: 'Arioch?'

And a beautiful youth stood where the fly had hovered. The beautiful youth spoke in a beautiful voice—soft and sympathetic and yet manly. He was clad in a robe that was like a liquid jewel and yet which did not dazzle Elric, for in some way no light seemed to come from it. There was a slender sword at the youth's belt and he wore no helm, but a circlet of red fire. His eyes were wise and his eyes were old and when they were looked at closely they could be seen to contain an ancient and confident evil.

'Elric.'

That was all the youth said, but it revived the albino so that he could raise himself to his knees.

'Elric.'

And Elric could stand. He was filled with energy.

The youth was taller, now, than Elric. He looked down at the Emperor of Melnibone and he smiled the smile that the fly had smiled. 'You alone are fit to serve Arioch. It is long since I was invited to this plane, but now that I am here I shall aid you, Elric. I shall become your patron. I shall protect you and give you strength and the source of strength, though master I be and slave you be.'
'How must I serve you, Duke Arioch?' Elric asked, having made a monstrous effort of self-control, for he was filled with terror by the implications of Arioch's words.

'You will serve me by serving yourself for the moment. Later a time will come when I shall call upon you to serve me in specific ways, but (for the moment) I ask little of you, save that you swear to serve me.'

Elric hesitated.

'You must swear that,' said Arioch reasonably, 'or I cannot help you in the matter of your cousin Yyrkoon or his sister Cymoril.'

'I swear to serve you,' said Elric. And his body was flooded with ecstatic fire and he trembled with joy and he fell to his knees.

'Then I can tell you that, from time to time, you can call on my aid and I will come if your need is truly desperate. I will come in whichever form is appropriate, or no form at all if that should prove appropriate. And now you may ask me one question before I depart.'

'I need the answers to two questions.'

'Your first question I cannot answer. I will not answer. You must accept that you have now sworn to serve me. I will not tell you what the future holds. But you need not fear, if you serve me well.'

'Then my second question is this: Where is Prince Yyrkoon.'

'Prince Yyrkoon is in the south, in a land of barbarians. By sorcery and by superior weapons and intelligence he has effected the conquest of two mean nations, one of which is called Oin and the other of which is called Yu. Even now he trains the men of Oin and the men of Yu to march upon Melnibone, for he knows that your forces are spread thinly across the earth, searching for him.'

'How has he hidden?'

'He has not. But he has gained possession of the Mirror of Memory--a magical device whose hiding place he discovered by his sorceries. Those who look into this mirror have their memories taken. The mirror contains a million memories: the memories of all who have looked into it. Thus anyone who ventures into Oin or Yu or travels by sea to the capital which serves both is confronted by the mirror and forgets that he has seen Prince Yyrkoon and his Imrryrians in those lands. It is the best way of remaining undiscovered.'

'It is.' Elric drew his brows together. 'Therefore it might be wise to consider destroying the mirror. But what would happen then, I wonder?'

Arioch raised his beautiful hand. 'Although I have answered further questions which are, one could argue, part of the same question, I will answer no more. It could be in your interest to destroy the mirror, but it might be better to consider other means of countering its effects, for it does, I remind you, contain many memories, some of which have been imprisoned for thousands of years. Now I must go. And you must go--to the lands of Oin and Yu which lie several months' journey from here, to the south and well beyond Lormyr. They are best reached by the Ship Which Sails Over Both Land and Sea. Farewell, Elric.'

And a fly buzzed for a moment upon the wall before vanishing.

Elric rushed from the room, shouting for his slaves.

5

The Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea

'AND HOW MANY dragons still sleep in the caverns?' Elric paced the gallery overlooking the city. It was morning, but no sun came through the dull clouds which hung low upon the towers of the Dreaming City. Imrryr's life continued unchanged in the streets below, save for the absence of the
majority of her soldiers who had not yet returned home from their fruitless quests and would not be home for many months to come.

Dyvim Tvar leaned on the parapet of the gallery and stared unseeingly into the streets. His face was tired and his arms were folded on his chest as if he sought to contain what was left of his strength.

'Two perhaps. It would take a great deal to wake them and even then I doubt if they'd be useful to us. What is this "Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea" which Arioch spoke of?'

'I've read of it before--in the Silver Grimoire and in other tomes. A magic ship. Used by a Melnibonean hero even before there was Melnibone and the empire. But where it exists, and if it exists, I do not know.'

'Who would know?' Dyvim Tvar straightened his back and turned it on the scene below.

'Arioch?' Elric shrugged. 'But he would not tell me.'

'What of your friends the Water Elementals. Have they not promised you aid? And would they not be knowledgeable in the matter of ships?'

Elric frowned, deepening the lines which now marked his face. 'Aye--Straasha might know. But I'm loath to call on his aid again. The Water Elementals are not the powerful creatures that the Lords of Chaos are. Their strength is limited and, moreover, they are inclined to be capricious, in the manner of the elements. What is more, Dyvim Tvar, I hesitate to use sorcery, save where absolutely imperative...'

'You are a sorcerer, Elric. You have but lately proved your greatness in that respect, involving the most powerful of all sorceries, the summoning of a Chaos Lord--and you still hold back? I would suggest, my lord king, that you consider such logic and that you judge it unsound. You decided to use sorcery in your pursuit of Prince Yyrkoon. The die is already cast. It would be wise to use sorcery now.'

'You cannot conceive of the mental and physical effort involved...'

'I can conceive of it, my lord. I am your friend. I do not wish to see you pained--and yet...'

'There is also the difficulty, Dyvim Tvar, of my physical weakness,' Elric reminded his friend. 'How long can I continue in the use of these overstrong potions that now sustain me? They supply me with energy, aye--but they do so by using up my few resources. I might die before I find Cymoril.'

'I stand rebuked.'

But Elric came forward and put his white hand on Dyvim Tvar's butter-coloured cloak. 'But what have I to lose, eh? No. You are right. I am a coward to hesitate when Cymoril's life is at stake. I repeat my stupidities--the stupidities which first brought this pass upon us all. I'll do it. Will you come with me to the ocean?'

'Aye.'

Dyvim Tvar began to feel the burden of Elric's conscience settling upon him also. It was a peculiar feeling to come to a Melnibonean and Dyvim Tvar knew very well that he liked it not at all.

Elric had last ridden these paths when he and Cymoril were happy. It seemed a long age ago. He had been a fool to trust that happiness. He turned his white stallion's head towards the cliffs and the sea beyond them. A light rain fell. Winter was descending swiftly on Melnibone.

They left their horses on the cliffs, lest they be disturbed by Elric's sorcery-working, and clambered down to the shore. The rain fell into the sea. A mist hung over the water little more than five ship lengths from the beach. It was deathly still and, with the tall, dark cliffs behind them and the wall of mist before them, it seemed to Dyvim Tvar that they had entered a silent netherworld where might easily be encountered the melancholy souls of those who, in legend, had committed suicide by a process of slow self-mutilation. The sound of the two men's boots on shingle was loud and yet was at once muffled by the mist which seemed to suck at noise and swallow it greedily as if it sustained its life on sound.

'Now,' Elric murmured. 'Now I must recall the rune which came so easily, unsummoned, to my brain not many months since.' He left Dyvim Tvar's side and went down to the place where the chill water lapped the land and there, carefully, he seated himself, cross-legged. His eyes stared, unseeingly, into the mist.
To Dyvim Tvar the tall albino appeared to shrink as he sat down. He seemed to become like a vulnerable child and Dyvim Tvar's heart went out to Elric as it might go out to a brave, nervous boy, and Dyvim Tvar had it in mind to suggest that the sorcery be done with and they seek the lands of Oin and Yu by ordinary means.

But Elric was already lifting his head as a dog lifts its head to the moon. And strange, thrilling words began to tumble from his lips and it became plain that, even if Dyvim Tvar did speak now, Elric would not hear him.

Dyvim Tvar was no stranger to the High Speech--as a Melnibonean noble he had been taught it as a matter of course--but the words seemed nonetheless strange to him, for Elric used peculiar inflections and emphases, giving the words a special and secret weight and chanting them in a voice which ranged from bass groan to falsetto shriek. It was not pleasant to listen to such noises coming from a mortal throat and now Dyvim Tvar had some clear understanding of why Elric was reluctant to use sorcery. The Lord of the Dragon Caves, Melnibonean though he was, found himself inclined to step backward a pace or two, even to retire to the cliff-tops and watch over Elric from there, and he had to force himself to hold his ground as the summoning continued.

For a good space of time the rune-chanting went on. The rain beat harder upon the pebbles of the shore and made them glisten. It dashed most ferociously into the still, dark sea, lashed about the fragile head of the chanting, pale-haired figure, and caused Dyvim Tvar to shiver and draw his cloak more closely about his shoulders.

'Straasha--Straasha--Straasha...' The words mingled with the sound of the rain. They were now barely words at all but sounds which the wind might make or a language which the sea might speak.

'Straasha . . .' Again Dyvim Tvar had the impulse to move, but this time he desired to go to Elric and tell him to stop, to consider some other means of reaching the lands of Oin and Yu.

'Straasha!' There was a cryptic agony in the shout. 'Straasha!' Elric's name formed on Dyvim Tvar's lips, but he found that he could not speak it.

'Straasha!' The cross-legged figure swayed. The word became the calling of the wind through the Caverns of Time.

'Straasha!' It was plain to Dyvim Tvar that the rune was, for some reason, not working and that Elric was using up all his strength to no effect. And yet there was nothing the Lord of the Dragon Caves could do. His tongue was frozen. His feet seemed frozen. His feet seemed frozen to the ground.

He looked at the mist. Had it crept closer to the shore? Had it taken on a strange, almost luminous, green tinge? He peered closely.

There was a massive disturbance of the water. The sea rushed up the beach. The shingle crackled. The mist retreated. Vague lights flickered in the air and Dyvim Tvar thought he saw the shining silhouette of a gigantic figure emerging from the sea and he realised that Elric's chant had ceased.

'King Straasha,' Elric was saying in something approaching his normal tone. 'You have come. I thank you.' The silhouette spoke and the voice reminded Dyvim Tvar of slow, heavy waves rolling beneath a friendly sun.

'We elementals are concerned, Elric, for there are rumours that you have invited Chaos Lords back to your plane and the elementals have never loved the Lords of Chaos. Yet I know that if you have done this it is because you are fated to do it and therefore we hold no enmity against you.'
The decision was forced upon me, King Straasha. There was no other decision I could make. If you are therefore reluctant to aid me, I shall understand that and call on you no more.'

'I will help you, though helping you is harder now, not for what happens in the immediate future but what is hinted will happen in years to come. Now you must tell me quickly how we of the water can be of service to you.'

'Do you know ought of the Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea? I need to find that ship if I am to fulfil my vow to find my love, Cymoril.'

'I know much of that ship, for it is mine. Grome also lays claim to it. But it is mine. Fairly, it is mine.'

'Grome of the Earth?'

'Grome of the Land Below the Roots. Grome of the Ground and all that lives, under it. My brother. Grome. Long since, even as we elementals count time, Grome and I built that ship so that we could travel between the realms of Earth and Water whenever we chose. But we quarrelled (may we be cursed for such foolishness) and we fought. There were earthquakes, tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, typhoons and battles in which all the elementals joined, with the result that new continents were flung up and old ones drowned. It was not the first time we had fought each other, but it was the last. And finally, lest we destroy each other completely, we made a peace. I gave Grome part of my domain and he gave me the Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea. But he gave it somewhat unwillingly and thus it sails the sea better than it sails the land, for Grome thwarts its progress whenever he can. Still, if the ship is of use to you, you shall have it.'

'I thank you, King Straasha. Where shall I find it?'

'It will come. And now I grow weary, for the further from my own realm I venture, the harder it is to sustain my mortal form. Farewell, Elric--and be cautious. You have a greater power than you know and many would make use of it to their own ends,'

'Shall I wait here for the Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea?'

'No...' the Sea King's voice was fading as his form faded. Grey mist drifted back where the silhouette and the green lights had been. The sea again was still. 'Wait. Wait in your tower... It will come...'

A few wavelets lapped the shore and then it was as if the king of the Water Elementals had never been there at all. Dyvim Tvar rubbed his eyes. Slowly at first he began to move to where Elric still sat. Gently he bent down and offered the albino his hand. Elric looked up in some surprise. 'Ah, Dyvim Tvar. How much time has passed?'

'Some hours, Elric. It will soon be night. What little light there is begins to wane. We had best ride back for Imrryr.'

Stiffly Elric rose to his feet, with Dyvim Tvar's assistance. 'Aye...' he murmured absently. 'The Sea King said...'

'I heard the Sea King, Elric. I heard his advice and I heard his warning. You must remember to heed both. I like too little the sound of this magic boat. Like most things of sorcerous origin, the ship appears to have vices as well as virtues, like a double-bladed knife which you raise to stab your enemy and which, instead, stabs you...'

'That must be expected where sorcery is concerned. It was you who urged me on, my friend.'

'Aye,' said Dyvim Tvar almost to himself as he led the way up the cliff-path towards the horses. 'Aye. I have not forgotten that, my lord king.'

Elric smiled wanly and touched Dyvim Tvar's arm. 'Worry not. The summoning is over and now we have the vessel we need to take us swiftly to Prince Yyrkoon and the lands of Oin and Yu.'

'Let us hope so.' Dyvim Tvar was privately sceptical about the benefits they would gain from the Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea. They reached the horses and he began to wipe the water off the flanks of his own roan. 'I regret,' he said, 'that we have once again allowed the dragons to expend their energy on a useless endeavour. With a squadron of my beasts, we could do much against Prince
Yyrkoon. And it would be fine and wild, my friend, to ride the skies again, side by side, as we used to.'

'When all this is done and Princess Cymoril brought home, we shall do that,' said Elric, hauling himself wearily into the saddle of his white stallion. 'You shall blow the Dragon Horn and our dragon brothers will hear it and you and I shall sing the Song of the Dragon Masters and our goads shall flash as we straddle Flamefang and his mate Sweetclaw. Ah, that will be like the days of old Melnibone, when we no longer equate freedom with power, but let the Young Kingdoms go their own way and be certain that they let us go ours!'

Dyvim Tvar pulled on his horse's reins. His brow was clouded. 'Let us pray that day will come, my lord. But I cannot help this nagging thought which tells me that Imrryr's days are numbered and that my own life nears its close...'

'Nonsense, Dyvim Tvar. You'll survive me. There's little doubt of that, though you be my elder.'

Dyvim Tvar said, as they galloped back through the closing day: 'I have two sons. Did you know that, Elric?'

'You have never mentioned them.'

'They are by old mistresses.'

'I am happy for you.'

'They are fine Melniboneans.'

'Why do you mention this, Dyvim Tvar?' Elric tried to read his friend's expression.

'It is that I love them and would have them enjoy the pleasures of the Dragon Isle.'

'And why should they not?'

'I do not know.' Dyvim Tvar looked hard at Elric. 'I could suggest that it is your responsibility, the fate of my sons, Elric.'

'Mine?'

'It seems to me, from what I gathered from the Water Elemental's words, that your decisions could decide the fate of the Dragon Isle. I ask you to remember my sons, Elric.'

'I shall, Dyvim Tvar. I am certain they shall grow into superb Dragon Masters and that one of them shall succeed you as Lord of the Dragon Caves.'

'I think you miss my meaning, my lord emperor.'

And Elric looked solemnly at his friend and shook his head. 'I do not miss your meaning, old friend. But I think you judge me harshly if you fear I'll do ought to threaten Melnibone and all she is.'

'Forgive me, then.' Dyvim Tvar lowered his head. But the expression in his eyes did not change.

In Imrryr they changed their clothes and drank hot wine and had spiced food brought. Elric, for all his weariness, was in better spirits than he had been for many a month. And yet there was still a tinge of something behind his surface mood which suggested he encouraged himself to speak gaily and put vitality into his movements. Admittedly, though Dyvim Tvar, the prospects had improved and soon they would be confronting Prince Yyrkoon. But the dangers ahead of them were unknown, the pitfalls probably considerable. Still, he did not, out of sympathy for his friend, want to dispel Elric's mood. He was glad, in fact, that Elric seemed in a more positive frame of mind. There was talk of the equipment they would need in their expedition to the mysterious lands of Yu and Oin, speculation concerning the capacity of the Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea--how many men it would take, what provisions they should put aboard and so on.

When Elric went to his bed, he did not walk with the dragging tiredness which had previously accompanied his step and again, bidding him goodnight, Dyvim Tvar was struck by the same emotion which had filled him on the beach, watching Elric begin his rune. Perhaps it was not by chance that he had used the example of his sons when speaking to Elric earlier that day, for he had a feeling that was almost protective, as if Elric were a boy looking forward to some treat which might not bring him the joy he expected.

Dyvim Tvar dismissed the thoughts, as best he could, and went to his own bed. Elric might blame
himself for all that had occurred in the question of Yyrkoon and Cymoril, but Dyvim Tvar wondered if he, too, were not to blame in some part. Perhaps he should have offered his advice more cogently--more vehemently, even--earlier and made a stronger attempt to influence the young emperor. And then, in the Melnibonéan manner, he dismissed such doubts and questions as pointless. There was only one rule--seek pleasure however you would. But had that always been the Melnibonéan way? Dyvim Tvar wondered suddenly if Elric might not have regressive rather than deficient blood. Could Elric be a reincarnation of one of their most distant ancestors? Had it always been in the Melnibonéan character to think only of oneself and one's own gratification?

And again Dyvim Tvar dismissed the questions. What use was there in questions, after all? The world was the world. A man was a man. Before he sought his own bed he went to visit both his old mistresses, waking them up and insisting that he see his sons, Dyvim Slorm and Dyvim Mav and when his sons, sleepy-eyed, bewildered, had been brought to him, he stared at them for a long while before sending them back. He had said nothing to either, but he had brought his brows together frequently and rubbed at his face and shaken his head and, when they had gone, had said to Niopal and Saramal, his mistresses, who were as bewildered as their offspring, 'Let them be taken to the Dragon Caves tomorrow and begin their learning.'

'So soon, Dyvim Tvar?' said Niopal.
'Aye. There's little time left, I fear.'

He would not amplify on this remark because he could not. It was merely a feeling he had. But it was a feeling that was growing almost to the point where it was becoming an obsession with him.

In the morning Dyvim Tvar returned to Elric's tower and found the emperor pacing the gallery above the city, asking eagerly for any news of a ship sighted off the coast of the island. But no such ship had been seen. Servants answered earnestly that if their emperor could describe the ship, it would be easier for them to know for what to look, but he could not describe the ship, and could only hint that it might not be seen on water at all, but might appear on land. He was all dressed up in his black war gear and it was plain to Dyvim Tvar that Elric was indulging in even larger quantities of the potions which replenished his blood. The crimson eyes gleamed with a hot vitality, the speech was rapid and the bone-white hands moved with unnatural speed when Elric made even the lightest gesture.

'Are you well this morning, my lord?' asked the Dragon Master.

'In excellent spirits, thank you, Dyvim Tvar.' Elric grinned. 'Though I'd feel even better if the Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea were here now.' He went to the balustrade and leaned upon it, peering over the towers and beyond the city walls, looking first to the sea and then to the land. 'Where can it be? I wish that King Straasha had been able to be more specific.'

'I'll agree with that.' Dyvim Tvar, who had not breakfasted, helped himself from the variety of succulent foods laid upon the table. It was evident that Elric had eaten nothing.

Dyvim Tvar began to wonder if the volume of potions had not affected his old friend's brain; perhaps madness, brought about by his involvement with complicated sorcery, his anxiety for Cymoril, his hatred of Yyrkoon, had begun to overwhelm Elric.

'Would it not be better to rest and to wait until the ship is sighted?' he suggested quietly as he wiped his lips.

'Aye--there's reason in that,' Elric agreed. 'But I cannot. I have an urge to be off, Dyvim Tvar, to come face to face with Yyrkoon, to have my revenge on him, to be united with Cymoril again.'

'I understand that. Yet, still...'

Elric's laugh was loud and ragged. 'You fret like Tanglebones over my well-being. I do not need two nursemaids, Lord of the Dragon Caves.'

With an effort Dyvim Tvar smiled. 'You are right. Well, I pray that this magical vessel--what is that?' He pointed out across the island. 'A movement in yonder forest. As if the wind passes through it. But there is no sign of wind elsewhere.'
Elric followed his gaze. 'You are right. I wonder...'

And then they saw something emerge from the forest and the land itself seemed to ripple. It was something which glinted white and blue and black. It came closer.

'A sail,' said Dyvim Tvar. 'It is your ship, I think, my lord.'

'Aye,' Elric whispered, craning forward. 'My ship. Make yourself ready, Dyvim Tvar. By midday we shall be gone from Imrryr.'

What the Earth God Desired

THE SHIP WAS tall and slender and she was delicate. Her rails, masts and bulwarks were exquisitely carved and obviously not the work of a mortal craftsman. Though built of wood, the wood was not painted but naturally shone blue and black and green and a kind of deep smoky red, and her rigging was the colour of sea-weed and there were veins in the planks of her polished deck, like the roots of trees, and the sails on her three tapering masts were as fat and white and light as clouds on a fine summer day. The ship was everything that was lovely in nature; few could look upon her and not feel delighted, as they might be delighted upon sighting a perfect view. In a word, the ship radiated harmony, and Elric could think of no finer vessel in which to sail against Prince Yyrkoon and the dangers of the lands of Oin and Yu.

The ship sailed gently in the ground as if upon the surface of a river and the earth beneath the keel rippled as if turned momentarily to water. Wherever the keel of the ship touched, and a few feet around it, this effect became evident, though, after the ship had passed, the ground would return to its usual stable state. This was why the trees of the forest had swayed as the ship passed through them, parting before the keel as the ship sailed towards Imrryr.

The Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea was not particularly large. Certainly she was considerably smaller than a Melnibonean battle-barge and only a little bigger than a southern galley. But the grace of her; the curve of her line; the pride of her bearing--in these, she had no rival at all.

Already her gangplanks had been lowered down to the ground and she was being made ready for her journey. Elric, hands on his slim hips, stood looking up at King Straasha's gift. From the gates of the city wall slaves were bearing provisions and arms and carrying them up the gangways. Meanwhile Dyvim Tvar was assembling the Imrryrian warriors and assigning them their ranks and duties while on the expedition. There were not many warriors. Only half the available strength could come with the ship, for the other half must remain behind under the command of Admiral Magum Colim and protect the city. It was unlikely that there would be any large attack on Melnibone after the punishment meted out to the barbarian fleet, but it was wise to take precautions, particularly since Prince Yyrkoon had vowed to conquer Imrryr. Also, for some strange reason that none of the onlookers could divine, Dyvim Tvar had called for volunteers--veterans who shared a common disability--and made up a special detachment of these men who, so the onlookers thought, could be of no use at all on the expedition. Still, neither were they of use when it came to defending the city, so they might as well go. These veterans were led aboard first.

Last to climb the gangway was Elric himself. He walked slowly, heavily, a proud figure in his black armour, until he reached the deck. Then he turned, saluted his city, and ordered the gangplank raised.

Dyvim Tvar was waiting for him on the poop-deck. The Lord of the Dragon Caves had stripped off one of his gauntlets and was running his naked hand over the oddly coloured wood of the rail. 'This is not a ship made for war, Elric,' he said. 'I should not like to see it harmed.'

'How can it be harmed?' Elric asked lightly as Imrryian's began to climb the rigging and adjust the sails. 'Would Straasha let it be destroyed? Would Grome? Fear not for the Ship Which Sails Over Land
and Sea, Dyvim Tvar. Fear only for our own safety and the success of our expedition. Now, let us consult the charts. Remembering Straasha's warning concerning his brother Grome, I suggest we travel by sea for as far as possible, calling in here...' he pointed to a sea-port on the western coast of Lormyr--'to get our bearings and learn what we can of the lands of Oin and Yu and how those lands are defended.'

'Few travellers have ever ventured beyond Lormyr. It is said that the edge of the world lies not far from that country's most southerly borders.' Dyvim Tvar frowned. 'Could not this whole mission be a trap, I wonder? Arioch's trap? What if he is in league with Prince Yyrkoon and we have been completely deceived into embarking upon an expedition which will destroy us?'

'I have considered that,' said Elric. 'But there is no other choice. We must trust Arioch.'

'I suppose we must.' Dyvim Tvar smiled ironically. 'Another matter now occurs to me. How does the ship move? I saw no anchors we could raise and there are no tides that I know of that know of that sweep across the land. The wind fills the sails--see.' It was true. The sails were billowing and the masts creaked slightly as they took the strain.

Elric shrugged and spread his hands. 'I suppose we must tell the ship,' he suggested. 'Ship--we are ready to sail.'

Elric took some pleasure in Dyvim Tvar's expression of astonishment as, with a lurch, the ship began to move. It sailed smoothly, as over a calm sea, and Dyvim Tvar instinctively clutched the rail, shouting: 'But we are heading directly for the city wall!'

Elric crossed quickly to the centre of the poop where a large lever lay, horizontally attached to a ratchet which in turn was attached to a spindle. This was almost certainly the steering gear. Elric grasped the lever as one might grasp an oar and pushed it round a notch or two. Immediately the ship responded--and turned towards another part of the wall! Elric hauled back on the lever and the ship leaned, protesting a little as she yawed around and began to head out across the island. Elric laughed in delight.

'You see, Dyvim Tvar, it is easy? A slight effort of logic was all it took!'

'Nonetheless,' said Dyvim Tvar suspiciously, 'I'd rather we rode dragons. At least they are beasts and may be understood. But this sorcery, it troubles me.'

'Those are not fitting words for a noble of Melnibone!' Elric shouted above the sound of the wind in the rigging, the creaking of the ship's timbers, the slap of the great white sails.

'Perhaps not,' said Dyvim Tvar. 'Perhaps that explains why I stand beside you now, my lord.'

Elric darted his friend a puzzled look before he went below to find a helmsman whom he could teach how to steer the ship.

The ship sped swiftly over rocky slopes and up gorse-covered hills; she cut her way through forests and sailed grandly over grassy plains. She moved like a low-flying hawk which keeps close to the ground but progresses with incredible speed and accuracy as it searches for its prey, altering its course with an imperceptible flick of a wing. The soldiers of Imrryr crowded her decks, gasping in amazement at the ship's progress over the land, and many of the men had to be clouted back to their positions at the sails or elsewhere about the ship. The huge warrior who acted as bosun seemed the only member of the crew unaffected by the miracle of the ship. He was behaving as he would normally behave aboard one of the golden battle-barges; going solidly about his duties and seeing to it that all was done in a proper seamanly manner. The helmsman Elric had selected was, on the other hand, wide-eyed and somewhat nervous of the ship he handled. You could see that he felt he was, at any moment, going to be dashed against a slab of rock or smash the ship apart in a tangle of thick-trunked pines. He was forever wetting his lips and wiping sweat from his brow, even though the air was sharp and his breath steamed as it left his throat. Yet he was a good helmsman and gradually he became used to handling the ship, though his movements were, perforce, more rapid, for there was little time to deliberate upon a decision, the ship travelled with such speed over the land. The speed was breathtaking; they sped more swiftly than any horse--were swifter, even, than Dyvim Tvar's beloved dragons. Yet the motion was exhilarating, too, as the expressions on the faces of all the Imrryrians told.

Elric's delighted laughter rang through the ship and infected many another member of the crew.
'Well, if Grome of the Roots is trying to block our progress, I hesitate to guess how fast we shall travel when we reach water!' he called to Dyvim Tvar.

Dyvim Tvar had lost some of his earlier mood. His long, fine hair streamed around his face as he smiled at his friend. 'Aye--we shall all be whisked off the deck and into the sea!'

And then, as if in answer to their words, the ship began suddenly to buck and at the same time sway from side to side, like a ship caught in powerful cross-currents. The helmsman went white and clung to his lever, trying to get the ship back under control. There came a brief, terrified yell and a sailor fell from the highest cross-tree in the main mast and crashed onto the deck, breaking every bone in his body. And then the ship swayed once or twice and the turbulence was behind them and they continued on their course.

Elric stared at the body of the fallen sailor. Suddenly the mood of gaiety left him completely and he gripped the rail in his black gauntleted hands and he gritted his strong teeth and his crimson eyes glowed and his lips curled in self-mockery. 'What a fool I am. What a fool I am to tempt the gods so!'

Still, though the ship moved almost as swiftly as it had done, there seemed to be something dragging at it, as if Grome's minions clung on to the bottom as barnacles might cling in the sea. And Elric sensed something around him in the air, something in the rustling of the trees through which they passed, something in the movement of the grass and the bushes and the flowers over which they crossed, something in the weight of the rocks, of the angle of the hills. And he knew that what he sensed was the presence of Grome of the Ground--Grome of the Land Below the Roots--Grome, who desired to own what he and his brother Straasha had once owned jointly, what they had had made as a sign of the unity between them and over which they had then fought. Grome wanted very much to take back the Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea. And Elric, staring down at the black earth, became afraid.

7

King Grome

BUT AT LAST, with the land tugging at their keel, they reached the sea, sliding into the water and gathering speed with every moment, until Melnibone was gone behind them and they were sighting the thick clouds of steam which hung forever over the Boiling Sea. Elric thought it unwise to risk even this magical vessel in those peculiar waters, so the vessel was turned and headed for the coast of Lormyr, sweetest and most tranquil of the Young Kingdom nations, and the port of Ramasaz on Lormyr's western shore. If the southern barbarians with whom they had so recently fought had been from Lormyr, Elric would have considered making for some other port, but the barbarians had almost certainly been from the South-East on the far side of the continent, beyond Pikarayd. The Lormyrians, under their fat, cautious King Fadan, were not likely to join a raid unless its success were completely assured. Sailing slowly into Ramasaz, Elric gave instructions that their ship be moored in a conventional way and treated like any ordinary ship. It attracted attention, nonetheless, for its beauty, and the inhabitants of the port were astonished to find Melniboneans crewing the vessel. Though Melniboneans were disliked throughout the Young Kingdoms, they were also feared. Thus, outwardly at any rate, Elric and his men were treated with respect and were served reasonably good food and wine in the hostelries they entered.

In the largest of the waterfront inns, a place called Heading Outward and Coming Safely Home Again, Elric found a garrulous host who had, until he bought the inn, been a prosperous fisherman and who knew the southernmost shores reasonably well. He certainly knew the lands of Oin and Yu, but he had no respect for them at all.

'You think they could be massing for war, my lord.' He raised his eyebrows at Elric before hiding his face in his wine-mug. Wiping his lips, he shook his red head. "Then they must war against sparrows. Oin and Yu are barely nations at all. Their only halfway decent city is Dhoz-Kam--and that is shared
between them, half being on one side of the River Ar and half being on the other. As for the rest of Oin and Yu—it is inhabited by peasants who are for the most part so ill-educated and superstition-ridden that they are poverty-striken. Not a potential soldier among 'em.'

'You've heard nothing of a Melnibonean renegade who has conquered Oin and Yu and set about training these peasants to make war?' Dyvim Tvar leaned on the bar next to Elric. He sipped fastidiously from a thick cup of wine. 'Prince Yyrkoon is the renegade's name.'

'Is that whom you seek?' The innkeeper became more interested. 'A dispute between the Dragon Princes, eh?'

'That's our business,' said Elric haughtily.

'Of course, my lords.'

'You know nothing of a great mirror which steals men's memories?' Dyvim Tvar asked.

'A magical mirror!' The innkeeper threw back his head and laughed heartily. 'I doubt if there's one decent mirror in the whole of Oin or Yu! No, my lords, I think you are misled if you fear danger from those lands!'

'Doubtless you are right,' said Elric, staring down into his own untasted wine. 'But it would be wise if we were to check for ourselves—and it would be in Lormyr's interests, too, if we were to find what we seek and warn you accordingly.'

'Fear not for Lormyr. We can deal easily with any silly attempt to make war from that quarter. But if you'd see for yourselves, you must follow the coast for three days until you come to a great bay. The River Ar runs into that bay and on the shores of the river lies Dhoz-Kam—a seedy sort of city, particularly for a capital serving two nations. The inhabitants are corrupt, dirty and disease-ridden, but fortunately they are also lazy and thus afford little trouble, especially if you keep a sword by you. When you have spent an hour in Dhoz-Kam, you will realise the impossibility of such folk becoming a menace to anyone else, unless they should get close enough to you to infect you with one of their several plagues!' Again the innkeeper laughed hugely at his own wit. As he ceased shaking, he added: 'Or unless you fear their navy. It consists of a dozen or so filthy fishing boats, most of which are so unseaworthy they dare only fish the shallows of the estuary.'

Elric pushed his wine-cup aside. 'We thank you, landlord.' He placed a Melnibonean silver piece upon the counter.

'This will be hard to change,' said the innkeeper craftily.

'There is no need to change it on our account,' Elric told him.

'I thank you, masters. Would you stay the night at my establishment. I can offer you the finest beds in Ramasaz.'

'I think not,' Elric told him. 'We shall sleep aboard out ship tonight, that we might be ready to sail at dawn.'

The landlord watched the Melniboneans depart. Instinctively he bit at the silver piece and then, suspecting he tasted something odd about it, removed it from his mouth. He stared at the coin, turning it this way and that. Could Melnibonean silver be poisonous to an ordinary mortal? he wondered. It was best not to take risks. He tucked the coin into his purse and collected up the two wine-cups they had left behind. Though he hated waste, he decided it would be wiser to throw the cups out lest they should have become tainted in some way.

The Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea reached the bay at noon on the following day and now it lay close inshore, hidden from the distant city by a short isthmus on which grew thick, near-tropical foliage. Elric and Dyvim Tvar waded through the clear, shallow water to the beach and entered the forest. They had decided to be cautious and not make their presence known until they had determined the truth of the innkeeper's contemptuous description of Dhoz-Kam. Near the tip of the isthmus was a reasonably high hill and growing on the hill were several good-sized trees. Elric and Dyvim Tvar used their swords to clear a path through the undergrowth and made their way up the hill until they stood
under the trees, picking out the one most easily climbed. Elric selected a tree whose trunk bent and then straightened out again. He sheathed his sword, got his hands onto the trunk and hauled himself up, clambering along until he reached a succession of thick branches which would bear his weight. In the meantime Dyvim Tvar climbed another nearby tree until at last both men could get a good view across the bay where the city of Dhoz-Kam could be clearly seen. Certainly the city itself deserved the innkeeper's description. It was squat and grimy and evidently poor. Doubtless this was why Yyrkoon had chosen it, for the lands of Oin and Yu could not have been hard to conquer with the help of a handful of well-trained Imrryrians and some of Yyrkoon's sorcerous allies. Indeed, few would have bothered to conquer such a place, since its wealth was plainly virtually non-existent and its geographical position of no strategic importance. Yyrkoon had chosen well, for purposes of secrecy if nothing else. But the landlord had been wrong about Dhoz-Kam's fleet. Even from here Elric and Dyvim Tvar could make out a good thirty good-sized warships in the harbour and there seemed to be more anchored up-river. But the ships did not interest them as much as the thing which flashed and glittered above the city--something which had been mounted on huge pillars which supported an axle which, in turn, supported a vast, circular mirror set in a frame whose workmanship was as plainly non-mortal as that of the ship which had brought the Melniboneans here. There was no doubt that they looked upon the Mirror of Memory and that any who had sailed into the harbour after it had been erected must have had their memory of what they had seen stolen from them instantly.

'It seems to me, my lord,' said Dyvim Tvar from his perch a yard or two away from Elric, 'that it would be unwise of us to sail directly into the harbour of Dhoz-Kam. Indeed, we could be in danger if we entered the bay. I think that we look upon the mirror, even now, only because it is not pointed directly at us. But you notice there is machinery to turn it in any direction its user chooses--save one. It cannot be turned inland, behind the city. There is no need for it, for who would approach Oin and Yu from the wastelands beyond their borders and who but the inhabitants of Oin or Yu would need to come overland to their capital?'

'It think I take your meaning, Dyvim Tvar. You suggest that we would be wise to make use of the special properties of our ship and...'

'... and go overland to Dhoz-Kam, striking suddenly and making full use of those veterans we brought with us, moving swiftly and ignoring Prince Yyrkoon's new allies--seeking the prince himself, and his renegades. Could we do that, Elric? Dash into the city--seize Yyrkoon, rescue Cymoril--then speed out again and away?'

'Since we have too few men to make a direct assault, it is all we can do, though it's dangerous. The advantage of surprise would be lost, of course, once we had made the attempt. If we failed in our first attempt it would become much harder to attack a second time. The alternative is to sneak into the city at night and hope to locate Yyrkoon and Cymoril alone, but then we should not be making use of our one important weapon, the Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea. I think your plan is the best one, Dyvim Tvar. Let us turn the ship inland, now, and hope that Grome takes his time in finding us--for I still worry lest he try seriously to wrest the ship from our possession.' Elric began to climb down towards the ground.

Standing once more upon the poop-deck of the lovely ship, Elric ordered the helmsman to turn the vessel once again towards the land. Under half-sail the ship moved gracefully through the water and up the curve of the bank and the flowering shrubs of the forest parted before its prow and then they were sailing through the green dark of the jungle, while startled birds cawed and shrilled and little animals paused in astonishment and peered down from the trees at the Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea and some almost lost their balance as the graceful boat progressed calmly over the floor of the forest, turning aside for only the thickest of the trees.

And thus they made their way to the interior of the land called Oin, which lay to the north of the River Ar, which marked the border between Oin and the land called Yu with which Oin shared a single
capital.

Oin was a country consisting largely of unforested jungle and infertile plains where the inhabitants farmed, for they feared the forest and would not go into it, even though that was where Oin's wealth might be found.

The ship sailed well enough through the forest and out over the plain and soon they could see a large lake glinting ahead of them and Dyvim Tvar, glancing at the crude map with which he had furnished himself in Ramasaz, suggested that they begin to turn towards the south again and approach Dhoz-Kam by means of a wide semi-circle. Elric agreed and the ship began to tack round.

It was then that the land began to heave again and huge waves of grassy earth this time rolled around the ship and blotted out the surrounding view. The ship pitched wildly up and down and from side to side. Two more Imryrians fell from the rigging and were killed on the deck below. The bosun was shouting loudly—though in fact all this upheaval was happening in silence—and the silence made the situation seem that much more menacing. The bosun yelled to his men to tie themselves to their positions. 'And all those not doing anything—get below at once!' he added.

Elric had wound a scarf around the rail and tied the other end to his wrist. Dyvim Tvar had used a long belt for the same purpose. But still they were flung in all directions, often losing their footing as the ship bucked this way and that, and every bone in Elric's body seemed about to crack and every inch of his flesh seemed bruised. And the ship was creaking and protesting and threatening to break up under the awful strain of riding the heaving land.

'Is this Grome's work, Elric?' Dyvim Tvar panted. 'Or is it some sorcery of Yyrkoon's?'

Elric shook his head. 'Not Yyrkoon. It is Grome. And I know no way to placate him. Not Grome, who thinks least of all the Kings of the Elements, yet, perhaps, is the most powerful.'

'But surely he breaks his bargain with his brother by doing this to us?'

'No. I think not. King Straasha warned us this might happen. We can only hope that Grome expends all his energy and that the ship survives, as it might survive a natural storm at sea.'

'This is worse than a sea-storm, Elric!'

Elric nodded his agreement but could say nothing, for the deck was tilting at a crazy angle and he had to cling to the rails with both hands in order to retain any kind of footing.

And now the silence stopped.

Instead they heard a rumbling and a roaring that seemed to have something of the character of laughter.

'King Grome!' Elric shouted. 'King Grome! Let us be! We have done you no harm!'

But the laughter increased and it made the whole ship quiver as the land rose and fell around it, as trees and hills and rocks rushed towards the ship and then fell away again, never quite engulfing them, for Grome doubtless wanted his ship intact.

'Grome! You have no quarrel with mortals!' Elric cried again. 'Let us be! Ask a favour of us if you must, but grant us this favour in return!'

Elric was shouting almost anything that came into his head. Really, he had no hope of being heard by the earth god and he did not expect King Grome to bother to listen even if the elemental did hear. But there was nothing else to do.

'Grome! Grome! Grome! Listen to me!'

Elric's only response was in the louder laughter which made every nerve in him tremble. And the earth heaved higher and dropped lower and the ship spun round and round until Elric was sure he would lose his senses entirely.

'King Grome! King Grome! Is it just to slay those who have never done you harm?'

And then, slowly, the heaving earth subsided and the ship was still and a huge, brown figure stood looking down at the ship. The figure was the colour of earth and looked like a vast, old oak. His hair and his beard were the colour of leaves and his eyes were the colour of gold ore and his teeth were the colour of granite and his feet were like roots and his skin seemed covered in tiny green shoots in place of hair.
and he smelled rich and musty and good and he was King Grome of the Earth Elementals. He sniffed and he frowned and he said in a soft, mighty voice that was yet coarse and grumpy: 'I want my ship.'

'It is not our ship to give, King Grome,' said Elric.

Grome's tone of petulance increased. 'I want my ship,' he said slowly. 'I want the thing. It is mine.'

'Of what use is it to you, King Grome?'

'Use? It is mine.'

Grome stamped and the land rippled.

Elric said desperately: 'It is your brother's ship, King Grome. It is King Straasha's ship. He gave you part of his domain and you allowed him to keep the ship. That was the bargain.'

'I know nothing of a bargain. The ship is mine.'

'You know that if you take the ship then King Straasha will have to take back the land he gave you.'

'I want my ship.' The huge figure shifted its position and bits of earth fell from it, landing with distinctly heard thuds on the ground below and on the deck of the ship.

'Then you must kill us to obtain it,' Elric said.

'Kill? Grome does not kill mortals. He kills nothing. Grome builds. Grome brings to life.'

'You have already killed three of our company,' Elric pointed out. 'Three are dead, King Grome, because you made the land-storm.'

Grome's great brows drew together and he scratched his great head, causing an immense rustling noise to sound. 'Grome does not kill,' he said again.

'King Grome has killed,' said Elric reasonably. 'Three lives lost.'

'Grome grunted. 'But I want my ship,'

'The ship is lent to us by your brother. We cannot give it to you. Besides, we sail in it for a purpose--a noble purpose, I think. We...'

'I know nothing of "purposes"--and care nothing for you. I want my ship. My brother should not have lent it to you. I had almost forgotten it. But now that I remember it, I want it.'

'Will you not accept something else in place of the ship, King Grome?' said Dyvim Tvar suddenly. 'Some other gift.'

Grome shook his monstrous head. 'How could a mortal give me something? It is mortals who take from me all the time. They steal my bones and my blood and my flesh. Could you give me back all that your kind has taken?'

'Is there not one thing?' Elric said.

Grome closed his eyes.

'Precious metals? Jewels?' suggested Dyvim Tvar.

'We have many such in Melnibone.'

'I have plenty,' said King Grome.

Elric shrugged in despair. 'How can we bargain with a god, Dyvim Tvar?' He gave a bitter smile.

'What can the Lord of the Soil desire? More sun, more rain? These are not ours to give.'

'I am a rough sort of god,' said Grome, 'if indeed god I am. But I did not mean to kill your comrades. I have an idea. Give me the bodies of the slain. Bury them in my earth.'

'Elric's heart leapt. 'That is all you wish of us.'

'It would seem much to me.'

'And for that you will let us sail on?'

'On water, aye,' growled Grome. 'But I do not see why I should allow you to sail over my land. It is too much to expect of me. You can go to yonder lake, but from now this ship will only possess the properties bestowed upon it by my brother Straasha. No longer shall it cross my domain.'

'But, King Grome, we need this ship. We are upon urgent business. We need to sail to the city yonder.' Elric pointed in the direction of Dhoz-Kam.

'You may go to the lake, but after that the ship will sail only on water. Now give me what I ask.'
Elric called down to the bosun who, for the first time, seemed amazed by what he was witnessing. 'Bring up the bodies of the three dead men.'

The bodies were brought up from below. Grome stretched out one of his great, earthy hands and picked them up.

'I thank you,' he growled. 'Farewell.'

And slowly Grome began to descend into the ground, his whole huge frame becoming, atom by atom, absorbed with the earth until he was gone.

And then the ship was moving again, slowly towards the lake, on the last short voyage it would ever make upon the land.

'And thus our plans are thwarted,' said Elric.

Dyvim Tvar looked miserably towards the shining lake. 'Aye. So much for that scheme. I hesitate to suggest this to you, Elric, but I fear we must resort to sorcery again if we are to stand any chance of achieving our goal.'

Elric sighed.

'I fear we must,' he said.

The City and the Mirror

PRINCE YYRKOON WAS pleased. His plans went well. He peered through the high fence which enclosed the flat roof of his house (three storeys high and the finest in Dhoz-Kam); he looked out towards the harbour at his splendid, captured fleet. Every ship which had come to Dhoz-Kam and which had not flown the standard of a powerful nation had been easily taken after its crew had looked upon the great mirror which squatted on its pillars above the city. Demons had built those pillars and Prince Yyrkoon had paid them for their work with the souls of all those in Oin and Yu who had resisted him. Now there was one last ambition to fulfil and then he and his new followers would be on their way to Melnibone...

He turned and spoke to his sister. Cymoril lay on a wooden bench, staring unseeingly at the sky, clad in the filthy tatters of the dress she had been wearing when Yyrkoon abducted her from her tower.

'See our fleet, Cymoril! While the golden barges are scattered we shall sail unhampered into Imrryr and declare the city ours. Elric cannot defend himself against us now. He fell so easily into my trap. He is a fool! And you were a fool to give him your affection!'

Cymoril made no response. Through all the months she had been away, Yyrkoon had drugged her food and drink and produced in her a lassitude which rivalled Elric's undrugged condition. Yyrkoon's own experiments with his sorcerous powers had turned him gaunt, wild-eyed and somewhat mangy; he ceased to take any pains with his physical appearance. But Cymoril had a wasted, haunted look to her, for all that beauty remained. It was as if Dhoz-Kam's rundown seediness had infected them both in different ways.

'Fear not for your own future, however, my sister,' Yyrkoon continued. He chuckled. 'You shall still be empress and sit beside the emperor on his Ruby Throne. Only I shall be emperor and Elric shall die for many days and the manner of his death will be more inventive than anything he thought to do to me.'

Cymoril's voice was hollow and distant. She did not turn her head when she spoke. 'You are insane, Yyrkoon.'

'Insane? Come now, sister, is that a word that a true Melnibonean should use? We Melniboneans judge nothing sane or insane. What a man is--he is. What he does--he does. Perhaps you have stayed too long in the Young Kingdoms and its judgments are becoming yours. But that shall soon be righted. We shall return to the Dragon Isle in triumph and you will forget all this, just as if you yourself had - looked
into the Mirror of Memory.' He darted a nervous glance upwards, as if he half-expected the mirror to be turned on him.

Cymoril closed her eyes. Her breathing was heavy and very slow; she was bearing this nightmare with fortitude, certain that Elric must eventually rescue her from it. That hope was all that had stopped her from destroying herself. If the hope went altogether, then she would bring about her own death and be done with Yyrkoon and all his horrors.

'Did I tell you that last night I was successful? I raised demons, Cymoril. Such powerful, dark demons. I learned from them all that was left for me to learn. And I opened the Shade Gate at last. Soon I shall pass through it and there I shall find what I seek. I shall become the most powerful mortal on earth. Did I tell you all this, Cymoril?'

He had, in fact, repeated himself several times that morning, but Cymoril had paid no more attention to him than she did now. She felt so tired. She tried to sleep. She said slowly, as if to remind herself of something: 'I hate you, Yyrkoon.'

'Ah, but you shall love me soon, Cymoril. Soon.' 'Elric will come...'

'Elric! Ha! He sits twiddling his thumbs in his tower, waiting for news that will never come--save when I bring it to him!'

'Elric will come,' she said.

Yyrkoon snarled. A brute-faced Oinish girl brought him his morning wine. Yyrkoon seized the cup and sipped the stuff. Then he spat it at the girl who, trembling, ducked away. Yyrkoon took the jug and emptied it onto the white dust of the roof. 'This is Elric's thin blood. This is how it will flow away!'

But again Cymoril was not listening. She was trying to remember her albino lover and the few sweet days they had spent together since they were children.

Yyrkoon hurled the empty jug at the girl's head, but she was adept at dodging him. As she dodged, she murmured her standard response to all his attacks and insults. 'Thank you, Demon Lord,' she said. 'Thank you, Demon Lord.'

Yyrkoon laughed. 'Aye. Demon Lord. Your folk are right to call me that, for I rule more demons than I rule men. My power increases every day!'

The Oinish girl hurried away to fetch more wine, for she knew he would be calling for it in a moment. Yyrkoon crossed the roof to stare through the slats in the fence at the proof of his power, but as he looked upon his ships he heard sounds of confusion from the other side of the roof. Could the Yurits and the Oinish be fighting amongst themselves? Where were their Imrryrian centurions. Where was Captain Valharik?

He almost ran across the roof, passing Cymoril who appeared to be sleeping, and peered down into the streets.

'Fire?' he murmured. 'Fire?'

It was true that the streets appeared to be on fire. And yet it was not an ordinary fire. Balls of fire seemed to drift about, igniting rush-thatched roofs, doors, anything which would easily burn--as an invading army might put a village to the torch.

Yyrkoon scowled, thinking at first that he had been careless and some spell of his had turned against him, but then he looked over the burning houses at the river and he saw a strange ship sailing there, a ship of great grace and beauty, that somehow seemed more a creation of nature than of man--and he knew they were under attack. But who would attack Dhoz-Kam? There was no loot worth the effort. It could not be Imrryrians...

It could not be Elric.

'It must not be Elric,' he growled. 'The Mirror. It must be turned upon the invaders.'

'And upon yourself, brother?' Cymoril had risen unsteadily and leaned against a table. She was smiling. 'You were too confident, Yyrkoon. Elric comes.'

'Elric! Nonsense! Merely a few barbarian raiders from the interior. Once they are in the centre of the city, we shall be able to use the Mirror of Memory upon them.' He ran to the trapdoor which led
down into his house. 'Captain Valharik! Valharik where are you?'
Valharik appeared in the room below. He was sweating. There was a blade in his gloved hand, though he did not seem to have been in any fighting as yet.
'Make the mirror ready, Valharik. Turn it upon the attackers.'
'But, my lord, we might...'
'Hurry! Do as I say. We'll soon have these barbarians added to our own strength--along with their ships.'
'Barbarians, my lord? Can barbarians command the fire elementals? These things we fight are flame spirits. They cannot be slain any more than fire itself can be slain.'
'Fire can be slain by water,' Prince Yyrkoon reminded his lieutenant. 'By water, Captain Valharik. Have you forgotten?'
'But, Prince Yyrkoon, we have tried to quench the spirits with water--and the water will not move from our buckets. Some powerful sorcerer commands the invaders. He has the aid of the spirits of fire and water.'
'You are mad, Captain Valharik,' said Yyrkoon firmly. 'Mad. Prepare the mirror and let us have no more of these stupidities.'
Valharik wetted his dry lips. 'Aye, my lord.' He bowed his head and went to do his master's bidding.
Again Yyrkoon went to the fence and looked through. There were men in the streets now, fighting his own warriors, but smoke obscured his view, he could not make out the identities of any of the invaders. 'Enjoy your petty victory,' Yyrkoon chuckled, 'for soon the mirror will take away your minds and you will become my slaves.'
'It is Elric,' said Cymoril quietly. She smiled. 'Elric comes to take vengeance on you, brother.'
Yyrkoon sniggered. 'Think you? Think you? Well, should that be the case, he'll find me gone, for I still have a means of evading him--and he'll find you in a condition which will not please him (though it will cause him considerable anguish). But it is not Elric. It is some crude shaman from the steppes to the east of here. He will soon be in my power.'
Cymoril, too, was peering through the fence.
'Elric,' she said. 'I can see his helm.'
'What?' Yyrkoon pushed her aside. There, in the streets, Imrryrian fought Imrryrian, there was no longer any doubt of that. Yyrkoon's men--Imrryrian, Oinish and Yurit--were being pushed back. And at the head of the attacking Imrryrians could be seen a black dragon helm such as only one Melnibonean wore. It was Elric's helm. And Elric's sword, that had once belonged to Earl Aubec of Malador, rose and fell and was bright with blood which glistened in the morning sunshine.
For a moment Yyrkoon was overwhelmed with despair. He groaned. 'Elric. Elric. Elric. Ah, how we continue to underestimate each other. What curse is on us?'
Cymoril had flung back her head and her face had come to life again. 'I said he would come, brother!' Yyrkoon whirled on her. 'Aye--he has come--and the mirror will rob him of his brain and he will turn into my slave, believing anything I care to put in his skull. This is even sweeter than I planned, sister. Ha!' He looked up and then flung his arms across his eyes as he realised what he had done. 'Quickly--below--into the house--the mirror begins to turn.' There came a great creaking of gears and pulleys and chains as the terrible Mirror of Memory began to focus on the streets below. 'It will be only a little while before Elric has added himself and his men to my strength. What a splendid irony!' Yyrkoon hurried his sister down the steps leading from the roof and he closed the trapdoor behind him. 'Elric himself will help in the attack on Imrryr. He will destroy his own kind. He will oust himself from the Ruby Throne!'
'Do you not think that Elric has anticipated the threat of the Mirror of Memory, brother?' Cymoril said with relish.
'Anticipate it, aye--but resist it he cannot. He must see to fight. He must either be cut down or open
his eyes. No man with eyes can be safe from the power of the mirror.' He glanced around the crudely furnished room. 'Where is Valharik? Where is the cur?'

Valharik came running in. 'The mirror is being turned, my lord, but it will affect our own men, too. I fear...'

'Then cease to fear. What if our own men are drawn under its influence? We can soon feed what they need to know back into their brains--at the same time as we feed our defeated foes. You are too nervous, Captain Valharik.'

'But Elric leads them...'

'And Elric's eyes are eyes--though they look like crimson stones. He will fare no better than his men.'

In the streets around Prince Yyrkoon's house Elric, Dyvim Tvar and their Imrryrians pushed on, forcing back their demoralised opponents. The attackers had lost barely a man, whereas many Oinish and Yurits lay dead in the streets, beside a few of their renegade Imrryrian commanders. The flame elementals, whom Elric had summoned with some effort, were beginning to disperse, for it cost them dear to spend so much time entirely within Elric's plane, but the necessary advantage had been gained and there was now little question of who would win as a hundred or more houses blazed throughout the city, igniting others and requiring attention from the defenders lest the whole squalid place burn down about their ears. In the harbour, too, ships were burning.

Dyvim Tvar was the first to notice the mirror beginning to swing into focus on the streets. He pointed a warning finger, then turned, blowing on his war-horn and ordering forward the troops who, up to now, had played no part in the fighting. 'Now you must lead us!' he cried, and he lowered his helm over his face. The eyeholes of the helm had been blocked so that he could not see through.

Slowly Elric lowered his own helm until he was in darkness. The sound of fighting continued however, as the veterans who had sailed with them from Melnibone, set to work in their place and the other troops fell back. The leading Imrryrians had not blocked their eyeholes.

Elric prayed that the scheme would work.

Yyrkoon, peeking cautiously through a chink in a heavy curtain, said querulously: 'Valharik? They fight on. Why is that? Is not the mirror focussed?'

'It should be, my lord.'

'Then, see for yourself, the Imrryrians continue to forge through our defenders--and our men are beginning to come under the influence of the mirror. What is wrong, Valharik? What is wrong?'

Valharik drew air between his teeth and there was a certain admiration in his expression as he looked upon the fighting Imrryrians.

'They are blind,' he said. 'They fight by sound and touch and smell. They are blind, my lord emperor--and they lead Elric and his men whose helms are so designed they can see nothing.'

'Blind?' Yyrkoon spoke almost pathetically, refusing to understand. 'Blind?'

'Aye. Blind warriors--men wounded in earlier wars, but good fighters nonetheless. That is how Elric defeats our mirror, my lord.'

'Agh! No! No!' Yyrkoon beat heavily on his captain's back and the man shrank away. 'Elric is not cunning. He is not cunning. Some powerful demon gives him these ideas.'

'Perhaps, my lord. But are there demons more powerful than those who have aided you?'

'No," said Yyrkoon. 'There are none. Oh, that I could summon some of them now. But I have expended my powers in opening the Shade Gate. I should have anticipated... I could not anticipate... Oh Elric! I shall yet destroy you, when the runeblades are mine!' Then Yyrkoon frowned. 'But how could he have been prepared? What demon .... ? Unless he summoned Arioch himself? But he has not the power to summon Arioch. I could not summon him...''

And then, as if in reply, Yyrkoon heard Elric's battle song sounding from the nearby streets. And
that song answered the question.

'Arioch! Arioch! Blood and souls for my lord Arioch!'

'Then I must have the runeblades. I must pass through the Shade Gate. There I still have allies--supernatural allies who shall deal easily with Elric, if need be. But I need time...' Yyrkoon mumbled to himself as he paced about the room. Valharik continued to watch the fighting.

'They come closer,' said the captain.

Cymoril smiled. 'Closer, Yyrkoon? Who is the fool now? Elric? Or you?'

'Be still! I think. I think...' Yyrkoon fingered his lips.

Then a light came into his eye and he looked cunningly at Cymoril for a second before turning his attention to Captain Valharik.

'Valharik, you must destroy the Mirror of Memory.'

'Destroy it? But it is our only weapon, my lord?' 'Exactly--but is it not useless now?'

'Aye.'

'Destroy it and it will serve us again.' Yyrkoon flicked a long finger in the direction of the door. 'Go. Destroy the mirror.'

'But, Prince Yyrkoon--emperor, I mean--will that not have the effect of robbing us of our only weapon?'

'Do as I say, Valharik! Or perish!'

'But how shall I destroy it, my lord?'

'Your sword. You must climb the column behind the face of the mirror. Then, without looking into the mirror itself, you must swing your sword against it and smash it. It will break easily. You know the precautions I have had to take to make sure that it was not harmed.'

'Is that all I must do?'

'Aye. Then you are free from my service--you may escape or do whatever else you wish to do.'

'Do we not sail against Melnibone?'

'Of course not. I have devised another method of taking the Dragon Isle.'

Valharik shrugged. His expression showed that he had never really believed Yyrkoon's assurances. But what else had he to do but follow Yyrkoon, when fearful torture awaited him at Elric's hands? With shoulders bowed, the captain slunk away to do his prince's work.

'And now, Cymoril...' Yyrkoon grinned like a ferret as he reached out to grab his sister's soft shoulders. 'Now to prepare you for your lover, Elric.'

One of the blind warriors cried: 'They no longer resist us, my lord. They are limp and allow themselves to be cut down where they stand. Why is this?'

'The mirror has robbed them of their memories,' Elric called, turning his own blind head towards the sound of the warrior's voice. 'You can lead us into a building now--where, with luck, we shall not glimpse the mirror.'

At last they stood within what appeared to Elric, as he lifted his helm, to be a warehouse of some kind. Luckily it was large enough to hold their entire force and when they were all inside Elric had the doors shut while they debated their next action.

'We should find Yyrkoon,' Dyvim Tvar said. 'Let us interrogate one of those warriors...'

'There'll be little point in that, my friend,' Elric reminded him. 'Their minds are gone. They'll remember nothing at all. They do not at present remember even what they are, let alone who. Go to the shutters yonder, where the mirror's influence cannot reach, and see if you can see the building most likely to be occupied by my cousin.'

Dyvim Tvar crossed swiftly to the shutters and looked cautiously out. 'Aye--there's a building larger than the rest and I see some movement within, as if the surviving warriors were regrouping. It's likely
that's Yyrkoon's stronghold. It should be easily taken.'

Elric joined him. 'Aye. I agree with you. We'll find Yyrkoon there. But we must hurry, lest he
decides to slay Cymoril. We must work out the best means of reaching the place and instruct our blind
warriors as to how many streets, how many houses and so forth, we must pass.'

'What is that strange sound?' One of the blind warriors raised his head. 'Like the distant ringing of a
gong.'

'I hear it too,' said another blind man.

And now Elric heard it. A sinister noise. It came from the air above them. It shivered through the
atmosphere.

'The mirror!' Dyvim Tvar looked up. 'Has the mirror some property we did not anticipate?'

'Possibly...' Elric tried to remember what Arioch had told him. But Arioch had been vague. He had
said nothing of this dreadful, mighty sound, this shattering clangour as if... 'He is breaking the mirror!' he
said. 'But why?' There was something more now, something brushing at his brain. As if the sound were,
itself, sentient.

'Perhaps Yyrkoon is dead and his magic dies with him,' Dyvim Tvar began. And then he broke off
with a groan.

The noise was louder, more intense, bringing sharp pain to his ears.

And now Elric knew. He blocked his ears with his gauntleted hands. The memories in the mirror.
They were flooding into his mind. The mirror had been smashed and was releasing all the memories it
had stolen over the centuries--the aeons, perhaps. Many of those memories were not mortal. Many were
the memories of beasts and intelligent creatures which had existed even before Melnibone. And the
memories warred for a place in Elric's skull--in the skulls of all the Imrrryrians--in the poor, tortured
skulls of the men outside whose pitiful screams could be heard rising from the streets--and in the skull of
Captain Valharik, the turncoat, as he lost his footing on the great column and fell with the shards from
the mirror to the ground far below.

But Elric did not hear Captain Valharik scream and he did not hear Valharik's body crash first to a
roof-top and then into the street where it lay all broken beneath the broken mirror.

Elric lay upon the stone floor of the warehouse and he writhed, as his comrades writhed, trying to
clear his head of a million memories that were not his own--of loves, of hatreds, of strange experiences
and ordinary experiences, of wars and journeys, of the faces of relatives who were not his relatives, of
men and women and children, of animals, of ships and cities; of fights, of lovemaking, of fears and
desires--and the memories fought each other for possession of his crowded skull, threatening to drive his
own memories (and thus his own character) from his head. And as Elric writhed upon the ground,
clutching at his ears, he spoke a word over and over again in an effort to cling to his own identity.

'Elric. Elric. Elric.'

And gradually, by an effort which he had experienced only once before when he had summoned
Arioch to the plane of the Earth, he managed to extinguish all those alien memories and assert his own
until, shaken and feeble, he lowered his hands from his ears and no longer shouted his own name. And
then he stood up and looked about him.

More than two thirds of his men were dead, blind or otherwise. The big bosun was dead, his eyes
wide and staring, his lips frozen in a scream, his right eye-socket raw and bleeding from where he had
tried to drag his eye from it. All the corpses lay in unnatural positions, all had their eyes open (if they
had eyes) and many bore the marks of self-mutilation, while others had vomited and others had dashed
their brains against the wall. Dyvim Tvar was alive, but curled up in a corner, mumbling to himself and
Elric thought he might be mad. Some of the other survivors were, indeed, mad, but they were quiet, they
afforded no danger. Only five, including Elric, seemed to have resisted the alien memories and retained
their own sanity. It seemed to Elric, as he stumbled from corpse to corpse, that most of the men had had
their hearts fail.

'Dyvim Tvar?' Elric put his hand on his friend's shoulder. 'Dyvim Tvar?'
Dyvim Tvar took his head from his arm and looked into Elric's eyes. In Dyvim Tvar's own eyes was the experience of a score of millennia and there was irony there, too. 'I live, Elric.'

'Few of us live now.'

A little later they left the warehouse, no longer needing to fear the mirror, and found that all the streets were full of the dead who had received the mirror's memories. Stiff bodies reached out hands to them. Dead lips formed silent pleas for help. Elric tried not to look at them as he pressed through them, but his desire for vengeance upon his cousin was even stronger now.

They reached the house. The door was open and the ground floor was crammed with corpses. There was no sign of Prince Yyrkoon.

Elric and Dyvim Tvar led the few Imrryrians who were still sane up the steps, past more imploring corpses, until they reached the top floor of the house.

And here they found Cymoril.

She was lying upon a couch and she was naked. There were runes painted on her flesh and the runes were, in themselves, obscene. Her eyelids were heavy and she did not at first recognise them. Elric rushed to her side and cradled her body in his arms. The body was oddly cold.

'He--he makes me--sleep...' said Cymoril. 'A sorcerous sleep--from which--only he can wake me...'

She gave a great yawn. 'I have stayed awake --this long--by an effort of--will--for Elric comes...'

'Elric is here,' said her lover, softly. 'I am Elric, Cymoril.'

'Elric?' She relaxed in his arms. 'You--you must find Yyrkoon--for only he can wake me...'

'Where has he gone?' Elric's face had hardened. His crimson eyes were fierce. 'Where?'

'To find the two black swords--the runeswords--of--our ancestors--Mournblade...'

'And Stormbringer,' said Elric grimly. 'Those swords are cursed. But where has he gone, Cymoril? How has he escaped us?'

'Through--through--through the--Shade Gate--he conjured it--he made the most fearful pacts with demons to go through... The--other--room . . .'

Now Cymoril slept, but there seemed to be a certain peace on her face.

Elric watched as Dyvim Tvar crossed the room, sword in hand, and flung the door open. A dreadful stench came from the next room, which was in darkness. Something flickered on the far side.

'Aye--that's sorcery, right enough,' said Elric. 'And Yyrkoon has thwarted me. He conjured the Shade Gate and passed through it into some nether-world. Which one, I'll never know, for there is an infinity of them. Oh, Arioch, I would give much to follow my cousin!'

'Then follow him you shall,' said a sweet, sardonic voice in Elric's head.

At first the albino thought it was a vestige of a memory still fighting for possession of his head, but then he knew that Arioch spoke to him.

'Dismiss your followers that I may speak with thee,' said Arioch.

Elric hesitated. He wished to be alone--but not with Arioch. He wished to be with Cymoril, for Cymoril was making him weep. Tears already flowed from his crimson eyes.

'What I have to say could result in Cymoril being restored to her normal state,' said the voice. 'And, moreover, it will help you defeat Yyrkoon and be revenged upon him. Indeed, it could make you the most powerful mortal there has ever been.'

Elric looked up at Dyvim Tvar. 'Would you and your men leave me alone for a few moments?'

'Of course.' Dyvim Tvar led his men away and shut the door behind him.

Arioch stood leaning against the same door. Again he had assumed the shape and poise of a handsome youth. His smile was friendly and open and only the ancient eyes belied his appearance.

'It is time to seek the black swords yourself, Elric,' said Arioch. 'Lest Yyrkoon reach them first. I warn you of this--with the runeblades Yyrkoon will be so powerful he will be able to destroy half the world without thinking of it. That is why your cousin risks the dangers of the world beyond the Shade Gate. If Yyrkoon possesses those swords before you find them, it will mean the end of you, of Cymoril,
of the Young Kingdoms and, quite possibly, the destruction of Melnibone, too. I will help you enter the
netherworld to seek for the twin runeswords.'

Elric said musingly: 'I have often been warned of the dangers of seeking the swords--and the worse
dangers of owning them. I think I must consider another plan, my lord Arioch.'

'There is no other plan. Yyrkoon desires the swords if you do not. With Mournblade in one hand
and Stormbringer in the other, he will be invincible, for the swords give their user power. Immense
power.' Arioch paused.

'You must do as I say. It is to your advantage.' 'And to yours, Lord Arioch?'

'Aye--to mine. I am not entirely selfless.'

Elric shook his head. 'I am confused. There has been too much of the supernatural about this affair.
I suspect the gods of manipulating us...'

'The gods serve only those who are willing to serve them. And the gods serve destiny, also.'

'I like it not. To stop Yyrkoon is one thing, to assume his ambitions and take the swords myself--
that is another thing.'

'It is your destiny.'

'Cannot I change my destiny?'

Arioch shook his head. 'No more than can I.'

Elric stroked sleeping Cymoril's hair. 'I love her. She is all I desire.'

'You shall not wake her if Yyrkoon finds the blades before you do.'

'And how shall I find the blades?'

'Enter the Shade Gate--I have kept it open, though Yyrkoon thinks it closed--then you must seek the
Tunnel Under the Marsh which leads to the Pulsing Cavern. In that chamber the runeswords are kept.
They have been kept there ever since your ancestors relinquished them...'

'Why were they relinquished.'

'Your ancestors lacked courage.'

'Courage to face what?'

'Themselves.'

'You are cryptic, my lord Arioch.'

'That is the way of the Lords of the Higher Worlds. Hurry. Even I cannot keep the Shade Gate open
long.'

'Very well. I will go.'

And Arioch vanished immediately.

Elric called in a hoarse, cracking voice for Dyvim Tvar. Dyvim Tvar entered at once.

'Elric? What has happened in here? Is it Cymoril? You look...'

'I am going to follow Yyrkoon--alone, Dyvim Tvar.' You must make your way back to Melnibone
with those of our men who remain. Take Cymoril with you. If I do not return in reasonable time, you
must declare her empress. If she still sleeps, then you must rule as regent until she wakes.'

Dyvim Tvar said softly: 'Do you know what you do, Elric?'

Elric shook his head.

'No, Dyvim Tvar, I do not.'

He got to his feet and staggered towards the other room where the Shade Gate waited for him.

BOOK THREE

And now there is no turning back at all Elric's destiny has been forged and fixed as surely as the
hell swords were forged and fixed aeons before. Was there ever a point where he might have turned off
this road to despair, damnation and destruction? Or has he been doomed since before his birth? Doomed
through a thousand incarnations to know little else but sadness and struggle, loneliness and remorse--
eternally the champion of some unknown cause?

1

Through the Shade Gate

AND ELRIC STEPPED into a shadow and found himself in a world of shadows. He turned, but the
shadow through which he had entered now faded and was gone. Old Aubec's sword was in Elric's hand,
the black helm and the black armour were upon his body and only these were familiar, for the land was
dark and gloomy as if contained in a vast cave whose walls, though invisible, were oppressive and
tangible. And Elric regretted the hysteria, the weariness of brain, which had given him the impulse to
obey his patron demon Arioch and plunge through the Shade Gate. But regret was useless now, so he
forgot it.

Yyrkoon was nowhere to be seen. Either Elric's cousin had had a steed awaiting him or else, more
likely, he had entered this world at a slightly different angle (for all the planes were said to turn about
each other) and was thus either nearer or farther from their mutual goal. The air was rich with brine--so
rich that Elric's nostrils felt as if they had been packed with salt--it was almost like walking under water
and just being able to breathe the water itself. Perhaps this explained why it was so difficult to see any
great distance in any direction, why there were so many shadows, why the sky was like a veil which hid
the roof of a cavern. Elric sheathed his sword, there being no evident danger present at that moment, and
turned slowly, trying to get some kind of bearing.

It was possible that there were jagged mountains in what he judged the east, and perhaps a forest to
the west. Without sun, or stars, or moon, it was hard to gauge distance or direction. He stood on a rocky
plain over which whistled a cold and sluggish wind, which tugged at his cloak as if it wished to possess
it. There were a few stunted, leafless trees standing in a clump about a hundred paces away. It was all
that relieved the bleak plain, save for a large, shapeless slab of rock which stood a fair way beyond the
trees. It was a world which seemed to have been drained of all life, where Law and Chaos had once
battled and, in their conflict, destroyed all. Were there many planes such as this one? Elric wondered.
And for a moment he was filled with a dreadful presentiment concerning the fate of his own rich world.
He shook this mood off at once and began to walk towards the trees and the rock beyond.

He reached the trees and passed them, and the touch of his cloak on a branch broke the brittle thing
which turned almost at once to ash which was scattered on the wind. Elric drew the cloak closer about
his body.

As he approached the rock he became conscious of a sound which seemed to emanate from it. He
slowed his pace and put his hand upon the pommel of his sword.

The noise continued--a small, rhythmic noise. Through the gloom Elric peered carefully at the rock,
trying to locate the source of the sound.

And then the noise stopped and was replaced by another--a soft scuffle, a padding footfall, and then
silence. Elric took a pace backward and drew Aubec's sword. The first sound had been that of a man
sleeping. The second sound was that of a man waking and preparing himself either for attack or to
defend himself.

Elric said: 'I am Elric of Melnibone. I am a stranger here.'

And an arrow slid past his helm almost at the same moment as a bowstring sounded. Elric flung
himself to one side and sought about for cover, but there was no cover save the rock behind which the
archer hid.

And now a voice came from behind the rock. It was a firm, rather bleak voice. It said:
'That was not meant to harm you but to display my skill in case you considered harming me. I have
had my fill of demons in this world and you look like the most dangerous demon of all, Whiteface.'

'I am mortal,' said Elric, straightening up and deciding that if he must die it would be best to die with some sort of dignity.

'You spoke of Melnibone. I have heard of the place. An isle of demons.'

'Then you have not heard enough of Melnibone. I am mortal as are all my folk. Only the ignorant think us demons.'

'I am not ignorant, my friend. I am a Warrior Priest of Phum, born to that caste and the inheritor of all its knowledge and, until recently, the Lords of Chaos themselves were my patrons. Then I refused to serve them longer and was exiled to this plane by them. Perhaps the same fate befell you, for the folk of Melnibone serve Chaos do they not?'

'Aye. And I know of Phum--it lies in the unmapped East--beyond the Weeping Waste, beyond the Sighing Desert, beyond even Elwher. It is one of the oldest of the Young Kingdoms.'

'All that is so--though I dispute that the East is unmapped, save by the savages of the West. So you are, indeed, to share my exile, it seems.'

'I am not exiled. I am upon a quest. When the quest is done, I shall return to my own world.'

'Return, say you? That interests me, my pale friend. I had thought return impossible.'

'Perhaps it is and I have been tricked. And if your own powers have not found you a way to another plane, perhaps mine will not save me either.'

'Powers? I have none since I relinquished my servitude to Chaos. Well, friend, do you intend to fight me?'

'There is only one upon this plane I would fight and it is not you, Warrior Priest of Phum.' Elric sheathed his sword and at the same moment the speaker rose from behind the rock, replacing a scarlet-fletched arrow in a scarlet quiver.

'I am Rackhir,' said the man. 'Called the Red Archer for, as you see, I affect scarlet dress. It is a habit of the Warrior Priests of Phum to choose but a single colour to wear. It is the only loyalty to tradition I still possess.' He had on a scarlet jerkin, scarlet breeks, scarlet shoes and a scarlet cap with a scarlet feather in it. His bow was scarlet and the pommel of his sword glowed ruby-red. His face, which was aquiline and gaunt, as if carved from fleshless bone, was weather-beaten, and that was brown. He was tall and he was thin, but muscles rippled on his arms and torso. There was irony in his eyes and something of a smile upon his thin lips, though the face showed that it had been through much experience, little of it pleasant.

'An odd place to choose for a quest,' said the Red Archer, standing with hands on hips and looking Elric up and down. 'But I'll strike a bargain with you if you're interested.'

'If the bargain suits me, archer, I'll agree to it, for you seem to know more of this world than do I.'

'Well--you must find something here and then leave, whereas I have nothing at all to do here and wish to leave. If I help you in your quest, will you take me with you when you return to our own plane?'

'That seems a fair bargain, but I cannot promise what I have no power to give. I will say only this--if it is possible for me to take you back with me to our own plane, either before or after I have finished my quest, I will do it.'

'That is reasonable,' said Rackhir the Red Archer. 'Now--tell me what you seek.'

'I seek two swords, forged millennia ago by immortals, used by my ancestors but then relinquished by them and placed upon this plane. The swords are large and heavy and black and they have cryptic runes carved into their blades. I was told that I would find them in the Pulsing Cavern which is reached through the Tunnel Under the Marsh. Have you heard of either of these places?'

'I have not. Nor have I heard of the two black swords.' Rackhir rubbed his bony chin. 'Though I remember reading something in one of the Books of Phum and what I read disturbed me...'

'The swords are legendary. Many books make some small reference to them--almost always mysterious. There is said to be one tome which records the history of the swords and all who have used them--and all who will use them in the future--a timeless book which contains all time. Some call it the
Chronicle of the Black Sword and in it, it is said, men may read their whole destinies.'

'I know nothing of that, either. It is not one of the Books of Phum. I fear, Comrade Elric, that we shall have to venture to the City of Ameeron and ask your questions of the inhabitants there.'

'There is a city upon this plane?'

'Aye--a city. I stayed but a short time in it, preferring the wilderness. But with a friend, it might be possible to bear the place a little longer.'

'Why is Ameeron unsuited to your taste?'

'Its citizens are not happy, indeed, they are a most depressed and depressing group, for they are all, you see, exiles or refugees or travelers between the worlds who lost their way and never found it again. No one lives in Ameeron by choice.'

'A veritable City of the Damned.'

'As the poet might remark, aye.' Rackhir offered Elric a sardonic wink. 'But I sometimes think all cities are that.'

'What is the nature of this plane where are, as far as I can tell, no planets, no moon, no sun. It has something of the air of a great cavern.'

'There is, indeed, a theory that it is a sphere buried in an infinity of rock. Others say that it lies in the future of our own Earth--a future where the universe has died. I heard a thousand theories during the short space of time I spend in the City of Ameeron. All, it seemed to me, were of equal value. All, it seemed to me, could be correct. Why not? There are some who believe that everything is a Lie. Conversely, everything could be the Truth.'

It was Elric's turn to remark ironically: 'You are a philosopher, then, as well as an archer, friend Rackhir of Phum?'

Rackhir laughed. 'If you like! It is such thinking that weakened my loyalty to Chaos and led me to this pass. I have heard that there is a city called Tanelorn which may sometimes be found on the shifting shores of the Sighing Desert. If I ever return to our own world, Comrade Elric, I shall seek that city, for I have heard that peace may be found there--that such debates as the nature of Truth are considered meaningless. That men are content merely to exist in Tanelorn.'

'I envy those who dwell in Tanelorn,' said Elric.

'As the poet might remark, aye.' Rackhir offered Elric a sardonic wink. 'But it would probably prove a disappointment, if found. Legends are best left as legends and attempts to make them real are rarely successful. Come--yonder lies Ameeron and that, sad to say, is more typical of most cities one comes across--on any plane.'

The two tall men, both outcasts in their different ways, began to trudge through the gloom of that desolate wasteland.

2

In the City of Ameeron

THE CITY OF AMEERON came in sight and Elric had never seen such a place before. Ameeron made Dhoz-Kam seem like the cleanest and most well-run settlement there could be. The city lay below the plain of rocks, in a shallow valley over which hung perpetual smoke: a filthy, tattered cloak meant to hide the place from the sight of men and gods.

The buildings were mostly in a state of semi-ruin or else were wholly ruined and shacks and tents erected in their place. The mixture of architectural styles--some familiar, some most alien--was such that Elric was hard put to see one building which resembled another. There were shanties and castles, cottages, towers and forts, plain, square villas and wooden huts heavy with carved ornamentation. Others seemed merely piles of rock with a jagged opening at one end for a door. But none looked well--could not have looked well in that landscape under that perpetually gloomy sky.
Here and there red fires sputtered, adding to the smoke, and the smell as Elric and Rackhir reached the outskirts was rich with a great variety of stinks.

'Arrogance, rather than pride, is the paramount quality of most of Ameeron's residents,' said Rackhir, wrinkling his hawklike nose. 'Where they have any qualities of character left at all.'

Elric trudged through filth. Shadows scuttled amongst the close-packed buildings. 'Is there an inn, perhaps, where we can enquire after the Tunnel Under the Marsh and its whereabouts?'

'No inn. By and large the inhabitants keep themselves to themselves...'

'A city square where folk meet?'

'This city has no centre. Each resident or group of residents built their own dwelling where they felt like it, or where there was space, and they come from all planes and all ages, thus the confusion, the decay and the oldness of many of the places. Thus the filth, the hopelessness, the decadence of the majority.'

'How do they live?'

'They live off each other, by and large. They trade with demons who occasionally visit Ameeron from time to time...'

'Demons?'

'Aye. And the bravest hunt the rats which dwell in the caverns below the city.'

'What demons are these?'

'Just creatures, mainly minor minions of Chaos, who want something that the Ameeronese can supply--a stolen soul or two, a baby, perhaps (though few are born here)--you can imagine what else, if you've knowledge of what demons normally demand from sorcerers.'

'Aye. I can imagine. So Chaos can come and go on this plane as it pleases.'

'I'm not sure it's quite as easy. But it is certainly easier for the demons to travel back and forth here than it would be for them to travel back and forth in our plane.'

'Have you seen any of these demons?'

'Aye. The usual bestial sort. Coarse, stupid and powerful--many of them were once human before electing to bargain with Chaos. Now they are mentally and physically warped into foul, demon shapes.'

Elric found Rackhir's words not to his taste. 'Is that ever the fate of those who bargain with Chaos?' he said.

'You should know, if you come from Melnibone. I know that in Phum it is rarely the case. But it seems that the higher the stakes the subtler are the changes a man undergoes when Chaos agrees to trade with him.'

Elric sighed. 'Where shall we enquire of our Tunnel Under the Marsh?'

'There was an old man... Rackhir began, and then a grunt behind him made him pause.

Another grunt.

A face with tusks in it emerged from a patch of darkness formed by a fallen slab of masonry. The face grunted again.

'Who are you?' said Elric, his sword-hand ready.

'Pig,' said the face with tusks in it. Elric was not certain whether he was being insulted or whether the creature was describing himself.

'Pig.'

Two more faces with tusks in them came out of the patch of darkness. 'Pig,' said one.

'Pig,' said another.

'Snake,' said a voice behind Elric and Rackhir. Elric turned while Rackhir continued to watch the pigs. A tall youth stood there. Where his head would have been sprouted the bodies of about fifteen good-sized snakes. The head of each snake glared at Elric. The tongues flickered and they all opened their mouths at exactly the same moment to say again:
'Snake.'
'Thing,' said another voice. Elric glanced in that direction, gasped, drew his sword and felt nausea sweep through him.

Then Pigs, Snake and Thing were upon them.

Rackhir took one Pig before it could move three paces. His bow was off his back and strung and a red-fletched arrow nocked and shot, all in a second. He had time to shoot one more Pig and then drop his bow to draw his sword. Back to back he and Elric prepared to defend themselves against the demons' attack. Snake was bad enough, with its fifteen darting heads hissing and snapping with teeth which dripped venom, but Thing kept changing its form--first an arm would emerge, then a face would appear from the shapeless, heaving flesh which shuffled implacably closer.

'Thing!' it shouted. Two swords slashed at Elric who was dealing with the last Pig and missed his stroke so that instead of running the Pig through the heart, he took him in a lung. Pig staggered backward and slumped to the ground in a pool of muck, He crawled for a moment, but then collapsed. Thing had produced a spear and Elric barely managed to deflect the cast with the flat of his sword. Now Rackhir was engaged with Snake and the two demons closed on the men, eager to make a finish of them. Half the heads of Snake lay writhing on the ground and Elric had managed to slice one hand off Thing, but the demon still seemed to have three other hands ready. It seemed to be created not from one creature but from several. Elric wondered if, through his bargaining with Arioch, this would ultimately be his fate, to be turned into a demon--a formless monster. But wasn't he already something of a monster? Didn't folk already mistake him for a demon?

These thoughts gave him strength. He yelled as he fought. 'Elric!' And: 'Thing!' replied his adversary, also eager to assert what he regarded as the essence of his being.

Another hand flew off as Aubec's sword bit into it. Another javelin jabbed out and was knocked aside; another sword appeared and came down on Elric's helm with a force which dazed him and sent him reeling back against Rackhir who missed his thrust at Snake and was almost bitten by four of the heads. Elric chopped at the arm and the tentacle which held the sword and saw them part from the body but then become reabsorbed again. The nausea returned. Elric thrust his sword into the mass and the mass screamed: 'Thing! Thing! Thing!'

Elric thrust again and four swords and two spears waved and clashed and tried to deflect Aubec's blade.

'Thing!'

'This is Yyrkoon's work,' said Elric, 'without a doubt. He has heard that I have followed him and seeks to stop us with his demon allies.' He gritted his teeth and spoke through them. 'Unless one of these is Yyrkoon himself! Are you my cousin Yyrkoon, Thing?'

'Thing...' The voice was almost pathetic. The weapons waved and clashed but they no longer darted so fiercely at Elric.

'Or are you some other old, familiar friend?'

'Thing...'

Elric stabbed again and again into the mass. Thick, reeking blood spurted and fell upon his armour. Elric could not understand why it had become so easy to take the attack to the demon.

'Now!' shouted a voice from above Elric's head. 'Quickly!'

Elric glanced up and saw a red face, a white beard, a waving arm. 'Don't look at me you fool! Now--strike!'

And Elric put his two hands above his sword hilt and drove the blade deep into the shapeless creature which moaned and wept and said in a small whisper

Frank... before it died.

Rackhir thrust at the same moment and his blade went under the remaining snake heads and plunged into the chest and thence into the heart of the youth-body and his demon died, too.
The white-haired man came clambering down from the ruined archway on which he had been perched. He was laughing. 'Niun's sorcery still has some effect, even here, eh? I heard the tall one call his demon friends and instruct them to set upon you. It did not seem fair to me that five should attack two--so I sat upon that wall and I drew the many-armed demon's strength out of it. I still can. I still can. And now I have his strength (or a fair part of it) and feel considerably better than I have done for many a moon (if such a thing exists).'

'It said "Frank",' said Elric frowning. 'Was that a name, do you think? Its name before?'

'Perhaps,' said old Niun, 'perhaps. Poor creature. But still, it is dead now. You are not of Ameeron, you two--though I've seen you here before, red one.'

'And I've seen you,' said Rackhir with a smile. He wiped Snake's blood from his blade, using one of Snake's heads for the purpose. 'You are Niun Who Knew All.'

'Aye. Who Knew All but who now knows very little. Soon it will be over, when I have forgotten everything. Then! may return from this awful exile. It is the pact I made with Orland of the Staff. I was a fool who wished to know everything and my curiosity led me into an adventure concerning this Orland. Orland showed me the error of my ways and sent me here to forget. Sadly, as you noticed, I still remember some of my powers and my knowledge from time to time. I know you seek the Black Swords. I know you are Elric of Melnibone I know what will become of you.'

'You know my destiny?' said Elric eagerly. 'Tell me what it is Niun Who Knew All!'

Niun opened his mouth as if to speak but then firmly shut it again. 'No,' he said. 'I have forgotten.'

'No!' Elric made as if to seize the old man. 'No!' You remember! I can see that you remember!'

'I have forgotten.' Niun lowered his head.

Rackhir took hold of Elric's arm. 'He has forgotten, Elric.'

Elric nodded. 'Very well.' Then he said, 'But have you remembered where lies the Tunnel Under the Marsh?'

'Yes. It is only a short distance from Ameeron, the Marsh itself. You go that way. Then you look for a monument in the shape of an eagle carved in black marble. At the base of the monument is the entrance to the tunnel.' Niun repeated this information parrot-fashion and when he looked up his face was clearer.

'What did I just tell you?'

Elric said: 'You gave us instructions on how to reach the entrance to the Tunnel Under the Marsh.'

'Did I?' Niun clapped his old hands. 'Splendid. I have forgotten that now, too. Who are you?'

'We are best forgotten,' said Rackhir with a gentle smile. 'Farewell, Niun and thanks.'

'Thanks for what?'

'Both for remembering and for forgetting.'

They walked on through the miserable City of Ameeron, away from the happy old sorcerer, sighting the odd face staring at them from a doorway or a window, doing their best to breathe as little of the foul air as possible.

'I think perhaps that I envy Niun alone of all the inhabitants of this desolate place,' said Rackhir.

'I pity him,' said Elric.

'Why so?'

'It occurs to me that when he has forgotten everything, he may well forget that he is allowed to leave Ameeron.'

Rackhir laughed and slapped the albino upon his black armoured back. 'You are a gloomy comrade, friend Elric. Are all your thoughts so hopeless?'

'They tend in that direction, I fear,' said Elric with a shadow of a smile.
AND ON THEY travelled through that sad and murky world until at last they came to the marsh. The marsh was black. Black spiky vegetation grew in clumps here and there upon it. It was cold and it was dank; a dark mist swirled close to the surface and through the mist sometimes darted low shapes. From the mist rose a solid black object which could only be the monument described by Niun.

'The monument,' said Rackhir, stopping and leaning on his bow. 'It's well out into the marsh and there's no evident pathway leading to it. Is this a problem, do you think, Comrade Elric?'

Elric waded cautiously into the edge of the marsh. He felt the cold ooze drag at his feet. He stepped back with some difficulty.

'There must be a path,' said Rackhir, fingering his bony nose. 'Else how would your cousin cross?' Elric looked over his shoulder at the Red Archer and he shrugged. 'Who knows? He could be travelling with sorcerous companions who have no difficulty where marshes are concerned.'

Suddenly Elric found himself sitting down upon the damp rock. The stink of brine from the marsh seemed for a moment to have overwhelmed him. He was feeling weak. The effectiveness of his drugs, last taken just as he stepped through the Shade Gate, was beginning to fade.

Rackhir came and stood by the albino. He smiled with a certain amount of bantering sympathy.

'Well, Sir Sorcerer, cannot you summon similar aid?'

Elric shook his head. 'I know little that is practical concerning the raising of small demons. Yyrkoon has all his grimoires, his favourite spells, his introductions to the demon worlds. We shall have to find a path of the ordinary kind if we wish to reach yonder monument, Warrior Priest of Phum.'

The Warrior Priest of Phum drew a red kerchief from within his tunic and blew his nose for some time. When he had finished he put down a hand, helped Elric to his feet, and began to walk along the rim of the marsh, keeping the black monument ever in sight.

It was some time later that they found a path at last and it was not a natural path but a slab of black marble extending out into the gloom of the mire, slippery to the feet and itself covered with a film of ooze.

'I would almost suspect this of being a false path--a lure to take us to our death,' said Rackhir as he and Elric stood and looked at the long slab, 'but what have we to lose now?'

'Come,' said Elric, setting foot on the slab and beginning to make his cautious way along it. In his hand he now held a torch of sorts, a bundle of sputtering reeds which gave off an unpleasant yellow light and a considerable amount of greenish smoke, but it was better than nothing.

Rackhir, testing each footstep with his unstrung bow-stave, followed behind, whistling a small, complicated tune as he went along. Another of his race would have recognised the tune as the Song of the Son of the Hero of the High Hell who is about to Sacrifice his Life, a popular melody in Phum, particularly amongst the caste of the Warrior Priest.

Elric found the tune irritating and distracting, but he said nothing, for he concentrated every fragment of his attention on keeping his balance upon the slippery surface of the slab, which now appeared to rock slightly, as if it floated on the surface of the marsh.

And now they were halfway to the monument whose shape could be clearly distinguished: A great eagle with spread wings and a savage beak and claws extended for the kill. An eagle in the same black marble as the slab on which they tried to keep their balance. And Elric was reminded of a tomb. Had some ancient hero been buried here? Or had the tomb been built to house the Black Swords--imprison them so that they might never enter the world of men again and steal men's souls?

The slab rocked more violently. Elric tried to remain upright but swayed first on one foot and then the other, the brand waving crazily. Both feet slid from under him and he went flying into the marsh and was instantly buried up to his knees.

He began to sink.

Somehow he had managed to keep his grip on the brand and by its light he could see the red-clad
archer peering forward.

'Elric?'
'I'm here, Rackhir.'
'You're sinking?'
'The marsh seems intent on swallowing me, aye.'
'Can you lie flat?'
'I can lie forward, but my legs are trapped.' Elric tried to move his body in the ooze which pressed against it. Something rushed past him in front of his face, giving voice to a kind of muted gibbering. Elric did his best to control the fear which welled up in him. 'I think you must give me up, friend Rackhir.'

'What? And lose my means of getting out of this world? You must think me more selfless than I am, Comrade Elric. Here...' Rackhir carefully lowered himself to the slab and reached out his arm towards Elric. Both men were now covered in clinging slime; both shivered with cold. Rackhir stretched and stretched and Elric leaned forward as far as he could and tried to reach the hand, but it was impossible. And every second dragged him deeper into the stinking filth of the marsh.

Then Rackhir took up his bow-stave and pushed that out.

'Grab the bow, Elric. Can you?'

Leaning forward and stretching every bone and muscle in his body, Elric just managed to get a grip on the bow-stave.

'Now, I must--Ah!' Rackhir, pulling at the bow, found his own feet slipping and the slab beginning to rock quite wildly. He flung out one arm to grab the far lip of the slab and with his other hand kept a grip on the bow, 'Hurry, Elric! Hurry!'

Elric began painfully to pull himself from the ooze. The slab still rocked crazily and Rackhir's hawklike face was almost as pale as Elric's own as he desperately strove to keep his hold on both slab and bow. And then Elric, all soaked in mire, managed to reach the slab and crawl onto it, the brand still sputtering in his hand, and lie there gasping and gasping and gasping.

Rackhir, too, was short of breath, but he laughed. 'What a fish I've caught!' he said. 'The biggest yet, I'd wager!'

'I am grateful to you, Rackhir the Red Archer. I am grateful, Warrior Priest of Phum. I owe you my life,' said Elric after a while. 'And I swear that whether I'm successful in my quest or not I'll use all my powers to see you through the Shade Gate and back into the world from which we have both come.'

Rackhir said quietly: 'You are a man, Elric of Melnibone. That is why I saved you. There are few men in any world.' He shrugged and grinned. 'Now I suggest we continue towards yonder monument on our knees. Undignified it might be, but safer it is also. And it is but a short way to crawl.'

Elric agreed.

Not much more time had passed in that timeless darkness before they had reached a little moss-grown island on which stood the Monument of the Eagle, huge and heavy and towering above them into the greater gloom which was either the sky or the roof of the cavern. And at the base of the plinth they saw a low doorway. And the doorway was open.

'A trap?' mused Rackhir.

'Or does Yyrkoon assume us perished in Ameeron?' said Elric, wiping himself free of slime as best he could. He sighed. 'Let's enter and be done with it.'

And so they entered.

They found themselves in a small room. Elric cast the faint light of a brand about the place and saw another doorway. The rest of the room was featureless-each wall made of the same faintly glistening black marble. The room was filled with silence.

Neither man spoke. Both walked unfalteringly towards the next doorway and, when they found steps, began to descend the steps, which wound down and down into total darkness.

For a long time they descended, still without speaking, until eventually they reached the bottom and
saw before them the entrance to a narrow tunnel which was irregularly shaped so that it seemed more the work of nature than of some intelligence. Moisture dripped from the roof of the tunnel and fell with the regularity of heartbeats to the floor, seeming to echo a deeper sound, far, far away, emanating from somewhere in the tunnel itself.

Elric heard Rackhir clear his throat.
'This is without doubt a tunnel,' said the Red Archer, 'and it, unquestionably leads under the marsh.'

Elric felt that Rackhir shared his reluctance to enter the tunnel. He stood with the guttering brand held high, listening to the sound of the drops falling to the floor of the tunnel, trying to recognise that other sound which came so faintly from the depths.

And then he forced himself forward, almost running into the tunnel, his ears filled with a sudden roaring which might have come from within his head or from some other source in the tunnel. He heard Rackhir's footfalls behind him. He drew his sword, the sword of the dead hero Aubec, and he heard the hissing of his own breath echo from the walls of the tunnel which was now alive with sounds of every sort.

Elric shuddered, but he did not pause.

The tunnel was warm. The floor felt spongy beneath his feet, the smell of brine persisted. And now he could see that the walls of the tunnel were smoother, that they seemed to shiver with quick, regular movement. He heard Rackhir gasp behind him as the archer, too, noted the peculiar nature of the tunnel.
'It's like flesh,' murmured the Warrior Priest of Phum. 'Like flesh.'

Elric could not bring himself to reply. All his attention was required to force himself forward. He was consumed by terror. His whole body shook. He sweated and his legs threatened to buckle under him. His grip was so weak that he could barely keep his sword from falling to the floor. And there were hints of something in his memory, something which his brain refused to consider. Had he been here before? His trembling increased. His stomach turned. But he still stumbled on, the brand held before him.

And now the soft, steady thrumming sound grew louder and he saw ahead a small, almost circular aperture at the very end of the tunnel. He stopped, swaying.
'The tunnel ends,' whispered Rackhir. 'There is no way through.'
The small aperture was pulsing with a swift, strong beat.
'The Pulsing Cavern,' Elric whispered. 'That is what we should find at the end of the Tunnel Under the Marsh. That must be the entrance, Rackhir.'
'It is too small for a man to enter, Elric,' said Rackhir reasonably.
'No...'

Elric stumbled forward until he stood close to the opening. He sheathed his sword. He handed the brand to Rackhir and then, before the Warrior Priest of Phum could stop him, he had flung himself headfirst through the gap, wriggling his body through—and the walls of the aperture parted for him and then closed behind him, leaving Rackhir on the other side.
Elric got slowly to his feet. A faint, pinkish light now came from the walls and ahead of him was another entrance, slightly larger than the other through which he had just come. The air was warm and thick and salty. It almost stifled him. His head throbbed and his body ached and he could barely act or think, save to force himself onward. On faltering legs he flung himself towards the next entrance as the great, muffled pulsing sounded louder and louder in his ears.
'Elric!'
Rackhir stood behind him, pale and sweating. He had abandoned the brand and followed Elric through.
Elric licked dry lips and tried to speak.
Rackhir came closer.
Elric said thickly: 'Rackhir. You should not be here.'
'I said I would help.'
'Aye, but . . .'
'Then help I shall.'

Elric had no strength for arguing, so he nodded and with his hands forced back the soft walls of the second aperture and saw that it led into a cavern whose round wall quivered to a steady pulsing. And in the centre of the cavern, hanging in the air without any support at all were two swords. Two identical swords, huge and fine and black.

And standing beneath the swords, his expression gloating and greedy, stood Prince Yyrkoon of Melnibone, reaching up for them, his lips moving but no words escaping from him. And Elric himself was able to voice but one word as he climbed through and stood upon that shuddering floor. 'No,' he said.

Yyrkoon heard the word. He turned with terror in his face. He snarled when he saw Elric and then he, too, voiced a word which was at once a scream of outrage. 'No!'

With an effort Elric dragged Aubec's blade from its scabbard. But it seemed too heavy to hold upright, it tugged his arm so that it rested on the floor, his arm hanging straight at his side. Elric drew deep breaths of heavy air into his lungs. His vision was dimming. Yyrkoon had become a shadow. Only the two black swords, standing still and cool in the very centre of the circular chamber, were in focus.

Elric sensed Rackhir enter the chamber and stand beside him.

'Yyrkoon,' said Elric at last, 'those swords are mine.'

Yyrkoon smiled and reached up towards the blades. A peculiar moaning sound seemed to issue from them. A faint, black radiance seemed to emanate from them. Elric saw the runes carved into them and he was afraid.

Rackhir fitted an arrow to his bow. He drew the string back to his shoulder, sighting along the arrow at Prince Yyrkoon. 'If he must die, Elric, tell me.'

'Slay him,' said Elric.

And Rackhir released the string.

But the arrow moved very slowly through the air and then hung halfway between the archer and his intended target.

Yyrkoon turned, a ghastly grin on his face. 'Mortal weapons are useless here,' he said.

Elric said to Rackhir, 'He must be right. And your life is in danger, Rackhir. Go...'

Rackhir gave him a puzzled look. 'No, I must stay here and help you...'

Elric shook his head. 'You cannot help, you will only die if you stay. Go.'

Reluctantly the Red Archer unstrung his bow, glanced suspiciously up at the two black swords, then squeezed his way through the doorway and was gone.

'Now, Yyrkoon,' said Elric, letting Aubec's sword fall to the floor. 'We must settle this, you and I.'

4

Two Black Swords

AND THEN THE runeblades Stormbringer and Mournblade were gone from where they had hung so long.

And Stormbringer had settled into Elric's right hand. And Mournblade lay in Prince Yyrkoon's right hand.

And the two men stood on opposite sides of the Pulsing Cavern and regarded first each other and then the swords they held.

The swords were singing. Their voices were faint but could be heard quite plainly. Elric lifted the huge blade easily and turned it this way and that, admiring its alien beauty.
'Stormbringer,' he said.
And then he felt afraid.
It was suddenly as if he had been born again and that this runesword was born with him. It was as if
they had never been separate.
'Stormbringer.'
And the sword moaned sweetly and settled even more smoothly into his grasp.
'Stormbringer!' yelled Elric and he leapt at his cousin.
'Stormbringer!'
And he was full of fear--so full of fear. And the fear brought a wild kind of delight--a demonic need
to fight and kill his cousin, to sink the blade deep into Yyrkoon's heart. To take vengeance. To spill
blood. To send a soul to hell.
And now Prince Yyrkoon's cry could be heard above the thrum of the sword-voices, the drumming
of the pulse of the cavern.
'Mournblade!'
And Mournblade came up to meet Stormbringer's blow and turn that blow and thrust back at Elric
who swayed aside and brought Stormbringer round and down in a sidestroke which knocked Yyrkoon
and Mournblade backward for an instant. But Stormbringer's next thrust was met again. And the next
thrust was met. And the next. If the swordsmen were evenly matched, then so were the blades, which
seemed possessed of their own wills, though they performed the wills of their wielders.
And the clang of the metal upon metal turned into a wild, metallic song which the swords sang. A
joyful song as if they were glad at last to be back to battling, though they battled each other.
And Elric barely saw his cousin, Prince Yyrkoon, at all, save for an occasional flash of his dark,
wild face. Elric's attention was given entirely to the two black swords, for it seemed that the swords
fought with the life of one of the swordsmen as a prize (or perhaps the lives of both, thought Elric) and
that the rivalry between Elric and Yyrkoon was nothing compared with the brotherly rivalry between the
swords who seemed full of pleasure at the chance to engage again after many millennia.
And this observation, as he fought--and fought for his soul as well as his life--gave Elric pause to
consider his hatred of Yyrkoon.
Kill Yyrkoon he would, but not at the will of another power. Not to give sport to these alien swords.
Mournblade's point darted at his eyes and Stormbringer rose to deflect the thrust once more.
Elric no longer fought his cousin. He fought the will of the two black swords.
Stormbringer dashed for Yyrkoon's momentarily undefended throat. Elric clung to the sword and
dragged it back, sparing his cousin's life. Stormbringer whined almost petulantly, like a dog stopped
from biting an intruder.
And Elric spoke through clenched teeth. 'I'll not be your puppet, runeblade. If we must be united, let
it be upon a proper understanding.'
The sword seemed to hesitate, to drop its guard, and Elric was hard put to defend himself against
the whirling attack of Mournblade which, in turn, seemed to sense its advantage.
Elric felt fresh energy pour up his right arm and into his body. This was what the sword could do.
With it, he needed no drugs, would never be Weak again. In battle he would triumph. At peace, he could
rule with pride. When he travelled, it could be alone and without fear. It was as if the sword reminded
him of all these things, even as it returned Mournblade's attack.
And what must the sword have in return?
Elric knew. The sword told him, without words of any sort. Stormbringer needed to fight, for that
was its reason for existence. Stormbringer needed to kill, for that was its source of energy, the lives and
the souls of men, demons--even gods.
And Elric hesitated, even as his cousin gave a huge, cackling yell and dashed at him so that
Mournblade glanced off his helm and he was flung backwards and down and saw Yyrkoon gripping his
moaning black sword in both hands to plunge the runeblade into Elric's body.
And Elric knew he would do anything to resist that fate--for his soul to be drawn into Mournblade and his strength to feed Prince Yyrkoon's strength. And he rolled aside, very quickly, and got to one knee and turned and lifted Stormbringer with one gauntleted hand upon the blade and the other upon the hilt to take the great blow Prince Yyrkoon brought upon it. And the two black swords shrieked as if in pain, and they shivered, and black radiance poured from them as blood might pour from a man pierced by many arrows. And Elric was driven, still on his knees, away from the radiance, gasping and sighing and peering here and there for sight of Yyrkoon who had disappeared.

And Elric knew that Stormbringer spoke to him again. If Elric did not wish to die by Mournblade, then Elric must accept the bargain which the Black Sword offered.

'He must not die!' said Elric. 'I will not slay him to make sport for you!'

And through the black radiance ran Yyrkoon, snarling and snapping and whirling his runesword. Again Stormbringer darted through an opening, and again Elric made the blade pull back and Yyrkoon was only grazed.

Stormbringer writhed in Elric's hands.

Elric said: 'You shall not be my master.'

And Stormbringer seemed to understand and become quieter, as if reconciled. And Elric laughed, thinking that he now controlled the runesword and that from now on the blade would do his bidding.

'We shall disarm Yyrkoon,' said Elric. 'We shall not kill him.'

Elric rose to his feet.

Stormbringer moved with all the speed of a needle-thin rapier. It feinted, it parried, it thrust. Yyrkoon, who had been grinning in triumph, snarled and staggered back, the grin dropping from his sullen features.

Stormbringer now worked for Elric. It made the moves that Elric wished to make. Both Yyrkoon and Mournblade seemed disconcerted by this turn of events. Mournblade shouted as if in astonishment at its brother's behaviour. Elric struck at Yyrkoon's sword-arm, pierced cloth--pierced flesh--pierced sinew--pierced bone. Blood came, soaking Yyrkoon's arm and dripping down onto the hilt of the sword. The blood was slippery. It weakened Yyrkoon's grip on his runesword. He took it in both hands, but he was unable to hold it firmly.

Elric, too, took Stormbringer in both hands. Unearthly strength surged through him. With a gigantic blow he dashed Stormbringer against Mournblade where blade met hilt. The runesword few from Yyrkoon's grasp. It sped across the Pulsing Cavern.

Elric smiled. He had defeated his own sword's will and, in turn, had defeated the brother sword. Mournblade fell against the wall of the Pulsing Cavern and for a moment was still.

A groan then seemed to escape the defeated runesword. A high-pitched shriek filled the Pulsing Cavern. Blackness flooded over the eery pink light and extinguished it.

When the light returned Elric saw that a scabbard lay at his feet. The scabbard was black and of the same alien craftsmanship as the runesword. Elric saw Yyrkoon. The prince was on his knees and he was sobbing, his eyes darting about the Pulsing Cavern seeking Mournblade, looking at Elric with fright as if he knew he must now be slain.

'Mournblade?' Yyrkoon said hopelessly. He knew he was to die.

Mournblade had vanished from the Pulsing Cavern.

'Your sword is gone,' said Elric quietly.

Yyrkoon whimpered and tried to crawl towards the entrance of the cavern. But the entrance had shrunk to the size of a small coin. Yyrkoon wept.

Stormbringer trembled, as if thirsty for Yyrkoon's soul. Elric stooped.

Yyrkoon began to speak rapidly. 'Do not slay me, Elric--not with that runeblade. I will do anything you wish. I will die in any other way."

Elric said: 'We are victims, cousin, of a conspiracy--a game played by gods, demons and sentient swords. They wish one of us dead. I suspect they wish you dead more than they wish me dead. And that
is the reason why I shall not slay you here.' He picked up the scabbard. He forced Stormbringer into it and at once the sword was quiet. Elric took off his old scabbard and looked around for Aubec's sword, but that, too, was gone. He dropped the old scabbard and hooked the new one to his belt. He rested his left hand upon the pommel of Stormbringer and he looked not without sympathy upon the creature that was his cousin.

'You are a worm, Yyrkoon. But is that your fault?'
Yyrkoon gave him a puzzled glance.
'I wonder, if you had all your desire, would you cease to be a worm, cousin?'
Yyrkoon raised himself to his knees. A little hope began to show in his eyes. Elric smiled and drew a deep breath. 'We shall see,' he said. 'You must agree to wake Cymoril from her sorcerous slumber.'

'You have humbled me, Elric,' said Yyrkoon in a small, pitiful voice. 'I will wake her. Or would...' 'Can you not undo your spell?'
'Ve cannot escape from the Pulsing Cavern. It is past the time...'
'What's this?'
'I did not think you would follow me. And then I thought I would easily finish you. And now it is past the time. One can keep the entrance open for only a little while. It will admit anyone who cares to enter the Pulsing Cavern, but it will let no-one out after the power of the spell dies. I gave much to know that spell.'

'You have given too much for everything,' said Elric. He went to the entrance and peered through. Rackhir waited on the other side. The Red Archer had an anxious expression. Elric said: 'Warrior Priest of Phum, it seems that my cousin and I are trapped in here. The entrance will not part for us.' Elric tested the warm, moist stuff of the wall. It would not open more than a tiny fraction. 'It seems that you can join us or else go back. If you do join us, you share our fate.'

'It is not much of a fate if I go back,' said Rackhir. 'What chances have you?'
'One,' said Elric. 'I can invoke my patron.'
'A Lord of Chaos?' Rackhir made a wry face. 'Exactly,' said Elric. 'I speak of Arioch.'
'Arioch, eh? Well, he does not care for renegades from Phum.'
'What do you choose to do?'

Rackhir stepped forward. Elric stepped back. Through the opening came Rackhir's head, followed by his shoulders, followed by the rest of him. The entrance closed again immediately. Rackhir stood up and untangled the string of his bow from the stave, smoothing it. 'I agreed to share your fate--to gamble all on escaping from this plane,' said the Red Archer. He looked surprised when he saw Yyrkoon. 'Your enemy is still alive?'

'Aye.'

'You are merciful indeed!'

'Perhaps. Or obstinate. I would not slay him merely because some supernatural agency used him as a pawn, to be killed if I should win. The Lords of the higher Worlds do not as yet control me completely--nor will they if I have any power at all to resist them.'

Rackhir grinned. 'I share your view--though I'm not optimistic about its realism. I see you have one of those black swords at your belt. Will that not hack a way through the cavern?'

'No,' said Yyrkoon from his place against the wall. 'Nothing can harm the stuff of the Pulsing Cavern.'

'I'll believe you,' said Elric, 'for I do not intend to draw this new sword of mine often. I must learn how to control it first.'

'So Arioch must be summoned.' Rackhir sighed.

'If that is possible,' said Elric.

'He will doubtless destroy me,' said Rackhir, looking to Elric in the hope that the albino would deny
this statement.

Elric looked grave. 'I might be able to strike a bargain with him. It will also test something.'

Elric turned his back on Rackhir and on Yyrkoon. He adjusted his mind. He sent it out through vast spaces and complicated mazes. And he cried:

'Arioch! Arioch! Aid me, Arioch!'

He had a sense of something listening to him. 'Arioch!'

Something shifted in the places where his mind went.

'Arioch...'

And Arioch heard him. He knew it was Arioch.

Rackhir gave a horrified yell. Yyrkoon screamed. Elric turned and saw that something disgusting had appeared near the far wall. It was black and it was foul and it slobbered and its shape was intolerably alien. Was this Arioch? How could it be? Arioch was beautiful. But perhaps, thought Elric, this was Arioch's true shape. Upon this plane, in this peculiar cavern, Arioch could not deceive those who looked upon him.

But then the shape had disappeared and a beautiful youth with ancient eyes stood looking at the three mortals.

'You have won the sword, Elric,' said Arioch, ignoring the others. 'I congratulate you. And you have spared your cousin's life. Why so?'

'More than one reason,' said Elric. 'But let us say he must remain alive in order to wake Cymoril.'

Arioch's face bore a little, secret smile for a moment and Elric realised that he had avoided a trap. If he had killed Yyrkoon, Cymoril would never have woken again.

'And what is this little traitor doing with you?' Arioch turned a cold eye on Rackhir who did his best to stare back at the Chaos Lord.

'He is my friend,' said Elric. 'I made a bargain with him. If he aided me to find the Black Sword, then I would take him back with me to our own plane.'

'That is impossible. Rackhir is an exile here. That is his punishment.'

'He comes back with me,' said Elric. And now he unhooked the scabbard holding Stormbringer from his belt and he held the sword out before him. 'Or I do not take the sword with me. Failing that, we all three remain here for eternity.'

'That is not sensible, Elric. Consider your responsibilities.'

'I have considered them. That is my decision.'

Arioch's smooth face had just a tinge of anger. 'You must take the sword. It is your destiny.'

'So you say. But I now know that the sword may only be borne by me. You cannot bear it, Arioch, or you would. Only I--or another mortal like me--can take it from the Pulsing Cavern. Is that not so?'

'You are clever, Elric of Melnibone.' Arioch spoke with sardonic admiration. 'And you are a fitting servant of Chaos. Very well--that traitor can go with you. But he would be best warned to tread warily.

'The Lords of Chaos have been known to bear malice...'

Rackhir said hoarsely: 'So I have heard, My Lord Arioch.'

Arioch ignored the archer. 'The man of Phum is not, after all, important. And if you wish to spare your cousin's life, so be it. It matters little. Destiny can contain a few extra threads in her design and still accomplish her original aims.'

'Very well then,' said Elric. 'Take us from this place.'

'Where to?'

'Why, to Melnibone, if you please.'

With a smile that was almost tender Arioch looked down on Elric and a silky hand stroked Elric's cheek. Arioch had grown to twice his original size. 'Oh, you are surely the sweetest of all my slaves,' said the Lord of Chaos.

And there was a whirling. There was a sound like the roar of the sea. There was a dreadful sense of nausea. And three weary men stood on the floor of the great throne room in Imrryr. The throne room was
deserted, save that in one corner a black shape, like smoke, writhed for a moment and then was gone.

Rackhir crossed the floor and seated himself carefully upon the first step to the Ruby Throne. Yyrkoon and Elric remained where they were, staring into each other's eyes. Then Elric laughed and slapped his scabbarded sword. 'Now you must fulfil your promises to me, cousin. Then I have a proposition to put to you.'

'It is like a market place,' said Rackhir, leaning on one elbow and inspecting the feather in his scarlet hat. 'So many bargains!'

5

The Pale King's Mercy

Yyrkoon stepped back from his sister's bed. He was worn and his features were drawn and there was no spirit in him as he said: 'It is done.' He turned away and looked through the window at the towers of Imrryr, at the harbour where the returned golden battle-barges rode at anchor, together with the ship which had been King Straasha's gift to Elric. 'She will wake in a moment,’ added Yyrkoon absently.

Dyvim Tvar and Rackhir the Red Archer looked inquiringly at Elric who kneeled by the bed, staring into the face of Cymoril. Her face grew peaceful as he watched and for one terrible moment he suspected Prince Yyrkoon of tricking him and of killing Cymoril. But then the eyelids moved and the eyes opened and she saw him and she smiled. 'Elric? The dreams... You are safe?'

'I am safe, Cymoril. As are you.'

'Yyrkoon...?'

'He woke you.'

'But you swore to slay him...'

'I was as much subject to sorcery as you. My mind was confused. It is still confused where some matters are concerned. But Yyrkoon is changed now. I defeated him. He does not doubt my power. He no longer lusts to usurp me.'

'You are merciful, Elric.' She brushed raven hair from her face.

Elric exchanged a glance with Rackhir.

'It might not be mercy which moves me,' said Elric. 'It might merely be a sense of fellowship with Yyrkoon.'

'Fellowship? Surely you cannot feel... ?'

'We are both mortal. We were both victims of a game played between the Lords of the Higher Worlds. My loyalty must, finally, be to my own kind--and that is why I ceased to hate Yyrkoon.'

'And that is mercy,' said Cymoril.

Yyrkoon walked towards the door. 'May I leave, my lord emperor?'

Elric thought he detected a strange light in his defeated cousin's eyes. But perhaps it was only humility or despair. He nodded. Yyrkoon went from the room, closing the door softly.

Dyvim Tvar said: 'Trust Yyrkoon not at all, Elric. He will betray you again.' The Lord of the Dragon Caves was troubled.

'No,' said Elric. 'If he does not fear me, he fears the sword I now carry.'

'And you should fear that sword,' said Dyvim Tvar.

'No,' said Elric. 'I am the master of the sword.'

Dyvim Tvar made to speak again but then shook his head almost sorrowfully, bowed and, together with Rackhir the Red Archer, left Elric and Cymoril alone.

Cymoril took Elric in her arms. They kissed. They wept.

There were celebrations in Melnibone for a week.

Now almost all the ships and men and dragons were home. And Elric was home, having proved his
right to rule so well that all his strange quirks of character (this 'mercy' of his was perhaps the strangest) were accepted by the populace.

In the throne room there was a ball and it was the most lavish ball any of the courtiers had ever known. Elric danced with Cymoril, taking a full part in the activities. Only Yyrkoon did not dance, preferring to remain in a quiet corner below the gallery of the music-slaves; ignored by the guests. Rackhir the Red Archer danced with several Melnibonean ladies and made assignations with them all, for he was a hero now in Melnibone. Dyvim Tvar danced, too, though his eyes were often brooding when they fell upon Prince Yyrkoon.

And later, when people ate, Elric spoke to Cymoril as they sat together on the dais of the Ruby Throne.

'Would you be empress, Cymoril?'
'So you would be my wife?'
'Aye.' She laughed for she thought he joked.
'And not be empress? For a year at least?'
'What mean you, my lord.'
'I must go away from Melnibone, Cymoril, for a year. What I have learned in recent months has made me want to travel the Young Kingdoms--see how other nations conduct their affairs. For I think Melnibone must change if she is to survive. She could become a great force for good in the world, for she still has much power.'

'For good?' Cymoril was surprised and there was a little alarm in her voice, too. 'Melnibone has never stood for good or for evil, but for herself and the satisfaction of her desires.'
'I would see that changed.'
'You intend to alter everything?'
'I intend to travel the world and then decide if there is any point to such a decision. The Lords of the Higher Worlds have ambitions in our world. Though they have given me aid, of late, I fear them. I should like to see if it is possible for men to rule their own affairs.'

'And you will go? There were tears in her eyes. 'When?''
'Tomorrow--when Rackhir leaves. We will take King Straasha's ship and make for the Isle of the Purple Towns where Rackhir has friends. Will you come?''
'I cannot imagine--I cannot. Oh, Elric, why spoil this happiness we now have?'
'Because I feel that the happiness cannot last unless we know completely what we are.'

She frowned. 'Then you must discover that, if that is what you wish,' she said slowly. 'But it is for you to discover alone, Elric, for I have no such desire. You must go by yourself into those barbarian lands.'

'You will not accompany me?'
'It is not possible. I--I am Melnibonean... ' She sighed. 'I love you, Elric.'
'And I you, Cymoril.'
'Then we shall be married when you return. In a year.'

Elric was full of sorrow, but he knew that his decision was correct. If he did not leave, he would grow restless soon enough and if he grew restless he might come to regard Cymoril as an enemy, someone who had trapped him.

'Then you must rule as empress until I return,' he said.
'No, Elric I cannot take that responsibility.'
'Then, who...? Dyvim Tvar...'
'I know Dyvim Tvar. He will not take such power. Magum Colim, perhaps...'
'No.'
'Then you must stay, Elric.'
But Elric's gaze had travelled through the crowd in the throne room below. It stopped when it reached a lonely figure seated by itself under the gallery of the music-slaves. And Elric smiled ironically and said:

'Then it must be Yyrkoon.'

Cymoril was horrified. 'No, Elric. He will abuse any power...'

'Not now. And it is just. He is the only one who wanted to be emperor. Now he can rule as emperor for a year in my stead. If he rules well, I may consider abdicating in his favour. If he rules badly, it will prove, once and for all, that his ambitions were misguided.'

'Elric,' said Cymoril. 'I love you. But you are a fool--a criminal, if you trust Yyrkoon again.'

'No,' he said evenly. 'I am not a fool. All I am is Elric. I cannot help that, Cymoril.'

'It is Elric that I love!' she cried. 'But Elric is doomed. We are all doomed unless you remain here now.'

'I cannot. Because I love you, Cymoril, I cannot.' She stood up. She was weeping. She was lost.

'And I am Cymoril,' she said. 'You will destroy us both.' Her voice softened and she stroked his hair.

'You will destroy us, Elric.'

'No,' he said. 'I will build something that will be better. I will discover things. When I return we shall marry and we shall live long and we shall be happy, Cymoril.'

And now, Elric had told three lies. The first concerned his cousin Yyrkoon. The second concerned the Black Sword. The third concerned Cymoril. And upon those three lies was Elric's destiny to be built, for it is only about things which concern us most profoundly that we lie clearly and with profound conviction.

EPILOGUE

THERE WAS A port called Menii which was one of the humblest and friendliest of the Purple Towns. Like the others on the isle it was built mainly of the purple stone which gave the towns their name. And there were red roofs on the houses and there were bright-sailed boats of all kinds in the harbour as Elric and Rackhir the Red Archer came ashore in the early morning when just a few sailors were beginning to make their way down to their ships.

King Straasha's lovely ship lay some way out beyond the harbour wall. They had used a small boat to cross the water between it and the town. They turned and looked back at the ship, They had sailed it themselves, without crew, and the ship had sailed well.

'So, I must seek peace and mythic Tanelorn,' said Rackhir, with a certain amount of self-mockery. He stretched and yawned and the bow and the quiver danced on his back.

Elric was dressed in simple costume that might have marked any soldier-of-fortune of the Young Kingdoms. He looked fit and relaxed. He smiled into the sun. The only remarkable thing about his garb was the great, black runesword at his side. Since he had donned the sword, he had needed no drugs to sustain him at all.

'And I must seek knowledge in the lands I find marked upon my map,' said Elric. 'I must learn and I must carry what I learn back to Melnibone at the end of a year. I wish that Cymoril had accompanied me, but I understand her reluctance.'

'You will go back?' Rackhir said. 'When a year is over?'

'She will draw me back!' Elric laughed. 'My only fear is that I will weaken and return before my quest is finished.'

'I should like to come with you,' said Rackhir, 'for I have travelled in most lands and would be as good a guide as I was in the netherworld. But I am sworn to find Tanelorn, for all I know it does not really exist.'

'I hope that you find it, Warrior Priest of Phum,' said Elric.
'I shall never be that again,' said Rackhir. Then his eyes widened a little. 'Why, look--your ship!'
And Elric looked and saw the ship that had once been called The Ship Which Sails Over Land and Sea, and he saw that slowly it was sinking. King Straasha was taking it back.
'The elementals are friends, at least,' he said. 'But I fear their power wanes as the power of Melnibone wanes. For all that we of the Dragon Isle are considered evil by the folk of the Young Kingdoms, we share much in common with the spirits of Air, Earth, Fire and Water.'
Rackhir said, as the masts of the ship disappeared beneath the waves: 'I envy you those friends, Elric. You may trust them.'
'Aye.'
Rackhir looked at the runesword hanging on Elric's hip. 'But you would be wise to trust nothing else,' he added.
Elric laughed. 'Fear not for me, Rackhir, for I am my own master--for a year at least. And I am master of this sword now!'
The sword seemed to stir at his side and he took firm hold of its grip and slapped Rackhir on the back and he laughed and shook his white hair so that it drifted in the air and he lifted his strange, red eyes to the sky and he said:
'I shall be a new man when I return to Melnibone.'

Here ends Book One of the Elric Saga
The Sailor on the Seas of Fate
Book two of the Elric Saga
By
Michael Moorcock

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Book ONE

SAILING TO THE FUTURE

. . . and leaving his cousin Yyrkoon sitting as regent upon the Ruby Throne of Melnibonè, leaving his cousin Cymoril weeping for him and despairing of his ever returning, Elric sailed from Imryr, the Dreaming City, and went to seek an unknown goal in the worlds of the Young Kingdoms where Melnibonèans were, at best, disliked.

-THE CHRONICLE OF THE BLACK SWORD

I

It was as if the man stood in a vast cavern whose walls and roof were comprised of gloomy, unstable colors which would occasionally break and admit rays of light from the moon. That these walls were mere clouds massed above mountains and ocean was hard to believe, for all that the moonlight pierced them, stained them and revealed the black and turbulent sea washing the shore on which the man now stood.

Distant thunder rolled; distant lightning flickered. A thin rain fell. And the clouds were never still. From dusky jet to deadly white they swirled slowly, like the cloaks of men and women engaged in a trancelike and formalistic minuet: the man standing on the shingle of the grim beach was reminded of giants dancing to the music of the faraway storm and felt as one must feel who walks unwittingly into a hall where the gods are at play. He turned his gaze from the clouds to the ocean.

The sea seemed weary. Great waves heaved themselves together with difficulty and collapsed as if in relief, gasping as they struck sharp rocks.

The man pulled his hood closer about his face and he looked over his leathern shoulder more than once as he trudged closer to the sea and let the surf spill upon the toes of his knee-length black boots. He tried to peer into the cavern formed by the clouds but could see only a short distance. There was no way of telling what lay on the other side of the ocean or, indeed, how far the water extended. He put his head on one side, listening carefully, but could hear nothing but the sounds of the sky and the sea. He sighed.

For a moment a moonbeam touched him and from the white flesh of his face there glowed two crimson, tormented eyes; then darkness came back. Again the man turned, plainly fearing that the light had revealed him to some enemy. Making as little sound as possible, he headed toward the shelter of the rocks on his left.

Elric was tired. In the city of Ryfel in the land of Pikarayd he had naively sought acceptance by offering his services as a mercenary in the army of the governor of that place. For his foolishness he had been imprisoned as a Melnibonèan spy (it was obvious to the governor that Elric could be nothing else)
and had but recently escaped with the aid of bribes and some minor sorcery.

The pursuit, however, had been almost immediate. Dogs of great cunning had been employed and the governor himself had led the hunt beyond the borders of Pikarayd and into the lonely, uninhabited shale valleys of a world locally called the Dead Hills, in which little grew or tried to live.

Up the steep sides of small mountains, whose slopes consisted of gray, crumbling slate, which made a clatter to be heard a mile or more away, the white-faced one had ridden. Along dales all but grassless and whose river-bottoms had seen no water for scores of years, through cave-tunnels bare of even a stalactite, over plateaus from which rose carins of stones erected by a forgotten folk, he had sought to escape his pursuers, and soon it seemed to him that he had left the world he knew forever, that he had crossed a supernatural frontier and had arrived in one of those bleak places of which he had read in the legends of his people, where once Law and Chaos had fought each other to a stalemate, leaving their battleground empty of life and the possibility of life.

And at last he had ridden his horse so hard that its heart had burst and he had abandoned its corpse and continued on foot, panting to the sea, to this narrow beach, unable to go farther forward and fearing to return lest his enemies should be lying in wait for him.

He thought that he would give much for a boat now. It would not be long before the dogs discovered his scent and led their masters to the beach. He shrugged. Best to die here alone, perhaps, slaughtered by those who did not even know his name. His only regret would be that Cymoril would wonder why he had not returned at the end of the year.

He had no food and few of the drugs which had of late sustained his energy. Without renewed energy he could not contemplate working a sorcery which might conjure for him some means of crossing the sea and making, perhaps, for the Isle of the Purple Towns where the people were least unfriendly to Melnibonéans.

It had been only a month since he had left behind his court and his queen-to-be, letting Yyrkoon sit on the throne of Melnibonè until his return. He had thought he might learn more of the human folk of the Young Kingdoms by mixing with them, but they had rejected him either with outright hatred or wary and insincere humility. Nowhere had he found one willing to believe that a Melnibonèan (and they did not know he was the emperor) would willingly throw in his lot with the human beings who had once been in thrall to that cruel and ancient race. And now, as he stood beside a bleak sea feeling trapped and already defeated, he knew himself to be alone in a malevolent universe, bereft of friends and purpose, a useless, sickly anachronism, a fool brought low by his own insufficiencies of character, by his profound inability to believe wholly in the tightness or the wrongness of anything at all. He lacked faith in his race, in his birthright, in gods or men, and above all he lacked faith in himself.

His pace slackened; his hand fell upon the pommel of his black runesword Stormbringer, the blade which had so recently defeated its twin, Mournblade, in the fleshy chamber within a sunless world of Limbo. Stormbringer, seemingly half-sentient, was now his only companion, his only confidant, and it had become his neurotic habit to talk to the sword as another might talk to his horse or as a prisoner might share his thoughts with a cockroach in his cell.

"Well, Stormbringer, shall we walk into the sea and end it now?" His voice was dead, barely a whisper. "At least we shall have the pleasure of thwarting those who follow us."

He made a halfhearted movement toward the sea, but to his fatigued brain it seemed that the sword murmured, stirred against his hip, pulled back. The albino chuckled. "You exist to live and to take lives. Do I exist, then, to die and bring both those I love and hate the mercy of death? Sometimes I think so. A sad pattern, if that should be the pattern. Yet there must be more to all this...."

He turned his back upon the sea, peering upward at the monstrous clouds forming and reforming above his head, letting the light ram fall upon his face, listening to the complex, melancholy music which the sea made as it washed over rocks and shingle and was carried this way and that by conflicting currents. The rain did little to refresh him. He had not slept at all for two nights and had slept hardly at all for several more. He must have ridden for almost a week before his horse collapsed.
At the base of a damp granite crag which rose nearly thirty feet above his head, he found a depression in the ground in which he could squat and be protected from the worst of the wind and the rain. Wrapping his heavy leather cloak tightly about him, he eased himself into the hole and was immediately asleep. Let them find while he slept. He wanted no warning of his death.

Harsh, gray light struck his eyes as he stirred. He raised his neck, holding back a groan at the stiffness of his muscles, and he opened his eyes. He blinked. It was morning—perhaps even later, for the sun was invisible—and a cold mist covered the beach. Through the mist the darker clouds could still be seen above, increasing the effect of his being inside a huge cavern. Muffled a little, the sea continued to splash and hiss, though it seemed calmer than it had on the previous night, and there were now no sounds of a storm. The air was very cold.

Elric began to stand up, leaning on his sword for support, listening carefully, but there was no sign that his enemies were close by. Doubtless they had given up the chase, perhaps after finding his dead horse.

He reached into his belt pouch and took from it a sliver of smoked bacon and a vial of yellowish liquid. He sipped from the vial, replaced the stopper, and returned the vial to his pouch as he chewed on the meat. He was thirsty. He trudged farther up the beach and found a pool of rainwater not too tainted with salt. He drank his fill, staring around him. The mist was fairly thick and if he moved too far from the beach he knew he would become immediately lost. Yet did that matter? He had nowhere to go. Those who had pursued him must have realized that. Without a horse he could not cross back to Pikarayd, the most easterly of the Young Kingdoms. Without a boat he could not venture onto that sea and try to steer a course back to the Isle of the Purple Towns. He recalled no map which showed an eastern sea and he had little idea of how far he had traveled from Pikarayd. He decided that his only hope of surviving was to go north, following the coast in the trust that sooner or later he would come upon a port or a fishing village where he might trade his few remaining belongings for a passage on a boat. Yet that hope was a small one, for his food and his drugs could hardly last more than a day or so.

He took a deep breath to steel himself for the march and then regretted it; the mist cut at his throat and his lungs like a thousand tiny knives. He coughed. He spat upon the shingle.

And he heard something, something other than the moody whisperings of the sea: a regular creaking sound, as of a man walking in stiff leather. His right hand went to his left hip and the sword which rested there. He turned about, peering in every direction for the source of the noise, but the mist distorted it. It could have come from anywhere.

Elric crept back to the rock where he had sheltered. He leaned against it so that no swordsman could take him unawares from behind. He waited.

The creaking came again, but other sounds were added. He heard a clanking; a splash; perhaps a voice, perhaps a footfall on timber; and he guessed that either he was experiencing a hallucination as a side effect of the drug he had just swallowed or he had heard a ship coming toward the beach and dropping its anchor.

He felt relieved and he was tempted to laugh at himself for assuming so readily that this coast must be uninhabited. He had thought that the bleak cliffs stretched for miles—perhaps hundreds of miles—in all directions. The assumption could easily have been the subjective result of his depression, his weariness. It occurred to him that he might as easily have discovered a land not shown on maps, yet with a sophisticated culture of its own: with sailing ships, for instance, and harbors for them. Yet still he did not reveal himself.

Instead he withdrew behind the rock, peering into the mist toward the sea. And at last he discerned a shadow which had not been there the previous night. A black, angular shadow which could only be a ship. He made out the suggestion of ropes, he heard men grunting, he heard the creak and the rasp of a yard as it traveled up a mast. The sail was being furled.

Elric waited at least an hour, expecting the crew of the ship to disembark. They could have no other reason for entering this treacherous bay. But a silence had descended, as if the whole ship slept.
Cautiously Elric emerged from behind the rock and walked down to the edge of the sea. Now he could see the ship a little more clearly. Red sunlight was behind it, thin and watery, diffused by the mist. It was a good-sized ship and fashioned throughout of the same dark wood. Its design was baroque and unfamiliar, with high decks fore and aft and no evidence of rowing ports. This was unusual in a ship either of Melnibonéan or Young Kingdoms design and it tended to prove his theory that he had stumbled upon a civilization for some reason cut off from the rest of the world, just as Elwher and the Unmapped Kingdoms were cut off by the vast stretches of the Sighing Desert and the Weeping Waste. He saw no movement aboard, heard none of the sounds one might usually expect to hear on a seagoing ship, even if the larger part of the crew was resting. The mist eddied and more of the red light poured through to illuminate the vessel, revealing the large wheels on both the fore-deck and the reardeck, the slender mast with its furled sail, the complicated geometrical carvings of its rails and its figurehead, the great curving prow which gave the ship its main impression of power and strength and made Elric think it must be a warship rather than a trading vessel. But who was there to fight in such waters as these?

He cast aside his wariness and cupped his hands about his mouth, calling out:
"Hail, the ship!"

The answering silence seemed to him to take on a peculiar hesitancy as if those on board heard him and wondered if they should answer.
"Hail, the ship!"

Then a figure appeared on the port rail and, leaning over, looked casually toward him. The figure had on armor as dark and as strange as the design of his ship; he had a helmet obscuring most of his face and the main feature that Elric could distinguish was a thick, golden beard and sharp blue eyes.
"Hail, the shore," said the armored man. His accent was unknown to Elric, his tone was as casual as his manner. Elric thought he smiled. "What do you seek with us?"
"Aid," said Elric. "I am stranded here. My horse is dead. I am lost."
"Lost? Aha!" The man's voice echoed in the mist. "Lost. And you wish to come aboard?"
"I can pay a little. I can give my services in return for a passage, either to your next port of call or to some land close to the Young Kingdoms where maps are available so that I could make my own way thereafter...."
"Well," said the other slowly, "there's work for a swordsman."
"I have a sword," said Elric.
"I see it. A good, big battle-blade."
"Then I can come aboard?"
"We must confer first. If you would be good enough to wait awhile ...
"Of course," said Elric. He was nonplussed by the man's manner, but the prospect of warmth and food on board the ship was cheering. He waited patiently until the blond-bearded warrior came back to the rail.
"Your name, sir?" said the warrior.
"I am Elric of Melnibonè."

The warrior seemed to be consulting a parchment, running his finger down a list until he nodded, satisfied, and put the list into his large-buckled belt.
"Well," he said, "there was some point in waiting here, after all. I found it difficult to believe."
"What was the dispute and why did you wait?"
"For you," said the warrior, heaving a rope ladder over the side so that its end fell into the sea. "Will you board now, Elric of Melnibonè?"

II

Elric was surprised by how shallow the water was and he wondered by what means such a large
vessel could come so close to the shore. Shoulder-deep in the sea he reached up to grasp the ebony rungs of the ladder. He had great difficulty heaving himself from the water and was further hampered by the swaying of the ship and the weight of his runesword, but eventually he had clambered awkwardly over the side and stood on the deck with the water running from his clothes to the timbers and his body shivering with cold. He looked about him. Shining, red-tinted mist clung about the ship’s dark yards and rigging, white mist spread itself over the roofs and sides of the two large cabins set fore and aft of the mast, and this mist was not of the same character as the mist beyond the ship. Elric, for a moment, had the fanciful notion that the mist traveled permanently wherever the ship traveled. He smiled to himself, putting the dreamlike quality of his experience down to lack of food and sleep. When the ship sailed into sunnier waters he would see it for the relatively ordinary vessel it was.

The blond warrior took Elric’s arm. The man was as tall as Elric and massively built. Within his helm he smiled, saying:
"Let us go below."

They went to the cabin forward of the mast and the warrior drew back a sliding door, standing aside to let Elric enter first. Elric ducked his head and went into the warmth of the cabin. A lamp of red-gray glass gleamed, hanging from four silver chains attached to the roof, revealing several more bulky figures, fully dressed in a variety of armors, seated about a square and sturdy sea-table. All faces turned to regard Elric as he came in, followed by the blond warrior who said:
"This is he."

One of the occupants of the cabin, who sat in the farthest corner and whose features were completely hidden by the shadow, nodded. "Aye," he said. "That is he."
"You know me, sir," said Elric, seating himself at the end of the bench and removing his sodden leather cloak. The warrior nearest him passed him a metal cup of hot wine and Elric accepted it gratefully, sipping at the spiced liquid and marveling at how quickly it dispersed the chill within him.
"In a sense," said the man in the shadows. His voice was sardonic and at the same time had a melancholy ring, and Elric was not offended, for the bitterness in the voice seemed directed more at the owner than at any he addressed.

The blond warrior seated himself opposite Elric. "I am Brut," he said, "once of Lashmar, where my family still holds land, but it is many a year since I have been there."
"From the Young Kingdoms, then?" said Elric.
"Aye. Once."
"This ship journeys nowhere near those nations?" Elric asked.
"I believe it does not," said Brut. "It is not so long, I think, since I myself came aboard. I was seeking Tanelorn, but found this craft, instead."
"Tanelorn?" Elric smiled. "How many must seek that mythical place? Do you know of one called Rackhir, once a warrior priest of Phum? We adventured together quite recently. He left to look for Tanelorn."
"I do not know him," said Brut of Lashmar.
"And these waters," said Elric, "do they lie far from the Young Kingdoms?"
"Very far," said the man in the shadows.
"Are you from Elwher, perhaps?" asked Elric. "Or from any other of what we in the west call the Unmapped Kingdoms?"
"Most of our lands are not on your maps," said the man in the shadows. And he laughed. Again Elric found that he was not offended. And he was not particularly troubled by the mysteries hinted at by the man in the shadows. Soldiers of fortune (as he deemed these men to be) were fond of their private jokes and references; it was usually all that united them save a common willingness to hire their swords to whomever could pay.

Outside the anchor was rattling and the ship rolled. Elric heard the yard being lowered and he heard the smack of the sail as it was unfurled. He wondered how they hoped to leave the bay with so little wind
available. He noticed that the faces of the other warriors (where their faces were visible) had taken on a rather set look as the ship began to move. He looked from one grim, haunted face to another and he wondered if his own features bore the same cast.

"For where do we sail?" he asked.

Brut shrugged: "I know only that we had to stop to wait for you, Elric of Melnibonè."

"You knew I would be there?"

The man in the shadows stirred and helped himself to more hot wine from the jug set into a hole in the center of the table. "You are the last one we need," he said. "I was the first taken aboard. So far I have not regretted my decision to make the voyage."

"Your name, sir?" Elric decided he would no longer be at that particular disadvantage.

"Oh, names? Names? I have so many. The one I favor is Erekosè. But I have been called Urlik Skarsol and John Daker and Ilian of Garathorm to my certain knowledge. Some would have me believe that I have been Elric Womanslayer...."

"Womanslayer? An unpleasant nickname. Who is this other Elric?"

"That I cannot completely answer," said Erekosè. "But I share a name, it seems, with more than one aboard this ship. I, like Brut, sought Tanelorn and found myself here instead."

"We have that in common," said another. He was a black-skinned warrior, the tallest of the company, his features oddly enhanced by a scar running like an inverted V from his forehead and over both eyes, down his cheeks to his jawbones. "I was in a land called Ghaja-Ki, a most unpleasant, swampy place, filled with perverse and diseased life. I had heard of a city said to exist there and I thought it might be Tanelorn. It was not. And it was inhabited by a blue-skinned, hermaphroditic race who determined to cure me of what they considered my malformations of hue and sexuality. This scar you see was their work. The pain of their operation gave me strength to escape them and I ran naked into the swamps, floundering for many a mile until the swamp became a lake feeding a broad river over which hung black clouds of insects which set upon me hungrily. This ship appeared and I was more than glad to seek its sanctuary. I am Otto Blendker, once a scholar of Brunse, now a hireling sword for my sins."

"This Brunse? Does it lie near Elwher?" said Elric. He had never heard of such a place, nor such an outlandish name, in the Young Kingdoms.

The black man shook his head. "I know naught of Elwher."

"Then the world is a considerably larger place than I imagined," said Elric.

"Indeed it is," said Erekosè. "What would you say if I offered you the theory that the sea on which we sail spans more than one world?"

"I would be inclined to believe you." Elric smiled. "I have studied such theories. More, I have experienced adventures in worlds other than my own."

"It is a relief to hear it," said Erekosè. "Not all on board this ship are willing to accept my theory."

"I come closer to accepting it," said Otto Blendker, "though I find it terrifying."

"It is that," agreed Erekosè. "More terrifying than you can imagine, friend Otto."

Elric leaned across the table and helped himself to a further mug of wine. His clothes were already drying and physically he had a sense of well-being. "I'll be glad to leave this misty shore behind."

"The shore has been left already," said Brut, "but as for the mist, it is ever with us. Mist appears to follow the ship—or else the ship creates the mist wherever it travels. It is rare that we see land at all and when we do see it, as we saw it today, it is usually obscured, like a reflection in a dull and buckled shield."

"We sail on a supernatural sea," said another, holding out a gloved hand for the jug. Elric passed it to him. "In Hasghan, where I come from, we have a legend of a Bewitched Sea. If a mariner finds himself sailing in those waters he may never return and will be lost for eternity."

"Your legend contains at least some truth, I fear, Terndrik of Hasghan," Brut said.

"How many warriors are on board?" Elric asked.
"Sixteen other than the Four," said Erekosé. "Twenty in all. The crew numbers about ten and then there is the captain. You will see him soon, doubtless."

"The Four? Who are they?"

Erekosé laughed. "You and I are two of them. The other two occupy the aft cabin. And if you wish to know why we are called the Four, you must ask the captain, though I warn you his answers are rarely satisfying."

Elric realized that he was being pressed slightly to one side. "The ship makes good speed," he said laconically, "considering how poor the wind was."

"Excellent speed," agreed Erekosé. He rose from his corner, a broad-shouldered man with an ageless face bearing the evidence of considerable experience. He was handsome and he had plainly seen much conflict, for both his hands and his face were heavily scarred, though not disfigured. His eyes, though deep-set and dark, seemed of no particular color and yet were familiar to Elric. He felt that he might have seen those eyes in a dream once.

"Have we met before?" Elric asked him.

"Oh, possibly—or shall meet. What does it matter? Our fates are the same. We share an identical doom. And possibly we share more than that."

"More? I hardly comprehend the first part of your statement."

"Then it is for the best," said Erekosé, inching past his comrades and emerging on the other side of the table. He laid a surprisingly gentle hand on Elric's shoulder. "Come, we must seek audience with the captain. He expressed a wish to see you shortly after you came aboard."

Elric nodded and rose. "This captain—what is his name?"

"He has none he will reveal to us," said Erekosé. Together they emerged onto the deck. The mist was if anything thicker and of the same deathly whiteness, no longer tinted by the sun's rays. It was hard to see to the far ends of the ship and for all that they were evidently moving rapidly, there was no hint of a wind. Yet it was warmer than Elric might have expected. He followed Erekosé forward to the cabin set under the deck on which one of the ship's twin wheels stood, tended by a tall man in sea-coat and leggings of quilted deerskin who was so still as to resemble a statue. The red-haired steersman did not look around or down as they advanced toward the cabin, but Elric caught a glimpse of his face.

The door seemed built of some kind of smooth metal possessing a sheen almost like the healthy coat of an animal. It was reddish-brown and the most colorful thing Elric had so far seen on the ship. Erekosé knocked softly upon the door. "Captain," he said. "Elric is here."

"Enter," said a voice at once melodious and distant.

The door opened. Rosy light flooded out, half-blinding Elric as he walked in. As his eyes adapted, he could see a very tall, pale-clad man standing upon a richly hued carpet in the middle of the cabin. Elric heard the door close and realized that Erekosé had not accompanied him inside.

"Are you refreshed, Elric?" said the captain.

"I am, sir, thanks to your wine."

The captain's features were no more human than were Elric's. They were at once finer and more powerful than those of the Melnibonèan, yet bore a slight resemblance in that the eyes were inclined to taper, as did the face, toward the chin. The captain's long hair fell to his shoulders in red-gold waves and was kept back from his brow by a circlet of blue jade. His body was clad in buff-colored tunic and hose and there were sandals of silver and silver-thread laced to his calves. Apart from his clothing, he was twin to the steersman Elric had recently seen.

"Will you have more wine?"

The captain moved toward a chest on the far side of the cabin, near the porthole, which was closed.

"Thank you," said Elric. And now he realized why the eyes had not focused on him. The captain was blind.

For all that his movements were deft and assured, it was obvious that he could not see at all. He
poured the wine from a silver jug into a silver cup and began to cross toward Elric, holding the cup out before him. Elric stepped forward and accepted it.

"I am grateful for your decision to join us," said the captain. "I am much relieved, sir."

"You are courteous," said Elric, "though I must add that my decision was not difficult to make. I had nowhere else to go."

"I understand that. It is why we put into shore when and where we did. You will find that all your companions were in a similar position before they, too, came aboard."

"You appear to have considerable knowledge of the movements of many men," said Elric. He held the wine untasted in his left hand.

"Many," agreed the captain, "on many worlds. I understand that you are a person of culture, sir, so you will be aware of something of the nature of the sea upon which my ship sails."

"I think so."

"She sails between the worlds, for the most part-between the planes of a variety of aspects of the same world, to be a little more exact." The captain hesitated, turning his blind face away from Elric.

"Please know that I do not deliberately mystify you. There are some things I do not understand and other things which I may not completely reveal. It is a trust I have and I hope you feel you can respect it."

"I have no reason as yet to do otherwise," replied the albino. And he took a sip of the wine.

"I find myself with a fine company," said the captain. "I hope that you continue to think it worthwhile honoring my trust when we reach our destination."

"And what is that, Captain?"

"An island indigenous to these waters."

"That must be a rarity."

"Indeed, it is, and once undiscovered, uninhabited by those we must count our enemies. Now that they have found it and realize its power, we are in great danger."

"We? You mean your race or those aboard your ship?"

The captain smiled. "I have no race, save myself. I speak, I suppose, of all humanity."

"These enemies are not human, then?"

"No. They are inextricably involved in human affairs, but this fact has not instilled in them any loyalty to us. I use 'humanity,' of course, in its broader sense, to include yourself and myself."

"I understood," said Elric. "What is this folk called?"

"Many things," said the captain. "Forgive me, but I cannot continue longer now. If you will ready yourself for battle I assure you that I will reveal more to you as soon as the time is right."

Only when Elric stood again outside the reddish-brown door, watching Erekosë advancing up the deck through the mist, did the albino wonder if the captain had charmed him to the point where he had forgotten all common sense. Yet the blind man had impressed him and he had, after all, nothing better to do than to sail on to the island. He shrugged. He could always alter his decision if he discovered that those upon the island were not, in his opinion, enemies.

"Are you more mystified or less, Elric?" said Erekosë, smiling.

"More mystified in some ways, less in others," Elric told him. "And, for some reason, I do not care."

"Then you share the feeling of the whole company," Erekosë told him.

It was only when Erekosë led him to the cabin aft of the mast that Elric realized he had not asked the captain what the significance of the Four might be.

III

Save that it faced in the opposite direction, the other cabin resembled the first in almost every detail. Here, too, were seated some dozen men, all experienced soldiers of fortune by their features and their
clothing. Two sat together at the center of the table's starboard side. One was bareheaded, fair, and
careworn, the other had features resembling Elric's own and he seemed to be wearing a silver gauntlet on
his left hand while the right hand was naked; his armor was delicate and outlandish. He looked up as
Elric entered and there was recognition in his single eye (the other was covered by a brocade-work
patch).

"Elric of Melnibonè!" he exclaimed. "My theories become more meaningful!" He turned to his
companion. "See, Hawkmoon, this is the one of whom I spoke."

"You know me, sir?" Elric was nonplussed.

"You recognize me, Elric. You must! At the Tower of Voilodion Ghagnasdiak? With Erekosè-
though a different Erekosè."

"I know of no such tower, no name which resembles that, and this is the first I have seen of
Erekosè. You know me and you know my name, but I do not know you. I find this disconcerting, sir."

"I, too, had never met Prince Corum before he came aboard," said Erekosè, "yet he insists we
fought together once. I am inclined to believe him. Time on the different planes does not always run
concurrently. Prince Corum might well exist in what we would term the future."

"I had thought to find some relief from such paradoxes here," said Hawkmoon, passing his hand
over his face. He smiled bleakly. "But it seems there is none at this present moment in the history of the
planes. Everything is in flux and even our identities, it seems, are prone to alter at any moment."

"We were Three," said Corum. "Do you not recall it, Elric? The Three Who Are One?"

Elric shook his head.

Corum shrugged, saying softly to himself, "Well, now we are Four. Did the captain say anything of
an island we are supposed to invade?"

"He did," said Elric. "Do you know who these enemies might be?"

"We know no more or less than do you, Elric," said Hawkmoon. "I seek a place called Tanelorn and
two children. Perhaps I seek the Runestaff, too. Of that I am not entirely sure."

"We found it once," said Corum. "We three. In the Tower of Voilodion Ghagnasdiak. It was of
considerable help to us."

"As it might be to me," Hawkmoon told him. "I served it once. I gave it a great deal."

"We have much in common," Erekosè put in, "as I told you, Elric. Perhaps we share masters in
common, too?"

Elric shrugged. "I serve no master but myself."

And he wondered why they all smiled in the same strange way.

Erekosè said quietly, "On such ventures as these one is inclined to forget much, as one forgets a
dream."

"This is a dream," said Hawkmoon. "Of late I've dreamed many such."

"It is all dreaming, if you like," said Corum. "All existence."

Elric was not interested in such philosophizing. "Dream or reality, the experience amounts to the
same, does it not?"

"Quite right," said Erekosè with a wan smile.

They talked on for another hour or two until Corum stretched and yawned and commented that he
was feeling sleepy. The others agreed that they were all tired and so they left the cabin and went aft and
below where there were bunks for all the warriors. As he stretched himself out in one of the bunks, Elric
said to Brut of Lashmar, who had climbed into the bunk above:

"It would help to know when this fight begins."

Brut looked over the edge, down at the prone albino. "I think it will be soon," he said.

Elric stood alone upon the deck, leaning upon the rail and trying to make out the sea, but the sea,
like the rest of the world, was hidden by white curling mist. Elric wondered if there were waters flowing
under the ship's keel at all. He looked up to where the sail was tight and swollen at the mast, filled with a
warm and powerful wind. It was light, but again it was not possible to tell the hour of the day. Puzzled
by Corum's comments concerning an earlier meeting, Elric wondered if there had been other dreams in his life such as this might be—dreams he had forgotten completely upon awakening. But the uselessness of such speculation became quickly evident and he turned his attention to more immediate matters, wondering at the origin of the captain and his strange ship sailing on a stranger ocean.

"The captain," said Hawkmoon's voice, and Elric turned to bid good morning to the tall, fair-haired man who bore a strange, regular scar in the center of his forehead, "has requested that we four visit him in his cabin."

The other two emerged from the mist and together they made their way to the prow, knocking on the reddish-brown door and being at once admitted into the presence of the blind captain, who had four silver wine-cups already poured for them. He gestured them toward the great chest on which the wine stood. "Please help yourselves, my friends."

They did so, standing there with the cups in their hands, four tall, doom-haunted swordsmen, each of a strikingly different cast of features, yet each bearing a certain stamp which marked them as being of a like kind. Elric noticed it, for all that he was one of them, and he tried to recall the details of what Corum had told him on the previous evening.

"We are nearing our destination," said the captain. "It will not be long before we disembark. I do not believe our enemies expect us, yet it will be a hard fight against those two."

"Two?" said Hawkmoon. "Only two?"

"Only two." The captain smiled. "A brother and a sister. Sorcerers from quite another universe than ours. Due to recent disruptions in the fabric of our worlds—of which you know something, Hawkmoon, and you, too, Corum—certain beings have been released who would not otherwise have the power they now possess. And possessing great power, they crave for more—for all the power that there is in our universe. These beings are amoral in a way in which the Lords of Law or Chaos are not. They do not fight for influence upon the Earth, as those gods do; their only wish is to convert the essential energy of our universe to their own uses. I believe they foster some ambition in their particular universe which would be furthered if they could achieve their wish. At present, in spite of conditions highly favorable to them, they have not attained their full strength, but the time is not far off before they do attain it. Agak and Gagak is how they are called in human tongue and they are outside the power of any of our gods, so a more powerful group has been summoned-yourselves. The Champion Eternal in four of his incarnations (and four is the maximum number we can risk without precipitating further unwelcome disruptions among the planes of Earth)—Erekosë, Elric, Corum, and Hawkmoon. Each of you will command four others, whose fates are linked with your own and who are great fighters in their own right, though they do not share your destinies in every sense. You may each pick the four with whom you wish to fight. I think you will find it easy enough to decide. We make landfall quite shortly now."

"You will lead us?" Hawkmoon said.

"I cannot. I can only take you to the island and wait for those who survive—if any survive." Elric frowned. "This fight is not mine, I think."

"It is yours," said the captain soberly. "And it is mine. I would land with you if that were permitted me, but it is not."

"Why so?" asked Corum.

"You will learn that one day. I have not the courage to tell you. I bear you nothing but goodwill, however. Be assured of that."

Erekosë rubbed his jaw. "Well, since it is my destiny to fight, and since I, like Hawkmoon, continue to seek Tanelorn, and since I gather there is some chance of my fulfilling my ambition if I am successful, I for one agree to go against these two, Agak and Gagak."

Hawkmoon nodded. "I go with Erekosë, for similar reasons."

"And I," said Corum.

"Not long since," said Elric, "I counted myself without comrades. Now I have many. For that reason alone I will fight with them."
"It is perhaps the best of reasons," said Erekosë approvingly. "There is no reward for this work, save my assurance that your success will save the world much misery," said the captain. "And for you, Elric, there is less reward than the rest may hope for."


They each accepted, while the captain continued, his blind face staring upward at the roof of the cabin.

"Upon this island is a ruin-perhaps it was once a city called Tanelorn—and at the center of the ruin stands one whole building. It is this building which Agak and his sister use. It is that which you must attack. You will recognize it, I hope, at once."

"And we must slay this pair?" said Erekosë.

"If you can. They have servants who help them. These must be slain, also. Then the building must be fired. This is important." The captain paused. "Fired. It must be destroyed in no other way."

Elric smiled a dry smile. "There are few other ways of destroying buildings, Sir Captain."

The captain returned his smile and made a slight bow of acknowledgment. "Aye, it's so. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering what I have said."

"Do you know what these two look like, these Agak and Gagak?" Corum asked.

"No. It is possible that they resemble creatures of our own worlds; it is possible that they do not. Few have seen them. It is only recently that they have been able to materialize at all."

"And how may they best be overwhelmed?" asked Hawkmoon.

"By courage and ingenuity," said the captain.

"You are not very explicit, sir," said Elric.

"I am as explicit as I can be. Now, my friends, I suggest you rest and prepare your arms."

As they returned to their cabins, Erekosë sighed. "We are fated, he said. "We have little free will, for all we deceive ourselves otherwise. If we perish or live through this venture, it will not count for much in the overall scheme of things."

"I think you are of a gloomy turn of mind, friend," said Hawkmoon.

The mist snaked through the branches of the mast, writhing in the rigging, flooding the deck. It swirled across the faces of the other three men as Elric looked at them.

"A realistic turn of mind," said Corum.

The mist massed more thickly upon the deck, mantling each man like a shroud. The timbers of the ship creaked and to Elric's ears took on the sound of a raven's croak. It was colder now. In silence they went to their cabins to test the hooks and buckles of their armor, to polish and to sharpen their weapons and to pretend to sleep.

"Oh, I've no liking for sorcery," said Brut of Lashmar, tugging at his golden beard, "for sorcery it was resulted in my shame." Elric had told him all that the captain had said and had asked Brut to be one of the four who fought with him when they landed.

"It is all sorcery here," Otto Blendker said. And he smiled wanly as he gave Elric his hand. "I'll fight beside you, Elric."

His sea-green armor shimmering faintly in the lantern light, another rose, his casque pushed back from his face. It was a face almost as white as Elric's, though the eyes were deep and near-black. "And I," said Hown Serpent-tamer, "though I fear I'm little use on still land."

The last to rise, at Elric's glance, was a warrior who had said little during their earlier conversations. His voice was deep and hesitant. He wore a plain iron battle-cap and the red hair beneath it was braided. At the end of each braid was a small fingerbone which rattled on the shoulders of his byrnie as he moved. This was Ashnar the Lynx, whose eyes were rarely less than fierce. "I lack the eloquence or the breeding of you other gentlemen," said Ashnar. "And I've no familiarity with sorcery or those other things of which you speak, but I'm a good soldier and my joy is in fighting. I'll take your orders, Elric, if
you'll have me."
    "Willingly," said Elric.
    "There is no dispute, it seems," said Erekosë to the remaining four who had elected to join him. "All this is doubtless preordained. Our destinies have been linked from the first."
    "Such philosophy can lead to unhealthy fatalism," said Terndrik of Hasghan. "Best believe our fates are our own, even if the evidence denies it."
    "You must think as you wish," said Erekosë. "I have led many lives, though all, save one, are remembered but faintly." He shrugged. "Yet I deceive myself, I suppose, in that I work for a time when I shall find this Tanelorn and perhaps be reunited with the one I seek. That ambition is what gives me energy, Terndrik."
    Elric smiled. "I fight, I think, because I relish the comradeship of battle. That, in itself, is a melancholy condition in which to find oneself, is it not?"
    "Aye." Erekosë glanced at the floor. "Well, we must try to rest now."

IV

The outlines of the coast were dim. They waded through white water and white mist, their swords held above their heads. Swords were their only weapons. Each of the Four possessed a blade of unusual size and design, but none bore a sword which occasionally murmured to itself as did Elric's Stormbringer. Glancing back, Elric saw the captain standing at the rail, his blind face turned toward the island, his pale lips moving as if he spoke to himself. Now the water was waist-deep and the sand beneath Elric's feet hardened and became smooth rock. He waded on, wary and ready to carry any attack to those who might be defending the island. But now the mist grew thinner, as if it could gain no hold on the land, and there were no obvious signs of defenders.

Tucked into his belt, each man had a brand, it's end wrapped in oiled cloth so that it should not be wet when the time came to light it. Similarly, each was equipped with a handful of smoldering tinder in a little firebox in a pouch attached to his belt, so that the brands could be instantly ignited.

"Only fire will destroy this enemy forever," the captain had said again as he handed them their brands and their tinderboxes.

As the mist cleared, it revealed a landscape of dense shadows. The shadows spread over red rock and yellow vegetation and they were shadows of all shapes and dimensions, resembling all manner of things. They seemed cast by the huge blood-colored sun which stood at perpetual noon above the island, but what was disturbing about them was that the shadows themselves seemed without a source, as if the objects they represented were invisible or existed elsewhere than on the island itself. The sky, too, seemed full of these shadows, but whereas those on the island were still, those in the sky sometimes moved, perhaps when the clouds moved. And all the while the red sun poured down its bloody light and touched the twenty men with its unwelcome radiance just as it touched the land.

And at times, as they advanced cautiously inland, a peculiar flickering light sometimes crossed the island so that the outlines of the place became unsteady for a few seconds before returning to focus. Elric suspected his eyes and said nothing until Hown Serpent-tamer (who was having difficulty finding his land-legs) remarked:

"I have rarely been ashore, it's true, but I think the quality of this land is stranger than any other I've known. It shimmers. It distorts."

Several voices agreed with him.

"And from whence come all these shadows?" Ashnar the Lynx stared around him in unashamed superstitious awe. "Why cannot we see that which casts them?"

"It could be," Corum said, "that these are shadows cast by objects existing in other dimensions of the Earth. If all dimensions meet here, as has been suggested, that could be a likely explanation." He put
his silver hand to his embroidered eye-patch. "This is not the strangest example I have witnessed of such a conjunction."

"Likely?" Otto Blendker snorted. "Pray let none give me an unlikely explanation, if you please!"

They pressed on through the shadows and the lurid light until they arrived at the outskirts of the ruins.

These ruins, thought Elric, had something in common with the ramshackle city of Ameeron, which he had visited on his quest for the Black Sword. But they were altogether more vast-more a collection of smaller cities, each one in a radically different architectural style.

"Perhaps this is Tanelorn," said Corum, who had visited the place, "or, rather, all the versions of Tanelorn there have ever been. For Tanelorn exists in many forms, each form depending upon the wishes of those who most desire to find her."

"This is not the Tanelorn I expected to find," said Hawkmoon bitterly.

"Nor I," added Erekosë bleakly.

"Perhaps it is not Tanelorn," said Elric. "Perhaps it is not."

"Or perhaps this is a graveyard," said Corum distantly, frowning with his single eye. "A graveyard containing all the forgotten versions of that strange city."

They began to clamber over the ruins, their arms clattering as they moved, heading for the center of the place. Elric could tell by the introspective expressions in the faces of many of his companions that they, like him, were wondering if this were not a dream. Why else should they find themselves in this peculiar situation, unquestioningly risking their lives-perhaps their souls-in a fight with which none of them was identified?

Erekosë moved closer to Elric as they marched. "Have you noticed," said he, "that the shadows now represent something?"

Elric nodded. "You can tell from the ruins what some of the buildings looked like when they were whole. The shadows are the shadows of those buildings-the original buildings before they became ruined."

"Just so," said Erekosë. Together, they shuddered.

At last they approached the likely center of the place and here was a building which was not ruined. It stood in a cleared space, all curves and ribbons of metal and glowing tubes.

"It resembles a machine more than a building," said Hawkmoon.

"And a musical instrument more than a machine," Corum mused.

The party came to a halt, each group of four gathering about its leader. There was no question but that they had arrived at their goal.

Now that Elric looked carefully at the building he could see that it was in fact two buildings-both absolutely identical and joined at various points by curling systems of pipes which might be connecting corridors, though it was difficult to imagine what manner of being could utilize them.

"Two buildings," said Erekosë. "We were not prepared for this. Shall we split up and attack both?"

Instinctively Elric felt that this action would be unwise. He shook his head. "I think we should go together into one, else our strength will be weakened."

"I agree," said Hawkmoon, and the rest nodded.

Thus, there being no cover to speak of, they marched boldly toward the nearest building to a point near the ground where a black opening of irregular proportions could be discerned. Ominously, there was still no sign of defenders. The buildings pulsed and glowed and occasionally whispered, but that was all.

Elric and his party were the first to enter, finding themselves in a damp, warm passage which curved almost immediately to the right. They were followed by the others until all stood in this passage warily glaring ahead, expecting to be attacked. But no attack came.

With Elric at their head, they moved on for some moments before the passage began to tremble violently and sent Mown Serpent-tamer crashing to the floor cursing. As the man in the sea-green armor
scrambled up, a voice began to echo along the passage, seemingly coming from a great distance yet nonetheless loud and irritable.

"Who? Who? Who invades me?"

The passage's tremble subsided a little into a constant quivering motion. The voice became a muttering, detached and uncertain.

"What attacks? What?"

The twenty men glanced at one another in puzzlement. At length Elric shrugged and led the party on and soon the passage had widened out into a hall whose walls, roof, and floor were damp with sticky fluid and whose air was hard to breathe. And now, somehow passing themselves through the walls of this hall, came the first of the defenders, ugly beasts who must be the servants of that mysterious brother and sister Agak and Gagak.

"Attack!" cried the distant voice. "Destroy this. Destroy it!"

The beasts were of a primitive sort, mostly gaping mouth and slithering body, but there were many of them oozing toward the twenty men, who quickly formed themselves into the four fighting units and prepared to defend themselves. The creatures made a dreadful slushing sound as they approached and the ridges of bone which served them as teeth clashed as they reared up to snap at Elric and his companions. Elric whirled his sword and it met hardly any resistance as it sliced through several of the things at once. But now the air was thicker than ever and a stench threatened to overwhelm them as fluid drenched the floor.

"Move on through them," Elric instructed, "hacking a path through as you go. Head for yonder opening." He pointed with his left hand.

And so they advanced, cutting back hundreds of the primitive beasts and thus decreasing the breathability of the air.

"The creatures are not hard to fight," gasped Hown Serpent-tamer, "but each one we kill robs us a little of our own chances of life."

Elric was aware of the irony. "Cunningly planned by our enemies, no doubt." He coughed and slashed again at a dozen of the beasts slithering toward him. The things were fearless, but they were stupid, too. They made no attempt at strategy.

Finally Elric reached the next passage, where the air was slightly purer. He sucked gratefully at the sweeter atmosphere and waved his companions on.

Sword-arms rising and falling, they gradually retreated back into the passage, followed by only a few of the beasts. The creatures seemed reluctant to enter the passage and Elric suspected that somewhere within it there must lie a danger which even they feared. There was nothing for it, however, but to press on and he was only grateful that all twenty had survived this initial ordeal.

Gasping, they rested for a moment, leaning against the trembling walls of the passage, listening to the tones of that distant voice, now muffled and indistinct.

"I like not this castle at all," growled Brut of Lashmar, inspecting a rent in his cloak where a creature had seized it. "High sorcery commands it."

"It is only what we knew," Ashnar the Lynx reminded him, and Ashnar was plainly hard put to control his terror. The fingerbones in his braids kept time with the trembling of the walls and the huge barbarian looked almost pathetic as he steeled himself to go on.

"They are cowards, these sorcerers," Otto Blendker said. "They do not show themselves." He raised his voice. "Is their aspect so loathsome that they are afraid lest we look upon them?" It was a challenge not taken up. As they pushed on through the passages there was no sign either of Agak or his sister Gagak. It became gloomier and brighter in turns. Sometimes the passages narrowed so that it was difficult to squeeze their bodies through, sometimes they widened into what were almost halls. Most of the time they appeared to be climbing higher into the building.

Elric tried to guess the nature of the building's inhabitants. There were no steps in the castle, no
artifacts he could recognize. For no particular reason he developed an image of Agak and Gagak as reptilian in form, for reptiles would prefer gently rising passages to steps and doubtless would have little need of conventional furniture. There again it was possible that they could change their shape at will, assuming human form when it suited them. He was becoming impatient to face either one or both of the sorcerers.

Ashnar the Lynx had other reasons—or so he said—for his own lack of patience.

"They said there'd be treasure here," he muttered. "I thought to stake my life against a fair reward, but there's naught here of value." He put a horny hand against the damp material of the wall. "Not even stone or brick. What are these walls made of, Elric?"

Elric shook his head. "That has puzzled me, also, Ashnar."

Then Elric saw large, fierce eyes peering out of the gloom ahead. He heard a rattling noise, a rushing noise, and the eyes grew larger and larger. He saw a red mouth, yellow fangs, orange fur. Then the growling sounded and the beast sprang at him even as he raised Stormbringer to defend himself and shouted a warning to the others. The creature was a baboon, but huge, and there were at least a dozen others following the first. Elric drove his body forward behind his sword, taking the beast in its groin. Claws reached out and dug into his shoulders and waist. He groaned as he felt at least one set of claws draw blood. His arms were trapped and he could not pull Stormbringer free. All he could do was twist the sword in the wound he had already made. With all his might, he turned the hilt. The great ape shouted, its bloodshot eyes blazing, and it bared its yellow fangs as its muzzle shot toward Elric's throat. The teeth closed on his neck, the stinking breath threatened to choke him. Again he twisted the blade. Again the beast yelled in pain.

The fangs were pressing into the metal of Elric's gorget, the only thing saving him from immediate death. He struggled to free at least one arm, twisting the sword for the third time, then tugging it sideways to widen the wound in the groin. The growls and groans of the baboon grew more intense and the teeth tightened their hold on his neck, but now, mingled with the noises of the ape, he began to hear a murmuring and he felt Stormbringer pulse in his hand. He knew that the sword was drawing power from the ape even as the ape sought to destroy him. Some of that power began to flow into his body.

Desperately Elric put all his remaining strength into dragging the sword across the ape's body, slitting its belly wide so that its blood and entrails spilled over him as he was suddenly free and staggering backward, wrenching the sword out in the same movement. The ape, too, was staggering back, staring down in stupefied awe at its own horrible wound before it fell to the floor of the passage.

Elric turned, ready to give aid to his nearest comrade, and he was in time to see Terndrik of Hasghan die, kicking in the clutches of an even larger ape, his head bitten clean from his shoulders and his red blood gouting.

Elric drove Stormbringer cleanly between the shoulders of Terndrik's slayer, taking the ape in the heart. Beast and human victim fell together. Two others were dead and several bore bad wounds, but the remaining warriors fought on, swords and armor smeared with crimson. The narrow passage stank of ape, of sweat, and of blood. Elric pressed into the fight, chopping at the skull of an ape which grappled with Hown Serpent-tamer, who had lost his sword. Hown darted a look of thanks at Elric as he bent to retrieve his blade and together they set upon the largest of all the baboons. This creature stood much taller than Elric and had Erekosë pressed against the wall, Erekosë's sword through its shoulder.

From two sides, Hown and Elric stabbed and the baboon snarled and screamed, turning to face the new attackers, Erekosë's blade quivering in its shoulder. It rushed upon them and they stabbed again together, taking the monster in its heart and its lung so that when it roared at them blood vomited from its mouth. It fell to its knees, its eyes dimming, then sank slowly down.

And now there was silence in the passage and death lay all about them.

Terndrik of Hasghan was dead. Two of Corum's party were dead. All of Erekosë's surviving men bore major wounds. One of Hawkmoon's men was dead, but the remaining three were virtually
unscathed. Brut of Lashmar's helm was dented, but he was otherwise unwounded and Ashnar the Lynx was disheveled, nothing more. Ashnar had taken two of the baboons during the fight. But now the barbarian's eyes rolled as he leaned, panting, against the wall.

"I begin to suspect this venture of being uneconomical," he said with a half-grin. He rallied himself, stepping over a baboon's corpse to join Elric. "The less time we take over it, the better. What think you, Elric?"

"I would agree." Elric returned his grin. "Come." And he led the way through the passage and into a chamber whose walls gave off a pinkish light. He had not walked far before he felt something catch at his ankle and he stared down in horror to see a long, thin snake winding itself about his leg. It was too late to use his sword; instead he seized the reptile behind its head and dragged it partially free of his leg before hacking the head from the body. The others were now stamping and shouting warnings to each other. The snakes did not appear to be venomous, but there were thousands of them, appearing, it seemed, from out of the floor itself. They were flesh-colored and had no eyes, more closely resembling earthworms than ordinary reptiles, but they were strong enough.

Hown Serpent-tamer sang a strange song now, with many liquid, hissing notes, and this seemed to have a calming effect upon the creatures. One by one at first and then in increasing numbers, they dropped back to the floor, apparently sleeping. Mown grinned at his success.

Elric said, "Now I understand how you came by your surname."

"I was not sure the song would work on these," Hown told him, "for they are unlike any serpents I have ever seen in the seas of my own world."

They waded on through mounds of sleeping serpents, noticing that the next passage rose sharply. At times they were forced to use their hands to steady themselves as they climbed the peculiar, slippery material of the floor.

It was much hotter in this passage and they were all sweating, pausing several times to rest and mop their brows. The passage seemed to extend upward forever, turning occasionally, but never leveling out for more than a few feet. At times it narrowed to little more than a tube through which they had to squirm on their stomachs and at other times the roof disappeared into the gloom over their heads. Elric had long since given up trying to relate their position to what he had seen of the outside of the castle. From time to time small, shapeless creatures rushed toward them in shoals apparently with the intention of attacking them, but these were rarely more than an irritation and were soon all but ignored by the party as it continued its climb.

For a while they had not heard the strange voice which had greeted them upon their entering, but now it began to whisper again, its tones more urgent than before.

"Where? Where? Oh, the pain!"

They paused, trying to locate the source of the voice, but it seemed to come from everywhere at once.

Grim-faced, they continued, plagued by thousands of little creatures which bit at their exposed flesh like so many gnats, yet the creatures were not insects. Elric had seen nothing like them before. They were shapeless, primitive, and all but colorless. They battered at his face as he moved; they were like a wind. Half-blinded, choked, sweating, he felt his strength leaving him. The air was so thick now, so hot, so salty, it was as if he moved through liquid. The others were as badly affected as was he; some were staggering and two men fell, to be helped up again by comrades almost as exhausted. Elric was tempted to strip off his armor, but he knew this would leave more of his flesh to the mercy of the little flying creatures.

Still they climbed and now more of the serpentine things they had seen earlier began to writhe around their feet, hampering them further, for all that Mown sang his sleeping song until he was hoarse.

"We can survive this only a little longer," said Ashnar the Lynx, moving close to Elric. "We shall be in no condition to meet the sorcerer if we ever find him or his sister."

Elric nodded a gloomy head. "My thoughts, too, yet what else may we do, Ashnar?"
"Nothing," said Ashnar in a low voice. "Nothing."
"Where? Where? Where?" The word rustled all about them. Many of the party were becoming openly nervous.

V

They had reached the top of the passage. The querulous voice was much louder now, but it quavered more. They saw an archway and beyond the archway a lighted chamber.
"Agak's room, without doubt," said Ashnar, taking a better grip on his sword.
"Possibly," said Elric. He felt detached from his body. Perhaps it was the heat and the exhaustion, or his growing sense of disquiet, but something made him withdraw into himself and hesitate before entering the chamber.

The place was octagonal and each of its eight sloping sides was of a different color and each color changed constantly. Occasionally the walls became semitransparent, revealing a complete view of the ruined city (or collection of cities) far below, and also a view of the twin castle to this one, still connected by tubes and wires.

It was the large pool in the center of the chamber which attracted their attention mostly. It seemed deep and was full of evil-smelling, viscous stuff. It bubbled. Shapes formed in it. Grotesque and strange, beautiful and familiar, the shapes seemed always upon the brink of taking permanent form before falling back into the stuff of the pool. And the voice was still louder and there was no question now that it came from the pool.
"What? What? Who invades?"
Elric forced himself closer to the pool and for a moment saw his own face staring out at him before it melted.
"Who invades? Ah! I am too weak!"
Elric spoke to the pool. "We are of those you would destroy," he said. "We are those on whom you would feed."
"Ah! Agak! Agak! I am sick! Where are you?"
Ashnar and Brut joined Elric. The faces of the warriors were filled with disgust.
"Agak," growled Ashnar the Lynx, his eyes narrowing. "At last some sign that the sorcerer is here!"
The others had all crowded in, to stand as far away from the pool as possible, but all stared, fascinated by the variety of the shapes forming and disintegrating in the viscous liquid.
"I weaken. . . . My energy needs to be replenished. . . . We must begin now, Agak. . . . It took us so long to reach this place. I thought I could rest. But there is disease here. It fills my body. Agak. Awaken, Agak. Awaken!"
"Some servant of Agak's, charged with the defense of the chamber?" suggested Mown Serpent-tamer in a small voice.
But Elric continued to stare into the pool as he began, he thought, to realize the truth.
"Will Agak wake?" Brut said. "Will he come?" He glanced nervously around him.
"Agak!" called Ashnar the Lynx. "Coward!"
"Agak!" cried many of the other warriors, brandishing their swords.
But Elric said nothing and he noted, too, that Hawkmoon and Corum and Erekosë all remained silent. He guessed that they must be filled with the same dawning understanding.
He looked at them. In Erekosë's eyes he saw an agony, a pity both for himself and his comrades.
"We are the Four Who Are One," said Erekosë. His voice shook.
Elric was seized by an alien impulse, an impulse which disgusted and terrified him. "No. . . ." He attempted to sheathe Stormbringer, but the sword refused to enter its scabbard.
"Agak! Quickly!" said the voice from the pool.
"If we do not do this thing," said Erekosë, "they will eat all our worlds. Nothing will remain."
Elric put his free hand to his head. He swayed upon the edge of that frightful pool. He moaned. "We must do it, then." Corum's voice was an echo. "I will not," said Elric. "I am myself." "And I!" said Hawkmoon.

But Corum Jhaelen Irsei said, "It is the only way for us, for the single thing that we are. Do you not see that? We are the only creatures of our worlds who possess the means of slaying the sorcerers-in the only manner in which they can be slain!"

Elric looked at Corum, at Hawkmoon, at Erekosë, and again he saw something of himself in all of them. "We are the Four Who Are One," said Erekosë. "Our united strength is greater than the sum. We must come together, brothers. We must conquer here before we can hope to conquer Agak."

"No..." Elric moved away, but somehow he found himself standing at a corner of the bubbling, noxious pool from which the voice still murmured and complained, in which shapes still formed, reformed, and faded. And at each of the other three corners stood one of his companions. All had a set, fatalistic look to them.

The warriors who had accompanied the Four drew back to the walls. Otto Blendker and Brut of Lashmar stood near the doorway, listening for anything which might come up the passage to the chamber. Ashnar the Lynx fingered the brand at his belt, a look of pure horror on his rugged features.

Elric felt his arm begin to rise, drawn upward by his sword, and he saw that each of his three companions were also lifting their swords. The swords reached out across the pool and their tips met above the exact center.

Elric yelled as something entered his being. Again he tried to break free, but the power was too strong. Other voices spoke in his head. "I understand..." This was Corum's distant murmur. "It is the only way."

"Oh, no, no..." And this was Hawkmoon, but the words came from Elric's lips. "Agak!" cried the pool. The stuff became more agitated, more alarmed. "Agak! Quickly! Wake!"

Elric's body began to shake, but his hand kept a firm hold upon the sword. The atoms of his body flew apart and then united again into a single flowing entity which traveled up the blade of the sword toward the apex. And Elric was still Elric, shouting with the terror of it, sighing with the ecstasy of it.

Elric was still Elric when he drew away from the pool and looked upon himself for a single moment, seeing himself wholly joined with his three other selves.

A being hovered over the pool. On each side of its head was a face and each face belonged to one of the companions. Serene and terrible, the eyes did not blink. It had eight arms and the arms were still; it squatted over the pool on eight legs, and its armor and accouterments were of all colors blending and at the same time separate.

The being clutched a single great sword in all eight hands and both he and the sword glowed with a ghastly golden light.

Then Elric had rejoined this body and had become a different thing-himself and three others and something else which was the sum of that union.

The Four Who Were One reversed its monstrous sword so that the point was directed downward at the frenetically boiling stuff in the pool below. The stuff feared the sword. It mewled.

"Agak, Agak...."

The being of whom Elric was a part gathered its great strength and began to plunge the sword down.

Shapeless waves appeared on the surface of the pool. Its whole color changed from sickly yellow to an unhealthy green. "Agak, I die...."

Inexorably the sword moved down. It touched the surface.

The pool swept back and forth; it tried to ooze over the sides and onto the floor. The sword bit deeper and the Four Who Were One felt new strength flow up the blade. There came a moan; slowly the
pool quieted. It became silent. It became still. It became gray.

Then the Four Who Were One descended into the pool to be absorbed.

It could see clearly now. It tested its body. It controlled every limb, every function. It had triumphed; it had revitalized the pool. Through its single octagonal eye it looked in all directions at the same time over the wide ruins of the city; then it focused all its attention upon its twin.

Agak had awakened too late, but he was awakening at last, roused by the dying cries of his sister Gagak, whose body the mortals had first invaded and whose intelligence they had overwhelmed, whose eye they now used and whose powers they would soon attempt to utilize.

Agak did not need to turn his head to look upon the being he still saw as his sister. Like hers, his intelligence was contained within the huge eight-sided eye.

"Did you call me, sister?"

"I spoke your name, that is all, brother." There were enough vestiges of Gagak's life-force in the Four Who Were One for it to imitate her manner of speaking.

"You cried out?"

"A dream." The Four paused and then it spoke again: "A disease. I dreamed that there was something upon this island which made me unwell."

"Is that possible? We do not know sufficient about these dimensions or the creatures inhabiting them. Yet none is as powerful as Agak and Gagak. Fear not, sister. We must begin our work soon."

"It is nothing. Now I am awake."

Agak was puzzled. "You speak oddly."

"The dream..." answered the creature which had entered Gagak's body and destroyed her.

"We must begin," said Agak. "The dimensions turn and the time has come. Ah, feel it. It waits for us to take it. So much rich energy. How we shall conquer when we go home!"

"I feel it," replied the Four, and it did. It felt its whole universe, dimension upon dimension, swirling all about it. Stars and planets and moons through plane upon plane, all full of the energy upon which Agak and Gagak had desired to feed. And there was enough of Gagak still within the Four to make the Four experience a deep, anticipatory hunger which, now that the dimensions attained the right conjunction, would soon be satisfied.

The Four was tempted to join with Agak and feast, though it knew if it did so it would rob its own universe of every shred of energy. Stars would fade, worlds would die. Even the Lords of Law and Chaos would perish, for they were part of the same universe. Yet to possess such power it might be worth committing such a tremendous crime. ... It controlled this desire and gathered itself for its attack before Agak became too wary.

"Shall we feast, sister?"

The Four realized that the ship had brought it to the island at exactly the proper moment. Indeed, they had almost come too late.

"Sister?" Agak was again puzzled. "What...?"

The Four knew it must disconnect from Agak. The tubes and wires fell away from his body and were withdrawn into Gagak's.

"What's this?" Agak's strange body trembled for a moment. "Sister?"

The Four prepared itself. For all that it had absorbed Gagak's memories and instincts, it was still not confident that it would be able to attack Agak in her chosen form. And since the sorceress had possessed the power to change her form, the Four began to change, groaning greatly, experiencing dreadful pain, drawing all the materials of its stolen being together so that what had appeared to be a building now became pulpy, unformed flesh. And Agak, stunned, looked on.

"Sister? Your sanity..."

The building, the creature that was Gagak, threshed, melted, and erupted. It screamed in agony.

It attained its form.

It laughed.
Four faces laughed upon a gigantic head. Eight arms waved in triumph, eight legs began to move. And over that head it waved a single, massive sword.

And it was running.

It ran upon Agak while the alien sorcerer was still in his static form. Its sword was whirling and shards of ghastly golden light fell away from it as it moved, lashing the shadowed landscape. The Four was as large as Agak. And at this moment it was as strong.

But Agak, realizing his danger, began to suck. No longer would this be a pleasurable ritual shared with his sister. He must suck at the energy of this universe if he were to find the strength to defend himself, to gain what he needed to destroy his attacker, the slayer of his sister. Worlds died as Agak sucked.

But not enough. Agak tried cunning.

"This is the center of your universe. All its dimensions intersect here. Come, you can share the power. My sister is dead. I accept her death. You shall be my partner now. With this power we shall conquer a universe far richer than this!"

"No!" said the Four, still advancing.

"Very well, but be assured of your defeat."

The Four swung its sword. The sword fell upon the faceted eye within which Agak's intelligence-pool bubbled, just as his sister's had once bubbled. But Agak was stronger already and healed himself at once.

Agak's tendrils emerged and lashed at the Four and the Four cut at the tendrils as it sought his body. And Agak sucked more energy to himself. His body, which the mortals had mistaken for a building, began to glow burning scarlet and to radiate an impossible heat.

The sword roared and flared so that black light mingled with the gold and flowed against the scarlet. And all the while the Four could sense its own universe shrinking and dying.

"Give back, Agak, what you have stolen!" said the Four.

Planes and angles and curves, wires and tubes, flickered with deep red heat and Agak sighed. The universe whimpered.

"I am stronger than you," said Agak. "Now."

And Agak sucked again.

The Four knew that Agak's attention was diverted for just that short while as he fed. And the Four knew that it, too, must draw energy from its own universe if Agak were to be defeated. So the sword was raised.

The sword was flung back, its blade slicing through tens of thousands of dimensions and drawing their power to it. Then it began to swing back. It swung and black light bellowed from its blade. It swung and Agak became aware of it. His body began to alter. Down toward the sorcerer's great eye, down toward Agak's intelligence-pool swept the black blade.

Agak's many tendrils rose to defend the sorcerer against the sword, but the sword cut through them as if they were not there and it struck the eight-sided chamber which was Agak's eyes and it plunged on down into Agak's intelligence-pool, deep into the stuff of the sorcerer's sensibility, drawing up Agak's energy into itself and thence into its master, the Four Who Were One. And something screamed through the universe and something sent a tremor through the universe. And the universe was dead, even as Agak began to die.

The Four did not dare wait to see if Agak were completely vanquished. It swept the sword out, back through the dimensions, and everywhere the blade touched the energy was restored. The sword rang round and round, round and round, dispersing the energy. And the sword sang its triumph and its glee.

And little shreds of black and golden light whispered away and were reabsorbed.

For a moment the universe had been dead. Now it lived and Agak's energy had been added to it. Agak lived, too, but he was frozen. He had attempted to change his shape. Now he still half-
resembled the building Elric had seen when he first came to the island, but part of him resembled the Four Who Were One—here was part of Corum's face, here a leg, there a fragment of sword-blade—as if Agak had believed, at the end, that the Four could only be defeated if its own form were assumed, just as the Four had assumed Gagak's form.

"We had waited so long. . . ." Agak sighed and then he was dead.

And the Four sheathed its sword.

Then there came a howling through the ruins of the many cities and a strong wind blustered against the body of the Four so that it was forced to kneel on its eight legs and bow its four-faced head before the gale. Then, gradually, it reassumed the shape of Gagak, the sorceress, and then it lay within Gagak's stagnating intelligence-pool and then it rose over it, hovered for a moment, withdrew its sword from the pool. Then four beings fled apart and Elric and Hawkmoon and Erekosë and Corum stood with sword-blades touching over the center of the dead brain.

The four men sheathed their swords. They stared for a second into each other's eyes and all saw terror and awe there. Elric turned away.

He could find neither thoughts nor emotions in him which would relate to what had happened. There were no words he could use. He stood looking dumbly at Ashnar the Lynx and he wondered why Ashnar giggled and chewed at his beard and scraped at the flesh of his own face with his fingernails, his sword forgotten upon the floor of the gray chamber.

"Now I have flesh again. Now I have flesh," Ashnar kept saying.

Elric wondered why Mown Serpent-tamer lay curled in a ball at Ashnar's feet, and why when Brut of Lashmar emerged from the passage he fell down and lay stretched upon the floor, stirring a little and moaning as if in disturbed slumber. Otto Blendker came into the chamber. His sword was in its scabbard. His eyes were tight shut and he hugged at himself, shivering.

Elric thought to himself: I must forget all this or sanity will disappear forever.

He went to Brut and helped the blond warrior to his feet. "What did you see?"

"More than I deserved, for all my sins. We were trapped—trapped in that skull. . . ." Then Brut began to weep as a small child might weep and Elric took the tall warrior in his own arms and stroked his head and could not find words or sounds with which to comfort him.

"We must go," said Erekosë. His eyes were glazed. He staggered as he walked.

Thus, dragging those who had fainted, leading those who had gone mad, leaving those who had died behind, they fled through the dead passages of Gagak's body, no longer plagued by the things she had created in her attempt to rid that body of those she had experienced as an invading disease. The passages and chambers were cold and brittle and the men were glad when they stood outside and saw the ruins, the sourceless shadows, the red, static sun.

Otto Blendker was the only one of the warriors who seemed to retain his sanity through the ordeal, when they had been absorbed, unknowingly, into the body of the Four Who Were One. He dragged his brand from his belt and he took out his tinder and ignited it. Soon the brand was flaming and the others lighted theirs from his. Elric trudged to where Agak's remains still lay and he shuddered as he recognized in a monstrous stone face part of his own features. He felt that the stuff could not possibly burn, but it did. Behind him Gagak's body blazed, too. They were swiftly consumed and pillars of growing fire jutted into the sky, sending up a smoke of white and crimson which for a little while obscured the red disk of the sun.

The men watched the corpses burn.

"I wonder," said Corum, "if the captain knew why he sent us here?"

"Or if he suspected what would happen?" said Hawkmoon. Hawkmoon's tone was near to resentful.

"Only we—only that being—could battle Agak and Gagak in anything resembling their own terms," said Erekosë. "Other means would not have been successful, no other creature could have the particular qualities, the enormous power needed to slay such strange sorcerers."

"So it seems," said Elric, and he would talk no more of it.
"Hopefully," said Corum, "you will forget this experience as you forgot—or will forget—the other." Elric offered him a hard stare. "Hopefully, brother," he said.

Erekosë’s chuckle was ironic. "Who could recall that?" And he, too, said no more.

Ashnar the Lynx, who had ceased his gigglings as he watched the fire, shrieked suddenly and broke away from the main party. He ran toward the flickering column and then veered away, disappearing among the ruins and the shadows.

Otto Blendker gave Elric a questioning stare, but Elric shook his head. "Why follow him? What can we do for him?" He looked down at Hown Serpent-tamer. He had particularly liked the man in the sea-green armor. He shrugged.

When they moved on, they left the curled body of Hown Serpent-tamer where it lay, helping only Brut of Lashmar across the rubble and down to the shore.

Soon they saw the white mist ahead and knew they neared the sea, though the ship was not in sight. At the edge of the mist both Hawkmoon and Erekosë paused.

"I will not rejoin the ship," said Hawkmoon. "I feel I’ve served my passage now. If I can find Tanelorn, this, I suspect, is where I must look."

"My own feelings." Erekosë nodded his head.

Elric looked to Corum. Corum smiled. "I have already found Tanelorn. I go back to the ship in the hope that soon it will deposit me upon a more familiar shore."

"That is my hope," said Elric. His arm still supported Brut of Lashmar. Brut whispered, "What was it? What happened to us?"

Elric increased his grip upon the warrior’s shoulder. "Nothing," he said.

Then, as Elric tried to lead Brut into the mist, the blond warrior stepped back, breaking free. "I will stay," he said. He moved away from Elric. "I am sorry."

Elric was puzzled. "Brut?"

"I am sorry," Brut said again. "I fear you. I fear that ship."

Elric made to follow the warrior, but Corum put a hard silver hand upon his shoulder. "Comrade, let us be gone from this place." His smile was bleak. "It is what is back there that I fear more than the ship."

They stared over the ruins. In the distance they could see the remains of the fire and there were two shadows there now, the shadows of Gagak and Agak as they had first appeared to them.

Elric drew a cold breath of air. "With that I agree," he told Corum.

Otto Blendker was the only warrior who chose to return to the ship with them. "If that is Tanelorn, it is not, after all, the place I sought," he said.

Soon they were waist-deep in the water. They saw again the outlines of the dark ship; they saw the captain leaning on the rail, his arm raised as if in salute to someone or something upon the island.

"Captain," called Corum, "we come aboard."

"You are welcome," said the captain. "Yes, you are welcome." The blind face turned toward them as Elric reached out for the rope ladder. "Would you care to sail for a while into the silent places, the restful places?"

"I think so," said Elric. He paused, halfway up the ladder, and he touched his head. "I have many wounds."

He reached the rail and with his own cool hands the captain helped him over. "They will heal, Elric."

Elric moved closer to the mast. He leaned against it and watched the silent crew as they unfurled the sail. Corum and Otto Blendker came aboard. Elric listened to the sharp sound of the anchor as it was drawn up. The ship swayed a little.

Otto Blendker looked at Elric, then at the captain, then he turned and went into his cabin, saying nothing at all as he closed the door.

The sail filled, the ship began to move. The captain reached out and found Elric’s arm. He took Corum’s arm, too, and led them toward his cabin. "The wine," he said. "It will heal all the wounds."
At the door of the captain's cabin Elric paused. "And does the wine have other properties?" he asked. "Does it cloud a man's reason? Was it that which made me accept your commission, Captain?"

The captain shrugged. "What is reason?"

The ship was gathering speed. The white mist was thicker and a cold wind blew at the rags of cloth and metal Elric wore. He sniffed, thinking for a moment that he smelled smoke upon that wind.

He put his two hands to his face and touched his flesh. His face was cold. He let his hands fall to his sides and he followed the captain into the warmth of the cabin.

The captain poured wine into silver cups from his silver jug. He stretched out a hand to offer a cup to Elric and to Corum. They drank.

A little later the captain said, "How do you feel?"
Elric said, "I feel nothing."

And that night he dreamed only of shadows and in the morning he could not understand his dream at all.

Book TWO

SAILING TO THE PRESENT

I

His bone-white, long-fingered hand upon a carved demon's head in black-brown hardwood (one of the few such decorations to be found anywhere about the vessel), the tall man stood alone in the ship's fo'c'sle and stared through large, slanting crimson eyes at the mist into which they moved with a speed and sureness to make any mortal mariner marvel and become incredulous.

There were sounds in the distance, incongruent with the sounds of even this nameless, tuneless sea: thin sounds, agonized and terrible, for all that they remained remote—yet the ship followed them, as if drawn by them; they grew louder—pain and despair were there, but terror was predominant.

Elric had heard such sounds echoing from his cousin Yyrkoon's sardonically named "Pleasure Chambers" in the days before he had fled the responsibilities of ruling all that remained of the old Melnibonèan Empire. These were the voices of men whose very souls were under siege; men to whom death meant not mere extinction, but a continuation of existence, forever in thrall to some cruel and supernatural master. He had heard men cry so when his salvation and his nemesis, his great black battleblade Stormbringer, drank their souls.

He did not savor the sound: he hated it, turned his back away from the source and was about to descend the ladder to the main deck when he realized that Otto Blendker had come up behind him. Now that Corum had been borne off by friends with chariots which could ride upon the surface of the water, Blendker was the last of those comrades to have fought at Elric's side against the two alien sorcerers Gagak and Agak.

Blendker's black, scarred face was troubled. The ex-scholar, turned hireling sword, covered his ears with his huge palms.

"Ach! By the Twelve Symbols of Reason, Elric, who makes that din? It's as though we sail close to the shores of Hell itself!"

Prince Elric of Melnibonè shrugged. "I'd be prepared to forego an answer and leave my curiosity unsatisfied, Master Blendker, if only our ship would change course. As it is, we sail closer and closer to the source."

Blendker grunted his agreement. "I've no wish to encounter whatever it is that causes those poor fellows to scream so! Perhaps we should inform the captain."

"You think he does not know where his own ship sails?" Elric's smile had little humor.
The tall black man rubbed at the inverted V-shaped scar which ran from his forehead to his jawbones. "I wonder if he plans to put us into battle again."

"I'll not fight another for him." Elric's hand moved from the carved rail to the pommel of his runesword. "I have business of my own to attend to, once I'm back on real land."

A wind came from nowhere. There was a sudden rent in the mist. Now Elric could see that the ship sailed through rust-colored water. Peculiar lights gleamed in that water, just below the surface. There was an impression of creatures moving ponderously in the depths of the ocean and, for a moment, Elric thought he glimpsed a white, bloated face not dissimilar to his own-a Melnibonèan face. Impulsively he whirled, back to the rail, looking past Blendker as he strove to control the nausea in his throat.

For the first time since he had come aboard the Dark Ship he was able clearly to see the length of the vessel. Here were the two great wheels, one beside him on the foredeck, one at the far end of the ship on the reardeck, tended now as always by the steersman, the captain's sighted twin. There was the great mast bearing the taut black sail, and fore and aft of this, the two deck cabins, one of which was entirely empty (its occupants having been killed during their last landfall) and one of which was occupied only by himself and Blendker. Elric's draw was drawn back to the steersman and not for the first time the albino wondered how much influence the captain's twin had over the course of the Dark Ship. The man seemed tireless, rarely, to Elric's knowledge, going below to his quarters, which occupied the stern deck as the captain's occupied the foredeck. Once or twice Elric or Blendker had tried to involve the steersman in conversation, but he appeared to be as dumb as his brother was blind.

The cryptographic, geometrical carvings covering all the ship's wood and most of its metal, from sternpost to figurehead, were picked out by the shreds of pale mist still clinging to them (and again Elric wondered if the ship actually generated the mist normally surrounding it) and, as he watched, the designs slowly turned to pale pink fire as the light from that red star, which forever followed them, permeated the overhead cloud.

A noise from below. The captain, his long red-gold hair drifting in a breeze which Elric could not feel, emerged from his cabin. The captain's circlet of blue jade, worn like a diadem, had turned to something of a violet shade in the pink light, and even his buff-colored hose and tunic reflected the hue—even the silver sandals with their silver lacing glittered with the rosy tint.

Again Elric looked upon that mysterious blind face, as unhuman, in the accepted sense, as his own, and puzzled upon the origin of the one who would allow himself to be called nothing but "Captain."

As if at the captain's summons, the mist drew itself about the ship again, as a woman might draw a froth of furs about her body. The red star's light faded, but the distant screams continued.

Did the captain notice the screams now for the first time, or was this a pantomime of surprise? His blind head tilted, a hand went to his ear. He murmured in a tone of satisfaction, "Aha!" The head lifted. "Elric?"

"Here," said the albino. "Above you."

"We are almost there, Elric."

The apparently fragile hand found the rail of the companionway. The captain began to climb.

Elric faced him at the top of the ladder. "If it's a battle..."

The captain's smile was enigmatic, bitter. "It was a fight—or shall be one."

"... we'll have no part of it," concluded the albino firmly.

"It is not one of the battles in which my ship is directly involved," the blind man reassured him.

"Those whom you can hear are the vanquished-lost in some future which, I think, you will experience close to the end of your present incarnation."

Elric waved a dismissive hand. "I'll be glad, Captain, if you would cease such vapid mystification. I'm weary of it."

"I'm sorry it offends you. I answer literally, according to my instincts."

The captain, going past Elric and Otto Blendker so that he could stand at the rail, seemed to be apologizing. He said nothing for a while, but listened to the disturbing and confused babble from the
mist. Then he nodded, apparently satisfied.

"We'll sight land shortly. If you would disembark and seek your own world, I should advise you to do so now. This is the closest we shall ever come again to your plane."

Elric let his anger show. He cursed, invoking Arioch's name, and put a hand upon the blind man's shoulder. "What? You cannot return me directly to my own plane?"

"It is too late." The captain's dismay was apparently genuine. "The ship sails on. We near the end of our long voyage."

"But how shall I find my world? I have no sorcery great enough to move me between the spheres! And demonic assistance is denied me here."

"There is one gateway to your world," the captain told him. "That is why I suggest you disembark. Elsewhere there are none at all. Your sphere and this one intersect directly."

"But you say this lies in my future."

"Be sure-you will return to your own time. Here you are timeless. It is why your memory is so poor. It is why you remember so little of what befalls you. Seek for the gateway-it is crimson and it emerges from the sea off the coast of the island."

"Which island?"

"The one we approach."

Elric hesitated. "And where shall you go, when I have landed?"

"To Tanelorn," said the captain. "There is something I must do there. My brother and I must complete our destiny. We carry cargo as well as men. Many will try to stop us now, for they fear our cargo. We might perish, but yet we must do all we can to reach Tanelorn."

"Was that not, then, Tanelorn, where we fought Agak and Gagak?"

"That was nothing more than a broken dream of Tanelorn, Elric."

The Melnibonèan knew that he would receive no more information from the captain.

"You offer me a poor choice-to sail with you into danger and never see my own world again, or to risk landing on yonder island inhabited, by the sound of it, by the damned and those which prey upon the damned!"

The captain's blind eyes moved in Elric's direction. "I know," he said softly. "But it is the best I can offer you, nonetheless."

The screams, the imploring, terrified shouts, were closer now, but there were fewer of them. Glancing over the side, Elric thought he saw a pair of armored hands rising from the water; there was foam, red-flecked and noxious, and there was yellowish scum in which pieces of frightful flotsam drifted; there were broken timbers, scraps of canvas, tatters of flags and clothing, fragments of weapons, and, increasingly, there were floating corpses.

"But where was the battle?" Blendker whispered, fascinated and horrified by the sight.

"Not on this plane," the captain told him. "You see only the wreckage which has drifted over from one world to another."

"Then it was a supernatural battle?"

The captain smiled again. "I am not omniscient. But, yes, I believe there were supernatural agencies involved. The warriors of half a world fought in the sea-battle-to decide the fate of the multiverse. It is-or will be-one of the decisive battles to determine the fate of Mankind, to fix Man's destiny for the coming Cycle."

"Who were the participants?" asked Elric, voicing the question in spite of his resolve. "What were the issues as they understood them?"

"You will know in time, I think." The captain's head faced the sea again.

Blendker sniffed the air. "Ach! It's foul!"

Elric, too, found the odor increasingly unpleasant. Here and there now the water was lighted by guttering fires which revealed the faces of the drowning, some of whom still managed to cling to pieces of blackened driftwood. Not all the faces were human (though they had the appearance of having, once,
been human): Things with the snouts of pigs and of bulls raised twisted hands to the Dark Ship and
grunted plaintively for succor, but the captain ignored them and the steersman held his course.

Fires spluttered and water hissed; smoke mingled with the mist. Elric had his sleeve over his mouth
and nose and was glad that the smoke and mist between them helped obscure the sights, for as the
wreckage grew thicker not a few of the corpses he saw reminded him more of reptiles than of men, their
pale, lizard bellies spilling something other than blood.

"If that is my future," Elric told the captain, "I've a mind to remain on board, after all."
"You have a duty, as have I," said the captain quietly. "The future must be served, as much as the
past and the present."

Elric shook his head. "I fled the duties of an empire because I sought freedom," the albino told him.
"And freedom I must have."

"No," murmured the captain. "There is no such thing. Not yet. Not for us. We must go through
much more before we can even begin to guess what freedom is. The price for the knowledge alone is
probably higher than any you would care to pay at this stage of your life. Indeed, life itself is often the
price."

"I also sought release from metaphysics when I left Melnibonè," said Elric. "I'll get the rest of my
gear and take the land that's offered. With luck this Crimson Gate will be quickly found and I'll be back
among dangers and torments which will, at least, be familiar."

"It is the only decision you could have made." The captain's blind head turned toward Blendker.
"And you, Otto Blendker? What shall you do?"

"Elric's world is not mine and I like not the sound of those screams. What can you promise me, sir,
if I sail on with you?"

"Nothing but a good death." There was regret in the captain's voice.

"Death is the promise we're all born with, sir. A good death is better than a poor one. I'll sail on with
you."

"As you like. I think you're wise." The captain sighed. "I'll say farewell to you, then, Elric of
Melnibonè. You fought well in my service and I thank you."

"Fought for what?" Elric asked.

"Oh, call it Mankind. Call it Fate. Call it a dream or an ideal, if you wish."

"Shall I never have a clearer answer?"

"Not from me. I do not think there is one."

"You allow a man little faith." Elric began to descend the companionway.

"There are two kinds of faith, Elric. Like freedom, there is a kind which is easily kept but proves
not worth the keeping, and there is a kind which is hard-won. I agree, I offer little of the former."

Elric strode toward his cabin. He laughed, feeling genuine affection for the blind man at that
moment. "I thought I had a penchant for such ambiguities, but I have met my match in you, Captain."

He noticed that the steersman had left his place at the wheel and was swinging out a boat on its
davits, preparatory to lowering it.

"Is that for me?"

The steersman nodded.

Elric ducked into his cabin. He was leaving the ship with nothing but that which he had brought
aboard, only his clothing and his armor were in a poorer state of repair than they had been, and his mind
was in a considerably greater state of confusion.

Without hesitation he gathered up his things, drawing his heavy cloak about him, pulling on his
gauntlets, fastening buckles and thongs, then he left the cabin and returned to the deck. The captain was
pointing through the mist at the dark outlines of a coast. "Can you see land, Elric?"

"I can."

"You must go quickly, then."
"Willingly."

Elric swung himself over the rail and into the boat. The boat struck the side of the ship several times, so that the hull boomed like the beating of some huge funeral drum. Otherwise there was silence now upon the misty waters and no sign of wreckage.

Blendker saluted him. "I wish you luck, comrade."
"You, too, Master Blendker."

The boat began to sink toward the flat surface of the sea, the pulleys of the davits creaking. Elric clung to the rope, letting go as the boat hit the water. He stumbled and sat down heavily upon the seat, releasing the ropes so that the boat drifted at once away from the Dark Ship. He got out the oars and fitted them into their rowlocks.

As he pulled toward the shore he heard the captain's voice calling to him, but the words were muffled by the mist and he would never know, now, if the blind man's last communication had been a warning or merely some formal pleasantry. He did not care. The boat moved smoothly through the water; the mist began to thin, but so, too, did the light fade.

Suddenly he was under a twilight sky, the sun already gone and stars appearing. Before he had reached the shore it was already completely dark, with the moon not yet risen, and it was with difficulty that he beached the boat on what seemed flat rocks, and stumbled inland until he judged himself safe enough from any inrushing tide.

Then, with a sigh, he lay down, thinking just to order his thoughts before moving on; but, almost instantly, he was asleep.

II

Elric dreamed.

He dreamed not merely of the end of his world but of the end of an entire cycle in the history of the cosmos. He dreamed that he was not only Elric of Melniboné but that he was other men, too—men who were pledged to some numinous cause which even they could not describe. And he dreamed that he had dreamed of the Dark Ship and Tanelorn and Agak and Gagak while he lay exhausted upon a beach somewhere beyond the borders of Pikarayd; and when he woke up he was smiling sardonically, congratulating himself for the possession of a grandiose imagination. But he could not clear his head entirely of the impression left by that dream.

This shore was not the same, so plainly something had befallen him—perhaps he had been drugged by slavers, then later abandoned when they found him not what they expected. . . . But, no, the explanation would not do. If he could discover his whereabouts, he might also recall the true facts.

It was dawn, for certain. He sat up and looked about him.

He was sprawled upon a dark, sea-washed limestone pavement, cracked in a hundred places, the cracks so deep that the small streams of foaming salt water rushing through these many narrow channels made raucous what would otherwise have been a very still morning.

Elric climbed to his feet, using his scabbarded rune-sword to steady himself. His bone-white lids closed for a moment over his crimson eyes as he sought, again, to recollect the events which had brought him here.

He recalled his flight from Pikarayd, his panic, his falling into a coma of hopelessness, his dreams. And, because he was evidently neither dead nor a prisoner, he could at least conclude that his pursuers had, after all, given up the chase, for if they had found him they would have killed him.

Opening his eyes and casting about him, he remarked the peculiar blue quality of the light (doubtless a trick of the sun behind the gray clouds) which made the landscape ghastly and gave the sea a dull, metallic look.

The limestone terraces which rose from the sea and stretched above him shone intermittently, like
polished lead. On an impulse he held his hand to the light and inspected it. The normally lusterless white of his skin was now tinged with a faint, bluish luminosity. He found it pleasing and smiled as a child might smile, in innocent wonder.

He had expected to be tired, but he now realized that he felt unusually refreshed, as if he had slept long after a good meal, and, deciding not to question the fact of this fortunate (and unlikely) gift, he determined to climb the cliffs in the hope that he might get some idea of his bearings before he decided which direction he would take.

Limestone could be a little treacherous, but it made easy climbing, for there was almost always somewhere that one terrace met another.

He climbed carefully and steadily, finding many footholds, and seemed to gain considerable height quite quickly, yet it was noon before he had reached the top and found himself standing at the edge of a broad, rocky plateau which fell away sharply to form a close horizon. Beyond the plateau was only the sky. Save for sparse, brownish grass, little grew here and there were no signs at all of human habitation. It was now, for the first time, that Elric realized the absence of any form of wildlife. Not a single seabird flew in the air, not an insect crept through the grass. Instead, there was an enormous silence hanging over the brown plain.

Elric was still remarkably untired, so he decided to make the best use he could of his energy and reach the edge of the plateau in the hope that, from there, he would sight a town or a village. He pressed on, feeling no lack of food and water, and his stride was singularly energetic, still; but he had misjudged his distance and the sun had begun to set well before his journey to the edge was completed. The sky on all sides turned a deep, velvety blue and the few clouds that there were in it were also tinged blue, and now, for the first time, Elric realized that the sun itself was not its normal shade, that it burned blackish purple, and he wondered again if he still dreamed.

The ground began to rise sharply and it was with some effort that he walked, but before the light had completely faded he was on the steep flank of a hill, descending toward a wide valley which, though bereft of trees, contained a river which wound through rocks and russet turf and bracken.

After a short rest, Elric decided to press on, although night had fallen, and see if he could reach the river where he might at least drink and, possibly, in the morning find fish to eat.

Again, no moon appeared to aid his progress and he walked for two or three hours in a darkness which was almost total, stumbling occasionally into large rocks, until the ground leveled and he felt sure he had reached the floor of the valley.

He had developed a strong thirst by now and was feeling somewhat hungry, but decided that it might be best to wait until morning before seeking the river when, rounding a particularly tall rock, he saw, with some astonishment, the light of a camp fire.

Hopefully this would be the fire of a company of merchants, a trading caravan on its way to some civilized country which would allow him to travel with it, perhaps in return for his services as a mercenary swordsman (it would not be the first time, since he had left Melnibonè, that he had earned his bread in such a way).

Yet Elric's old instincts did not desert him; he approached the fire cautiously and let no one see him. Beneath an overhang of rock, made shadowy by the flame's light, he stood and observed the group of fifteen or sixteen men who sat or lay close to the fire, playing some kind of game involving dice and slivers of numbered ivory.

Gold, bronze, and silver gleamed in the firelight as the men staked large sums on the fall of a dice and the turn of a slip of ivory.

Elric guessed that, if they had not been so intent on their game, these men must certainly have detected his approach, for they were not, after all, merchants. By the evidence, they were warriors, wearing scarred leather and dented metal, their weapons ready to hand, yet they belonged to no army-unless it be an army of bandits- for they were of all races and (oddly) seemed to be from various periods in the history of the Young Kingdoms.
It was as if they had looted some scholar's collection of relics. An axman of the later Lormyrian Republic, which had come to an end some two hundred years ago, lay with his shoulder rubbing the elbow of a Chalalite bowman, from a period roughly contemporary with Elric's own. Close to the Chalalite sat a short Ilmioran infantryman of a century past. Next to him was a Fikharian in the barbaric dress of that nation's earliest times. Tarkesters, Shazarians, Vilmirians, all mingled and the only thing they had in common, by the look of them, was a villainous, hungry cast to their features.

In other circumstances Elric might have skirted this encampment and moved on, but he was so glad to find human beings of any sort that he ignored the disturbing incongruities of the group; yet he remained content to watch them.

One of the men, less unwholesome than the others, was a bulky, black-bearded, baldheaded sea-warrior clad in the casual leathers and silks of the people of the Purple Towns. It was when this man produced a large gold Melnibonèan wheel-a coin not minted, as most coins, but carved by craftsmen to a design both ancient and intricate-that Elric's caution was fully conquered by his curiosity.

Very few of those coins existed in Melnibonè and none, that Elric had heard of, outside; for the coins were not used for trade with the Young Kingdoms. They were prized, even by the nobility of Melnibonè.

It seemed to Elric that the baldheaded man could only have acquired the coin from another Melnibonèan traveler-and Elric knew of no other Melnibonèans who shared his penchant for exploration. His wariness dismissed, he stepped into the circle.

If he had not been completely obsessed by the thought of the Melnibonèan wheel he might have taken some satisfaction in the sudden scuffle to arms which resulted. Within seconds, the majority of the men were on their feet, their weapons drawn.

"Forgive the interruption, gentlemen. I am but one tired fellow soldier who seeks to join you. I would beg some information and purchase some food, if you have it to spare."

On foot, the warriors had an even more ruffianly appearance. They grinned among themselves, entertained by Elric's courtesy but not impressed by it.

One, in the feathered helmet of a Pan Tangian sea-chief, with features to match-swarthy, sinister-pushes his head forward on his long neck and said banteringly:

"We've company enough, white-face. And few here are overfond of the man-demons of Melnibonè. You must be rich."

Elric recalled the animosity with which Melnibonèans were regarded in the Young Kingdoms, particularly by those from Pan Tang who envied the Dragon Isle her power and her wisdom and, of late, had begun crudely to imitate Melnibonè.

Increasingly on his guard, he said evenly, "I have a little money."

"Then we'll take it, demon." The Pan Tangian presented a dirty palm just below Elric's nose as he growled, "Give it over and be on your way."

Elric's smile was polite and fastidious, as if he had been told a poor joke. .

The Pan Tangian evidently thought the joke better than did Elric, for he laughed heartily and looked to his nearest fellows for approval.

Coarse laughter infected the night and only the bald-headed, black-bearded man did not join in the jest, but took a step or two backward, while all the others pressed forward.

The Pan Tangian's face was close to Elric's own; his breath was foul and Elric saw that his beard and hair were alive with lice, yet he kept his head, replying in the same equable tone:

"Give me some decent food, a flask of water-some wine, if you have it-and I'll gladly give you the money I have."

The laughter rose and fell again as Elric continued:

"But if you would take my money and leave me with naught-then I must defend myself. I have a
good sword."

The Pan Tangian strove to imitate Elric's irony. "But you will note, Sir Demon, that we outnumber you. Considerably."

Softly the albino spoke: "I've noticed that fact, but I'm not disturbed by it," and he had drawn the black blade even as he finished speaking, for they had come at him with a rush.

And the Pan Tangian was the first to die, sliced through the side, his vertebrae sheared, and Stormbringer, having taken its first soul, began to sing.

A Chalalite died next, leaping with stabbing javelin poised, on the point of the runesword, and Stormbringer murmured with pleasure.

But it was not until it had sliced the head clean off a Filkharian pike-master that the sword began to croon and come fully to life, black fire flickering up and down its length, its strange runes glowing.

Now the warriors knew they battled sorcery and became more cautious, yet they scarcely paused in their attack, and Elric, thrusting and parrying, hacking and slicing, needed all of the fresh, dark energy the sword passed on to him.

Lance, sword, ax, and dirk were blocked, wounds were given and received, but the dead had not yet outnumbered the living when Elric found himself with his back against the rock and nigh a dozen sharp weapons seeking his vitals.

It was at this point, when Elric had become somewhat less than confident that he could best so many, that the baldheaded warrior, ax in one gloved hand, sword in the other, came swiftly into the firelight and set upon those of his fellows closest to him.

"I thank you, sir!" Elric was able to shout, during the short respite this sudden turn produced. His morale improved, he resumed the attack.

The Lormyrian was cleaved from hip to pelvis as he dodged a feint; a Filkharian, who should have been dead four hundred years before, fell with the blood bubbling from lips and nostrils, and the corpses began to pile one upon the other. Still Stormbringer sang its sinister battle-song and still the runesword passed its power to its master so that with every death Elric found strength to slay more of the soldiers.

Those who remained now began to express their regret for their hasty attack. Where oaths and threats had issued from their mouths, now came plaintive petitions for mercy and those who had laughed with such bold braggadocio now wept like young girls, but Elric, full of his old battle-joy, spared none.

Meanwhile the man from the Purple Towns, unaided by sorcery, put ax and sword to good work and dealt with three more of his one-time comrades, exulting in his work as if "he had nursed a taste for it for some time.

"Yoi! But this is worthwhile slaughter!" cried the black-bearded one.

And then that busy butchery was suddenly done and Elric realized that none were left save himself and his new ally, who stood leaning on his ax, panting and grinning like a hound at the kill, replacing a steel skullcap upon his pate from where it had fallen during the fight, and wiping a bloody sleeve over the sweat glistening on his brow, and saying, in a deep, good-humored tone:

"Well, now, it is we who are wealthy, of a sudden."

Elric sheathed a Stormbringer still reluctant to return to its scabbard. "You desire their gold. Is that why you aided me?"

The black-bearded soldier laughed. "I owed them a debt and had been biding my time, waiting to pay. These rascals are all that were left of a pirate crew which slew everyone aboard my own ship when we wandered into strange waters-they would have slain me had I not told them I wished to join them. Now I am revenged. Not that I am above taking the gold, since much of it belongs to me and my dead brothers. It will go to their wives and their children when I return to the Purple Towns."

"How did you convince them not to kill you, too?" Elric sought among the ruins of the fire for something to eat. He found some cheese and began to chew upon it.

"They had no captain or navigator, it seemed. None were real sailors at all, but coast-huggers, based
upon this island. They were stranded here, you see, and had taken to piracy as a last resort, but were too terrified to risk the open sea. Besides, after the fight, they had no ship. We had managed to sink that as we fought. We sailed mine to this shore, but provisions were already low and they had no stomach for setting sail without full holds, so I pretended that I knew this coast (may the gods take my soul if I ever see it again after this business) and offered to lead them inland to a village they might loot. They had heard of no such village, but believed me when I said it lay in a hidden valley. That way I prolonged my life while I waited for the opportunity to be revenged upon them. It was a foolish hope, I know. Yet"-grinning"-as it happened, it was well-founded, after all! Eh?"

The black-bearded man glanced a little warily at Elric, uncertain of what the albino might say, hoping, however, for comradeship, though it was well known how haughty Melnibonèans were. Elric could tell that all these thoughts went through his new acquaintance's mind; he had seen many others make similar calculations. So he smiled openly and slapped the man on the shoulder.

"You saved my life, also, my friend. We are both fortunate."

The man sighed in relief and slung his ax upon his back. "Aye-lucky's the word. But shall our luck hold, I wonder?"

"You do not know the island at all?"

"Nor the waters, either. How we came to them I'll never guess. Enchanted waters, though, without question. You've seen the color of the sun?"

"I have."

"Well"-the seaman bent to remove a pendant from around the Pan Tangian's throat-"you'd know more about enchantments and sorceries than I. How came you here, Sir Melnibonèan?"

"I know not. I fled from some who hunted me. I came to a shore and could flee no further. Then I dreamed a great deal. When next I awoke I was on the shore again, but of this island."

"Spirits of some sort-maybe friendly to you-took you to safety, away from your enemies."

"That's just possible," Elric agreed, "for we have many allies among the elementals. I am called Elric and I am self-exiled from Melnibonè. I travel because I believe I have something to learn from the folk of the Young Kingdoms. I have no power, save what you see...."

The black-bearded man's eyes narrowed in appraisal as he pointed at himself with his thumb. "I'm Smiorgan Baldhead, once a sea-lord of the Purple Towns. I commanded a fleet of merchantmen. Perhaps I still do. I shall not know until I return-if I ever do return."

"Then let us pool our knowledge and our resources, Smiorgan Baldhead, and make plans to leave this island as soon as we can."

Elric walked back to where he saw traces of the abandoned game, trampled into the mud and the blood. From among the dice and the ivory slips, the silver and the bronze coins, he found the gold Melnibonèan wheel. He picked it up and held it in his outstretched palm. The wheel almost covered the whole palm. In the old days, it had been the currency of kings.

"This was yours, friend?" he asked Smiorgan.

Smiorgan Baldhead looked up from where he was still searching the Pan Tangian for his stolen possessions. He nodded.

"Aye. Would you keep it as part of your share?"

Elric shrugged. "I'd rather know from whence it came. Who gave it you?"

"It was not stolen. It's Melnibonèan, then?"

"Yes."

"I guessed it."

"From whom did you obtain it?"

Smiorgan straightened up, having completed his search. He scratched at a slight wound on his forearm. "It was used to buy passage on our ship-before we were lost- before the raiders attacked us."

"Passage? By a Melnibonèan?"

"Maybe," said Smiorgan. He seemed reluctant to speculate.
"Was he a warrior?"
Smiorgan smiled in his beard. "No. It was a woman gave that to me."

"How came she to take passage?"
Smiorgan began to pick up the rest of the money. "It's a long tale and, in part, a familiar one to most merchant sailors. We were seeking new markets for our goods and had equipped a good-sized fleet, which I commanded as the largest shareholder." He seated himself casually upon the big corpse of the Chalalite and began to count the money. "Would you hear the tale or do I bore you already?"

"I'd be glad to listen."
Reaching behind him, Smiorgan pulled a wine-flask from the belt of the corpse and offered it to Elric, who accepted it and drank sparingly of a wine which was unusually good.

Smiorgan took the flask when Elric had finished. "That's part of our cargo," he said. "We were proud of it. A good vintage, eh?"

"Excellent. So you set off from the Purple Towns?"

"Aye. Going east toward the Unknown Kingdoms. We sailed due east for a couple of weeks, sighting some of the bleakest coasts I have ever seen, and then we saw no land at all for another week. That was when we entered a stretch of water we came to call the Roaring Rocks-like the Serpent's Teeth off Shazar's coast, but much greater in expanse, and larger, too. Huge volcanic cliffs which rose from the sea on every side and around which the waters heaved and boiled and howled with a fierceness I've rarely experienced. Well, in short, the fleet was dispersed and at least four ships were lost on those rocks. At last we were able to escape those waters and found ourselves becalmed and alone. We searched for our sister ships for a while and then decided to give ourselves another week before turning for home, for we had no liking to go back into the Roaring Rocks again. Low on provisions, we sighted land at last-grassy cliffs and hospitable beaches and, inland, some signs of cultivation, so we knew we had found civilization again. We put into a small fishing port and satisfied the natives-who spoke no tongue used in the Young Kingdoms-that we were friendly. And that was when the woman approached us."

"The Melnibonèan woman?"

"If Melnibonèan she was. She was a fine-looking woman, I'll say that. We were short of provisions, as I told you, and short of any means of purchasing them, for the fishermen desired little of what we had to trade. Having given up our original quest, we were content to head westward again."

"The woman?"

"She wished to buy passage to the Young Kingdoms- and was content to go with us as far as Menii, our home port. For her passage she gave us two of those wheels. One was used to buy provisions in the town-Graghin, I think it was called-and after making repairs we set off again."

"You never reached the Purple Towns?"

"There were more storms-strange storms. Our instruments were useless, our lodestones were of no help to us at all. We became even more completely lost than before. Some of my men argued that we had gone beyond our own world altogether. Some blamed the woman, saying she was a sorceress who had no intention of going to Menii. But I believed her. Night fell and seemed to last forever until we sailed into a calm dawn beneath a blue sun. My men were close to panic-and it takes much to make my men panic-when we sighted the island. As we headed for it those pirates attacked us in a ship which belonged to history-it should have been on the bottom of the ocean, not on the surface. I've seen pictures of such craft in murals on a temple wall in Tarkesh. In ramming us, she stove in half her port side and was sinking even when they swarmed aboard. They were desperate, savage men, Elric-half-starved and blood-hungry. We were weary after our voyage, but fought well. During the fighting the woman disappeared, killed herself, maybe, when she saw the stamp of our conquerors. After a long fight only myself and one other, who died soon after, were left. That was when I became cunning and decided to wait for revenge."

"The woman had a name?"

"None she would give. I have thought the matter over and suspect that, after all, we were used by her. Perhaps she did not seek Menii and the Young Kingdoms. Perhaps it was this world she sought, and,
by sorcery, led us here."

"This world? You think it different from our own?"

"If only because of the sun's strange color. Do you not think so, too? You, with your Melnibonèan
knowledge of such things, must believe it."

"I have dreamed of such things," Elric admitted, but he would say no more.

"Most of the pirates thought as I—they were from all the ages of the Young Kingdoms. That much I
discovered. Some were from the earliest years of the era, some from our own time—and some were from
the future. Adventurers, most of them, who, at some stage in their lives, sought a legendary land of great
riches which lay on the other side of an ancient gateway, rising from the middle of the ocean; but they
found themselves trapped here, unable to sail back through this mysterious gate. Others had been
involved in sea-fights, thought themselves drowned and woken up on the shores of the island. Many, I
suppose, had once had reasonable virtues, but there is little to support life on the island and they had
become wolves, living off one another or any ship unfortunate enough to pass, inadvertently, through
this gate of theirs."

Elric recalled part of his dream. "Did any call it the 'Crimson Gate'?"

"Several did, aye."

"And yet the theory is unlikely, if you'll forgive my skepticism," Elric said. "As one who has passed
through the Shade Gate to Ameeron ..."

"You know of other worlds, then?"

"I've never heard of this one. And I am versed in such matters. That is why I doubt the reasoning.
And yet, there was the dream...."

"Dream?"

"Oh, it was nothing. I am used to such dreams and give them no significance."

"The theory cannot seem surprising to a Melnibonèan, Elric!" Smiorgan grinned again. "It's I who
should be skeptical, not you."

And Elric replied, half to himself: "Perhaps I fear the implications more." He lifted his head, and
with the shaft of a broken spear, began to poke at the fire. "Certain ancient sorcerers of Melnibonè
proposed that an infinite number of worlds coexist with our own. Indeed, my dreams, of late, have hinted
as much!" He forced himself to smile. "But I cannot afford to believe such things. Thus, I reject them."

"Wait for the dawn," said Smiorgan Baldhead. "The color of the sun shall prove the theory."

"Perhaps it will prove only that we both dream," said Elric. The smell of death was strong in his
nostrils. He pushed aside those corpses nearest to the fire and settled himself to sleep.

Smiorgan Baldhead had begun to sing a strong yet lilting song in his own dialect, which Elric could
scarcely follow.

"Do you sing of your victory over your enemies?" the albino asked.

Smiorgan paused for a moment, half-amused. "No, Sir Elric, I sing to keep the shades at bay. After
all, these fellows' ghosts must still be lurking nearby, in the dark, so little time has passed since they
died."

"Fear not," Elric told him. "Their souls are already eaten."

But Smiorgan sang on, and his voice was louder, his song more intense, than ever it had been
before.

Just before he fell asleep, Elric thought he heard a horse whinny, and he meant to ask Smiorgan if
any of the pirates had been mounted, but he fell asleep before he could do so.

III

Recalling little of his voyage on the Dark Ship, Elric would never know how he came to reach the
world in which he now found himself. In later years he would recall most of these experiences as
dreams, and indeed they seemed dreamlike even as they occurred.

He slept uneasily, and in the morning the clouds were heavier, shining with that strange, leaden light, though the sun itself was obscured. Smiorgan Baldhead of the Purple Towns was pointing upward, already on his feet, speaking with quiet triumph:

"Will that evidence suffice to convince you, Elric of Melnibonè?"

"I am convinced of a quality about the light—possibly about this terrain—which makes the sun appear blue," Elric replied. He glanced with distaste around him at the carnage. The corpses made a wretched sight and he was filled with a nebulous misery that was neither remorse nor pity.

Smiorgan's sigh was sardonic. "Well, Sir Skeptic, we had best retrace my steps and seek my ship. What say you?"

"I agree," the albino told him.

"How far had you marched from the coast when you found us?"

Elric told him.

Smiorgan smiled. "You arrived in the nick of time, then. I should have been most embarrassed by today if the sea had been reached and I could show my pirate friends no village! I shall not forget this favor you have done me, Elric. I am a count of the Purple Towns and have much influence. If there is any service I can perform for you when we return, you must let me know."

"I thank you," Elric said gravely. "But first we must discover a means of escape."

Smiorgan had gathered up a satchel of food, some water and some wine. Elric had no stomach to make his breakfast among the dead, so he slung the satchel over his shoulder. "I'm ready," he said.

Smiorgan was satisfied. "Come—we go this way."

Elric began to follow the sea-lord over the dry, crunching turf. The steep sides of the valley loomed over them, tinged with a peculiar and unpleasant greenish hue, the result of the brown foliage being stained by the blue light from above. When they reached the river, which was narrow and ran rapidly through boulders giving easy means of crossing, they rested and ate. Both men were stiff from the previous night's fighting; both were glad to wash the dried blood and mud from their bodies in the water.

Refreshed, the pair climbed over the boulders and left the river behind, ascending the slopes, speaking little so that their breath was saved for the exertion. It was noon by the time they reached the top of the valley and observed a plain not unlike the one which Elric had first crossed. Elric now had a fair idea of the island's geography: it resembled the top of a mountain, with an indentation near the center which was the valley. Again he became sharply aware of the absence of any wildlife and remarked on this to Count Smiorgan, who agreed that he had seen nothing—no bird, fish, nor beast since he had arrived.

"It's a barren little world, friend Elric, and a misfortune for a mariner to be wrecked upon its shores."

They moved on, until the sea could be observed meeting the horizon in the far distance.

It was Elric who first heard the sound behind them, recognizing the steady thump of the hooves of a galloping horse, but when he looked back over his shoulder he could see no sign of a rider, nor anywhere that a rider could hide. He guessed that, in his tiredness, his ears were betraying him. It had been thunder that he had heard.

Smiorgan strode implacably onward, though he, too, must have heard the sound.

Again it came. Again, Elric turned. Again he saw nothing.

"Smiorgan? Did you hear a rider?"

Smiorgan continued to walk without looking back. "I heard," he grunted.

"You have heard it before?"

"Many times since I arrived. The pirates heard it, too, and some believed it their nemesis—an Angel of Death seeking them out for retribution."

"You don't know the source?"

Smiorgan paused, then stopped, and when he turned his face was grim. "Once or twice I have
caught a glimpse of a horse, I think. A tall horse-white-richly dressed- but with no man upon his back. Ignore it, Elric, as I do. We have larger mysteries with which to occupy our minds!"

"You are afraid of it, Smiorgan?"

He accepted this. "Aye. I confess it. But neither fear nor speculation will rid us of it. Come!"

Elric was bound to see the sense of Smiorgan's statement and he accepted it; yet when the sound came again, about an hour later, he could not resist turning. Then he thought he glimpsed the outline of a large stallion, caparisoned for riding, but that might have been nothing more than an idea Smiorgan had put in his mind.

The day grew colder and in the air was a peculiar, bitter odor. Elric remarked on the smell to Count Smiorgan and learned that this, too, was familiar.

"The smell comes and goes, but it is usually here in some strength."

"Like sulfur," said Elric.

Count Smiorgan's laugh had much irony in it, as if Elric made reference to some private joke of Smiorgan's own. "Oh, aye! Sulfur right enough!"

The drumming of hooves grew louder behind them as they neared the coast and at last Elric, and Smiorgan too, turned around again, to look.

And now a horse could be seen plainly-riderless, but saddled and bridled, its dark eyes intelligent, its beautiful white head held proudly.

"Are you still convinced of the absence of sorcery here, Sir Elric?" Count Smiorgan asked with some satisfaction. "The horse was invisible. Now it is visible." He shrugged the battle-ax on his shoulder into a better position. "Either that, or it moves from one world to another with-ease, so that all we mainly hear are its hoofbeats."

"If so," said Elric sardonically, eyeing the stallion, "it might bear us back to our own world."

"You admit, then, that we are marooned in some Limbo?"

"Very well, yes. I admit the possibility."

"Have you no sorcery to trap the horse?"

"Sorcery does not come so easily to me, for I have no great liking for it," the albino told him.

As they spoke, they approached the horse, but it would let them get no closer. It snorted and moved backward, keeping the same distance between them and itself.

At last, Elric said, "We waste time, Count Smiorgan. Let's get to your ship with speed and forget blue suns and enchanted horses as quickly as we may. Once aboard the ship I can doubtless help you with a little incantation or two, for we'll need aid of some sort if we're to sail a large ship by ourselves."

They marched on, but the horse continued to follow them. They came to the edge of the cliffs, standing high above a narrow, rocky bay in which a battered ship lay at anchor. The ship had the high, fine lines of a Purple Towns merchantman, but its decks were piled with shreds of torn canvas, pieces of broken rope, shards of timber, torn-open bales of cloth, smashed wine-jars, and all manner of other refuse, while in several places her rails were smashed and two or three of her yards had splintered. It was evident that she had been through both storms and sea-fights and it was a wonder that she still floated.

"We'll have to tidy her up as best we can, using only the mains'l for motion," mused Smiorgan. "Hopefully we can salvage enough food to last us..."

"Look!" Elric pointed, sure that he had seen someone in the shadows near the afterdeck. "Did the pirates leave any of their company behind?"

"None."

"Did you see anyone on the ship, just then?"

"My eyes play filthy tricks on my mind," Smiorgan told him. "It is this damned blue light. There is a rat or two aboard, that's all. And that's what you saw."

"Possibly." Elric looked back. The horse appeared to be unaware of them as it cropped the brown grass. "Well, let's finish the journey."

They scrambled down the steeply sloping cliff-face and were soon on the shore, wading through the
shallows for the ship, clambering up the slippery ropes which still hung over the sides, and, at last, setting their feet with some relief upon the deck.

"I feel more secure already," said Smiorgan. "This ship was my home for so long!" He searched through the scattered cargo until he found an unbroken wine-jar, carved off the seal, and handed it to Elric. Elric lifted the heavy jar and let a little of the good wine flow into his mouth. As Count Smiorgan began to drink, Elric was sure he saw another movement near the afterdeck, and he moved closer.

Now he was certain that he heard strained, rapid breathing-like the breathing of one who sought to stifle his need for air rather than be detected. They were slight sounds, but the albino's ears, unlike his eyes, were sharp. His hand ready to draw his sword, he stalked toward the source of the sound, Smiorgan now behind him.

She emerged from her hiding place before he reached her. Her hair hung in heavy, dirty coils about her pale face; her shoulders were slumped and her soft arms hung limply at her sides, and her dress was stained and ripped.

As Elric approached, she fell on her knees before him. "Take my life," she said humbly, "but I beg you-do not take me back to Saxif D'Aan, though I know you must be his servant or his kinsman."

"It's she!" cried Smiorgan in astonishment. "It's our passenger. She must have been in hiding all this time.

Elric stepped forward, lifting up the girl's chin so that he could study her face. There was a Melnibonéan cast about her features, but she was, to his mind, of the Young Kingdoms; she lacked the pride of a Melnibonéan woman, too. "What name was that you used, girl?" he asked kindly. "Did you speak of Saxif D'Aan? Earl Saxif D'Aan of Melnibonè?

"I did, my lord."

"Do not fear me as his servant," Elric told her. "And as for being a kinsman, I suppose you could call me that, on my mother's side—or rather my great-grandmother's side. He was an ancestor. He must have been dead for two centuries, at least!"

"No," she said. "He lives, my lord."

"On this island?"

"This island is not his home, but it is in this plane that he exists. I sought to escape him through the Crimson Gate. I fled through the gate in a skiff, reached the town where you found me, Count Smiorgan, but he drew me back once I was aboard your ship. He drew me back and the ship with me. For that, I have remorse—and for what befell your crew. Now I know he seeks me. I can feel his presence growing nearer."

"Is he invisible?" Smiorgan asked suddenly. "Does he ride a white horse?"

She gasped. "You see! He is near! Why else should the horse appear on this island?"

"He rides it?" Elric asked.

"No, no! He fears the horse almost as much as I fear him. The horse pursues him!"

Elric produced the Melnibonéan gold wheel from his purse. "Did you take this from Earl Saxif D'Aan?"

"I did."

The albino frowned.

"Who is this man, Elric?" Count Smiorgan asked. "You describe him as an ancestor—yet he lives in this world. What do you know of him?"

Elric weighed the large gold wheel in his hand before replacing it in his pouch. "He was something of a legend in Melnibonè. His story is part of our literature. He was a great sorcerer—one of the greatest—and he fell in love. It's rare enough for Melnibonéans to fall in love, as others understand the emotion, but rarer for one to have such feelings for a girl who was not even of our own race. She was half-Melnibonèan, so I heard, but from a land which was, in those days, a Melnibonèan possession, a western province close to Dharijor. She was bought by him in a batch of slaves he planned to use for some
sorcerous experiment, but he singled her out, saving her from whatever fate it was the others suffered. He lavished his attention upon her, giving her everything. For her, he abandoned his practices, retired to live quietly away from Imrryr, and I think she showed him a certain affection, though she did not seem to love him. There was another, you see, called Carolak, as I recall, and also half-Melnibonèan, who had become a mercenary in Shazar and risen in the favor of the Shazarian court. She had been pledged to this Carolak before her abduction."

"She loved him?" Count Smiorgan asked.

"She was pledged to marry him, but let me finish my story. . . ." Elric continued: "Well, at length Carolak, now a man of some substance, second only to the king in Shazar, heard of her fate and swore to rescue her. He came with raiders to Melnibonè's shores, and aided by sorcery, sought out Saxif D'Aan's palace. That done, he sought the girl, finding her at last in the apartments Saxif D'Aan had set aside for her use. He told her that he had come to claim her as his bride, to rescue her from persecution. Oddly, the girl resisted, suggesting that she had been too long a slave in the Melnibonèan harem to re-adapt to the life of a princess in the Shazarian court. Carolak scoffed at this and seized her. He managed to escape the castle and had the girl over the saddle of his horse and was about to rejoin his men on the coast when Saxif D'Aan detected them. Carolak, I think, was slain, or else a spell was put on him, but Saxif D'Aan, in his terrible jealousy and certain that the girl had planned the escape with a lover, ordered her to die upon the Wheel of Chaos-a machine rather like that coin in design. Her limbs were broken slowly and Saxif D'Aan sat and watched, through long days, while she died. Her skin was peeled from her flesh, and Earl Saxif D'Aan observed every detail of her punishment. Soon it was evident that the drugs and sorcery used to sustain her life were failing and Saxif D'Aan ordered her taken from the Wheel of Chaos and laid upon a couch. 'Well,' he said, 'you have been punished for betraying me and I am glad. Now you may die.' And he saw that her lips, blood-caked and frightful, were moving, and he bent to hear her words."


"Her last gesture was an attempt to embrace him. And the words were those she had never uttered to him before, much as he had hoped that she would. She said simply, over and over again, until the last breath left her: 'I love you. I love you. I love you.' And then she died."

Smiorgan rubbed at his beard. "Gods! What then? What did your ancestor do?"

"He knew remorse."

"Of course!"

"Not so, for a Melnibonèan. Remorse is a rare emotion with us. Few have ever experienced it. Torn by guilt, Earl Saxif D'Aan left Melnibonè, never to return. It was assumed that he had died in some remote land, trying to make amends for what he had done to the only creature he had ever loved. But now, it seems, he sought the Crimson Gate, perhaps thinking it an opening into Hell."

"But why should he plague me!" the girl cried. "I am not she! My name is Vassliss. I am a merchant's daughter, from Jharkor. I was voyaging to visit my uncle in Vilmir when our ship was wrecked. A few of us escaped in an open boat. More storms seized us. I was flung from the boat and was drowning when"--she shuddered--"when his galley found me. I was grateful, then ..."

"What happened?" Elric pushed the matted hair away from her face and offered her some of their wine. She drank gratefully.

"He took me to his palace and told me that he would marry me, that I should be his empress forever and rule beside him. But I was frightened. There was such pain in him-and such cruelty, too. I thought he must devour me, destroy me. Soon after my capture, I took the money and the boat and fled for the gateway, which he had told me about...."

"You could find this gateway for us?" Elric asked.

"I think so. I have some knowledge of seamanship, learned from my father. But what would be the use, sir? He would find us again and drag us back. And he must be very near, even now."

"I have a little sorcery myself," Elric assured her, "and will pit it against Saxif D'Aan's, if I must." He turned to Count Smiorgan. "Can we get a sail aloft quickly?"
"Fairly quickly."
"Then let's hurry, Count Smiorgan Baldhead. I might have the means of getting us through this Crimson Gate and free from any further involvement in the dealings of the dead!"

IV

While Count Smiorgan and Vassliss of Jharkor watched, Elric lowered himself to the deck, panting and pale. His first attempt to work sorcery in this world had failed and had exhausted him.
"I am further convinced," he told Smiorgan, "that we are in another plane of existence, for I should have worked my incantations with less effort."
"You have failed."
Elric rose with some difficulty. "I shall try again."
He turned his white face skyward; he closed his eyes; he stretched out his arms and his body tensed as he began the incantation again, his voice growing louder and louder, higher and higher, so that it resembled the shrieking of a gale.

He forgot where he was; he forgot his own identity; he forgot those who were with him as his whole mind concentrated upon the summoning. He sent his call out beyond the confines of the world, into that strange plane where the elementals dwelled—where the powerful creatures of the air could still be found—the sylphs of the breeze, and the sharnahs, who lived in the storms, and the most powerful of all, the h'Haarshanns, creatures of the whirlwind.

And now at last some of them began to come at his summons, ready to serve him as, by virtue of an ancient pact, the elementals had served his forefathers. And slowly the sail of the ship began to fill, and the timbers creaked, and Smiorgan raised the anchor, and the ship was sailing away from the island, through the rocky gap of the harbor, and out into the open sea, still beneath a strange blue sun.

Soon a huge wave was forming around them, lifting up the ship and carrying it across the ocean, so that Count Smiorgan and the girl marveled at the speed of their progress, while Elric, his crimson eyes open now, but blank and unseeing, continued to croon to his unseen allies.

Thus the ship progressed across the waters of the sea, and at last the island was out of sight and the girl, checking their position against the position of the sun, was able to give Count Smiorgan sufficient information for him to steer a course.

As soon as he could, Count Smiorgan went up to Elric, who still straddled the deck, still as stiff-limbed as before, and shook him.
"Elric! You will kill yourself with this effort. We need your friends no longer!"
At once the wind dropped and the wave dispersed and Elric, gasping, fell to the deck.
"It is harder here," he said. "It is so much harder here. It is as if I have to call across far greater gulfs than any I have known before."

And then Elric slept.

He lay in a warm bunk in a cool cabin. Through the porthole filtered diffused blue light. He sniffed. He caught the odor of hot food, and turning his head, saw that Vassliss stood there, a bowl of broth in her hands. "I was able to cook this," she said. "It will improve your health. As far as I can tell, we are nearing the Crimson Gate. The seas are always rough around the gate, so you will need your strength."
Elric thanked her pleasantly and began to eat the broth as she watched him.
"You are very like Saxif D'Aan," she said. "Yet harder in a way—and gentler, too. He is so remote. I know why that girl could never tell him that she loved him."

Elric smiled. "Oh, it's nothing more than a folktale, probably, the story I told you. This Saxif D'Aan could be another person altogether—or an impostor, even, who has taken his name—or a sorcerer. Some sorcerers take the names of other sorcerers, for they think it gives them more power."

There came a cry from above, but Elric could not make out the words.
The girl's expression became alarmed. Without a word to Elric, she hurried from the cabin.

Elric, rising unsteadily, followed her up the companion-way.

Count Smiorgan Baldhead was at the wheel of his ship and he was pointing toward the horizon behind them. "What do you make of that, Elric?"

Elric peered at the horizon, but could see nothing. Often his eyes were weak, as now. But the girl said in a voice of quiet despair:

"It is a golden sail."

"You recognize it?" Elric asked her.

"Oh, indeed I do. It is the galleon of Earl Saxif D'Aan. He has found us. Perhaps he was lying in wait along our route, knowing we must come this way."

"How far are we from the gate?"

"I am not sure."

At that moment, there came a terrible noise from below, as if something sought to stave in the timbers of the ship.

"It's in the forward hatches!" cried Smiorgan. "See what it is, friend Elric! But take care, man!"

Cautiously Elric prised back one of the hatch covers and peered into the murky fastness of the hold. The noise of stamping and thumping continued on, and as his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw the source.

The white horse was there. It whinnied as it saw him, almost in greeting.

"How did it come aboard?" Elric asked. "I saw nothing. I heard nothing."

The girl was almost as white as Elric. She sank to her knees beside the hatch, burying her face in her arms.

"He has us! He has us!"

"There is still a chance we can reach the Crimson Gate in time," Elric reassured her. "And once in my own world, why, I can work much stronger sorcery to protect us."

"No," she sobbed, "it is too late. Why else would the white horse be here? He knows that Saxif D'Aan must soon board us."

"He'll have to fight us before he shall have you," Elric promised her.

"You have not seen his men. Cutthroats all. Desperate and wolfish! They'll show you no mercy. You would be best advised to hand me over to Saxif D'Aan at once and save yourselves. You'll gain nothing from trying to protect me. But I'd ask you a favor."

"What's that?"

"Find me a small knife to carry, that I may kill myself as soon as I know you two are safe."

Elric laughed, dragging her to her feet. "I'll have no such melodramatics from you, lass! We stand together. Perhaps we can bargain with Saxif D'Aan."

"What have you to barter?"

"Very little. But he is not aware of that."

"He can read your thoughts, seemingly. He has great powers!"

"I am Elric of Melnibonè. I am said to possess a certain facility in the sorcerous arts, myself."

"But you are not as single-minded as Saxif D'Aan," she said simply. "Only one thing obsesses him-the need to make me his consort."

"Many girls would be flattered by the attention-glad to be an empress with a Melnibonèan emperor for a husband." Elric was sardonic.

She ignored his tone. "That is why I fear him so," she said in a murmur. "If I lost my determination for a moment, I could love him. I should be destroyed! It is what she must have known!"
The gleaming galleon, sails and sides all gilded so that it seemed the sun itself pursued them, moved rapidly upon them while the girl and Count Smiorgan watched aghast and Elric desperately attempted to recall his elemental allies, without success.

Through the pale blue light the golden ship sailed relentlessly in their wake. Its proportions were monstrous, its sense of power vast, its gigantic prow sending up huge, foamy waves on both sides as it sped silently toward them.

With the look of a man preparing himself to meet death, Count Smiorgan Baldhead of the Purple Towns unslung his battle-ax and loosened his sword in its scabbard, setting his little metal cap upon his bald pate. The girl made no sound, no movement at all, but she wept.

Elric shook his head and his long, milk-white hair formed a halo around his face for a moment. His moody crimson eyes began to focus on the world around him. He recognized the ship; it was of a pattern with the golden battle-barges of Melniboné-doubtless the ship in which Earl Saxif D'Aan had fled his homeland, searching for the Crimson Gate. Now Elric was convinced that this must be that same Saxif D'Aan and he knew less fear than did his companions, but considerably greater curiosity. Indeed, it was almost with nostalgia that he noted the ball of fire, like a natural comet, glowing with green light, come hissing and spluttering toward them, flung by the ship's forward catapult. He half expected to see a great dragon wheeling in the sky overhead, for it was with dragons and gilded battle-craft like these that Melniboné had once conquered the world.

The fireball fell into the sea a few inches from their bow and was evidently placed there deliberately, as a warning.

"Don't stop!" cried Vassliss. "Let the flames slay us! It will be better!"

Smiorgan was looking upward. "We have no choice. Look! He has banished the wind, it seems."

They were becalmed. Elric smiled a grim smile. He knew now what the folk of the Young Kingdoms must have felt when his ancestors had used these identical tactics against them.

"Elric?" Smiorgan turned to the albino. "Are these your people? That ship's Melnibonèan without question!"

"So are the methods," Elric told him. "I am of the blood royal of Melnibonè. I could be emperor, even now, if I chose to claim my throne. There is some small chance that Earl Saxif D'Aan, though an ancestor, will recognize me and, therefore, recognize my authority. We are a conservative people, the folk of the Dragon Isle."

The girl spoke through dry lips, hopelessly: "He recognizes only the authority of the Lords of Chaos, who give him aid."

"All Melnibonèans recognize that authority," Elric told her with a certain humor.

From the forward hatch, the sound of the stallion's stamping and snorting increased.

"We're besieged by enchantments!" Count Smiorgan's normally ruddy features had paled. "Have you none of your own, Prince Elric, you can use to counter them?"

"None, it seems."

The golden ship loomed over them. Elric saw that the rails, high overhead, were crowded not with Imrryrian warriors but with cutthroats equally as desperate as those he had fought upon the island, and, apparently, drawn from the same variety of historical periods and nations. The galleon's long sweeps scraped the sides of the smaller vessel as they folded, like the legs of some water insect, to enable the grappling irons to be flung out. Iron claws bit into the timbers of the little ship and the brigandly crowd overhead cheered, grinning at them, menacing them with their weapons.

The girl began to run to the seaward side of the ship, but Elric caught her by the arm.

"Do not stop me, I beg you!" she cried. "Rather, jump with me and drown!"

"You think that death will save you from Saxif D'Aan?" Elric said. "If he has the power you say, death will only bring you more firmly into his grasp!"

"Oh!" The girl shuddered and then, as a voice called down to them from one of the tall decks of the gilded ship, she gave a moan and fainted into Elric's arms, so that, weakened as he was by his spell-
working, it was all that he could do to stop himself falling with her to the deck.

The voice rose over the coarse shouts and guffaws of the crew. It was pure, lilting, and sardonic. It was the voice of a Melnibonèan, though it spoke the common tongue of the Young Kingdoms, a corruption, in itself, of the speech of the Bright Empire.

"May I have the captain's permission to come aboard?"

Count Smiorgan growled back: "You have us firm, sir! Don't try to disguise an act of piracy with a polite speech!"

"I take it I have your permission, then." The unseen speaker's tone remained exactly the same.

Elric watched as part of the rail was drawn back to allow a gangplank, studded with golden nails to give firmer footing, to be lowered from the galleon's deck to theirs.

A tall figure appeared at the top of the gangplank. He had the fine features of a Melnibonèan nobleman, was thin, proud in his bearing, clad in voluminous robes of cloth-of-gold, an elaborate helmet in gold and ebony upon his long auburn locks. He had gray-blue eyes, pale, slightly flushed skin, and he carried, so far as Elric could see, no weapons of any kind.

With considerable dignity, Earl Saxif D'Aan began to descend, his rascals at his back. The contrast between this beautiful intellectual and those he commanded was remarkable. Where he walked with straight back, elegant and noble, they slouched, filthy, degenerate, unintelligent, grinning with pleasure at their easy victory. Not a man among them showed any sign of human dignity; each was overdressed in tattered and unclean finery, each had at least three weapons upon his person, and there was much evidence of looted jewelry, of nose-rings, earrings, bangles, necklaces, toe- and finger-rings, pendants, cloak-pins, and the like.

"Gods!" murmured Smiorgan. "I've rarely seen such a collection of scum, and I thought I'd encountered most kinds in my voyages. How can such a man bear to be in their company?"

"Perhaps it suits his sense of irony," Elric suggested.

Earl Saxif D'Aan reached their deck and stood looking up at them to where they still positioned themselves, in the poop. He gave a slight bow. His features were controlled and only his eyes suggested something of the intensity of emotion dwelling within him, particularly as they fell upon the girl in Elric's arms.

"I am Earl Saxif D'Aan of Melnibonè, now of the Islands Beyond the Crimson Gate. You have something with you which is mine. I would claim it from you."

"You mean the Lady Vassliss of Jharkor?" Elric said, his voice as steady as Saxif D'Aan's.

Saxif D'Aan seemed to note Elric for the first time. A slight frown crossed his brow and was quickly dismissed. "She is mine," he said. "You may be assured that she will come to no harm at my hands."

Elric, seeking some advantage, knew that he risked much when he next spoke, in the High Tongue of Melnibonè, used between those of the blood royal. "Knowledge of your history does not reassure me, Saxif D'Aan."

Almost imperceptibly, the golden man stiffened and fire flared in his gray-blue eyes. "Who are you, to speak the Tongue of Kings? Who are you, who claims knowledge of my past?"

"I am Elric, son of Sadríc, and I am the four-hundred-and-twenty-eighth emperor of the folk of R'lin K'ren A'a, who landed upon the Dragon Isle ten thousand years ago. I am Elric, your emperor, Earl Saxif D'Aan, and I demand your fealty." And Elric held up his right hand, upon which still gleamed a ring set with a single Actorios stone, the Ring of Kings.

Earl Saxif D'Aan now had firm control of himself again. He gave no sign that he was impressed. "Your sovereignty does not extend beyond your own world, noble emperor, though I greet you as a fellow monarch." He spread his arms so that his long sleeves rustled. "This world is mine. All that exists beneath the blue sun do I rule. You trespass, therefore, in my domain. I have every right to do as I please."

"Pirate pomp," muttered Count Smiorgan, who had understood nothing of the conversation but had
gathered something of what passed by the tone. "Pirate braggadocio. What does he say, Elric?"

"He convinces me that he is not, in your sense, a pirate, Count Smiorgan. He claims that he is ruler of this plane. Since there is apparently no other, we must accept his claim."

"Gods! Then let him behave like a monarch and let us sail safely out of his waters!"

"We may—if we give him the girl."

Count Smiorgan shook his head. "I'll not do that. She's my passenger, in my charge. I must die rather than do that. It is the Code of the Sea-lords of the Purple Towns."

"You are famous for your adherence to that code," Elric said. "As for myself, I have taken this girl into my protection and, as hereditary emperor of Melnibonè, I cannot allow myself to be browbeaten."

They had conversed in a murmur, but, somehow, Earl Saxif D'Aan had heard them.

"I must let you know," he said evenly, in the common tongue, "that the girl is mine. You steal her from me. Is that the action of an emperor?"

"She is not a slave," Elric said, "but the daughter of a free merchant in Jharkor. You have no rights upon her."

Earl Saxif D'Aan said, "Then I cannot open the Crimson Gate for you. You must remain in my world forever."

"You have closed the gate? Is it possible?"

"To me."

"Do you know that the girl would rather die than be captured by you, Earl Saxif D'Aan? Does it give you pleasure to instill such fear?"

The golden man looked directly into Elric's eyes as if he made some cryptic challenge. "The gift of pain has ever been a favorite gift among our folk, has it not? Yet it is another gift I offer her. She calls herself Vassliss of Jharkor, but she does not know herself. I know her. She is Gratyesha, Princess of Fwem-Omeyo, and I would make her my bride."

"How can it be that she does not know her own name?"

"She is reincarnated-soul and flesh are identical—that is how I know. And I have waited, Emperor of Melnibonè, for many scores of years for her. Now I shall not be cheated of her."

"As you cheated yourself, two centuries past, in Melnibonè?"

"You risk much with your directness of language, brother monarch!" There was a hint of a warning in Saxif D'Aan's tone, a warning much fiercer than any implied by the words.

"Well"—Elric shrugged—"you have more power than we do. My sorcery works poorly in your world. Your ruffians outnumber us. It should not be difficult for you to take her from us."

"You must give her to me. Then you may go free, back to your own world and your own time."

Elric smiled. "There is sorcery here. She is no reincarnation. You'd bring your lost love's spirit from the netherworld to inhabit this girl's body. Am I not right? That is why she must be given freely, or your sorcery will rebound upon you—or might-and you would not take the risk."

Earl Saxif D'Aan turned his head away so that Elric might not see his eyes. "She is the girl," he said, in the High Tongue. "I know that she is. I mean her soul no harm. I would merely give it back its memory."

"Then it is stalemate," said Elric.

"Have you no loyalty to a brother of the royal blood?" Saxif D'Aan murmured, still refusing to look at Elric.

"You claimed no such loyalty, as I recall, Earl Saxif D'Aan. If you accept me as your emperor, then you must accept my decisions. I keep the girl in my custody. Or you must take her by force."

"I am too proud."

"Such pride shall ever destroy love," said Elric, almost in sympathy. "What now, King of Limbo? What shall you do with us?"

Earl Saxif D'Aan lifted his noble head, about to reply, when from the hold the stamping and the
snorting began again. His eyes widened. He looked questioningly at Elric, and there was something close to terror in his face.

"What's that? What have you in the hold?"
"A mount, my lord, that is all," said Elric equably.
"A horse? An ordinary horse?"
"A white one. A stallion, with bridle and saddle. It has no rider."
At once Saxif D'Aan's voice rose as he shouted orders for his men. "Take those three aboard our ship. This one shall be sunk directly. Hurry! Hurry!"

Elric and Smiorgan shook off the hands which sought to seize them and they moved toward the gangplank, carrying the girl between them, while Smiorgan muttered, "At least we are not slain, Elric. But what becomes of us now?"

Elric shook his head. "We must hope that we can continue to use Earl Saxif D'Aan's pride against him, to our advantage, though the gods alone know how we shall resolve the dilemma."

Earl Saxif D'Aan was already hurrying up the gangplank ahead of them.
"Quickly," he shouted. "Raise the plank!"

They stood upon the decks of the golden battle-barge and watched as the gangplank was drawn up, the length of rail replaced.

"Bring up the catapults," Saxif D'Aan commanded. "Use lead. Sink that vessel at once!"

The noise from the forward hold increased. The horse's voice echoed over ships and water. Hooves smashed at timber and then, suddenly, it came crashing through the hatch-covers, scrambling for purchase on the deck with its front hooves, and then standing there, pawing at the planks, its neck arching, its nostrils dilating, and its eyes glaring, as if ready to do battle.

Now Saxif D'Aan made no attempt to hide the terror on his face. His voice rose to a scream as he threatened his rascals with every sort of horror if they did not obey him with utmost speed. The catapults were dragged up and huge globes of lead were lobbed onto the decks of Smiorgan's ship, smashing through the planks like arrows through parchment so that almost immediately the ship began to sink.

"Cut the grappling hooks!" cried Saxif D'Aan, wrenching a blade from the hand of one of his men and sawing at the nearest rope. "Cast loose-quickly!"

Even as Smiorgan's ship groaned and roared like a drowning beast, the ropes were cut. The ship keeled over at once, and the horse disappeared.

"Turn about!" shouted Saxif D'Aan. "Back to Fhaligarn and swiftly, or your souls shall feed my fiercest demons!"

There came a peculiar, high-pitched neighing from the foaming water, as Smiorgan's ship, stern uppermost, gasped and was swallowed. Elric caught a glimpse of the white stallion, swimming strongly.

"Go below!" Saxif D'Aan ordered, indicating a hatchway. "The horse can smell the girl and thus is doubly difficult to lose."

"Why do you fear it?" Elric asked. "It is only a horse. It cannot harm you."

Saxif D'Aan uttered a laugh of profound bitterness. "Can it not, brother monarch? Can it not?"

As they carried the girl below, Elric was frowning, remembering a little more of the legend of Saxif D'Aan, of the girl he had punished so cruelly, and of her lover, Prince Carolak. The last he heard of Saxif D'Aan was the sorcerer crying:

"More sail! More sail!"

And then the hatch had closed behind them and they found themselves in an opulent Melnibonèan day-cabin, full of rich hangings, precious metal, decorations of exquisite beauty and, to Count Smiorgan, disturbing decadence. But it was Elric, as he lowered the girl to a couch, who noticed the smell.

"Augh! It's the smell of a tomb-of damp and mold. Yet nothing rots. It is passing peculiar, friend Smiorgan, is it not?"

"I scarcely noticed, Elric." Smiorgan's voice was hollow. "But I would agree with you on one thing. We are entombed. I doubt we'll live to escape this world now."
An hour had passed since they had been forced aboard. The door had been locked behind them, and it seemed Saxif D'Aan was too preoccupied with escaping the white stallion to bother with them. Peering through the lattice of a porthole, Elric could look back to where their ship had been sunk. They were many leagues distant already; yet he still thought, from time to time, that he saw the head and shoulders of the stallion above the waves.

Vassliss had recovered and sat pale and shivering upon the couch.

"What more do you know of that horse?" Elric asked her. "It would be helpful to me if you could recall anything you have heard."

She shook her head. "Saxif D'Aan spoke little of it, but I gather he fears the rider more than he does the horse."

"Ah!" Elric frowned. "I suspected it! Have you ever seen the rider?"

"Never. I think that Saxif D'Aan has never seen him, either. I think he believes himself doomed if that rider should ever sit upon the white stallion."

Elric smiled to himself.

"Why do you ask so much about the horse?" Smiorgan wished to know.

Elric shook his head. "I have an instinct, that is all. Half a memory. But I'll say nothing and think as little as I may, for there is no doubt Saxif D'Aan, as Vassliss suggests, has some power of reading the mind."

They heard a footfall above, descending to their door. A bolt was drawn and Saxif D'Aan, his composure fully restored, stood in the opening, his hands in his golden sleeves.

"You will forgive, I hope, the peremptory way in which I sent you here. There was danger which had to be averted at all costs. As a result, my manners were not all that they should have been."

"Danger to us?" Elric asked. "Or to you, Earl Saxif D'Aan?"

"In the circumstances, to all of us, I assure you."

"Who rides the horse?" Smiorgan asked bluntly. "And why do you fear him?"

Earl Saxif D'Aan was master of himself again, so there was no sign of a reaction. "That is very much my private concern," he said softly. "Will you dine with me now?"

The girl made a noise in her throat and Earl Saxif D'Aan turned piercing eyes upon her. "Gratyesha, you will want to cleanse yourself and make yourself beautiful again. I will see that facilities are placed at your disposal."

"I am not Gratyesha," she said. "I am Vassliss, the merchant's daughter."

"You will remember," he said. "In time, you will remember." There was such certainty, such obsessive power, in his voice that even Elric experienced a frisson of awe. "The things will be brought to you, and you may use this cabin as your own until we return to my palace on Fhaligarn. My lords . . ." He indicated that they should leave.

Elric said, "I'll not leave her, Saxif D'Aan. She is too afraid."

"She fears only the truth, brother."

"She fears you and your madness."

Saxif D'Aan shrugged insouciantly. "I shall leave first, then. If you would accompany me, my lords . . ." He strode from the cabin and they followed.

Elric said, over his shoulder, "Vassliss, you may depend upon my protection." And he closed the cabin doors behind him.

Earl Saxif D'Aan was standing upon the deck, exposing his noble face to the spray which was flung up by the ship as it moved with supernatural speed through the sea.

"You called me mad, Prince Elric? Yet you must be versed in sorcery, yourself."
"Of course. I am of the blood royal. I am reckoned knowledgeable in my own world."
"But here? How well does your sorcery work?"
"Poorly, I'll admit. The spaces between the planes seem greater."
"Exactly. But I have bridged them. I have time to learn how to bridge them."
"You are saying that you are more powerful than am I?"
"It is a fact, is it not?"
"It is. But I did not think we were about to indulge in sorcerous battles, Earl Saxif D'Aan."
"Of course. Yet, if you were to think of besting me by sorcery, you would think twice, eh?"
"I should be foolish to contemplate such a thing at all. It could cost me my soul. My life, at least."
"True. You are a realist, I see."
"I suppose so."
"Then we can progress on simpler lines, to settle the dispute between us."
"You propose a duel?" Elric was surprised.

Earl Saxif D'Aan's laughter was light. "Of course not- against your sword? That has power in all worlds, though the magnitude varies."
"I'm glad that you are aware of that," Elric said significantly.
"Besides," added Earl Saxif D'Aan, his golden robes rustling as he moved a little nearer to the rail, "you would not kill me-for only I have the means of your escaping this world."
"Perhaps we'd elect to remain," said Elric.
"Then you would be my subjects. But, no-you would not like it here. I am self-exiled. I could not return to my own world now, even if I wished to do so. It has cost me much, my knowledge. But I would found a dynasty here, beneath the blue sun. I must have my wife, Prince Elric. I must have Gratyesha."
"Her name is Vassliss," said Elric obstinately.
"She thinks it is."
"Then it is. I have sworn to protect her, as has Count Smiorgan. Protect her we shall. You will have to kill us all."
"Exactly," said Earl Saxif D'Aan with the air of a man who has been coaching a poor student toward the correct answer to a problem, "Exactly. I shall have to kill you all. You leave me with little alternative, Prince Elric."
"Would that benefit you?"
"It would. It would put a certain powerful demon at my service for a few hours."
"We should resist."
"I have many men. I do not value them. Eventually, they would overwhelm you. Would they not?"

Elric remained silent.
"My men would be aided by sorcery," added Saxif D'Aan. "Some would die, but not too many, I think."

Elric was looking beyond Saxif D'Aan, staring out to sea. He was sure that the horse still followed. He was sure that Saxif D'Aan knew, also.
"And if we gave up the girl?"
"I should open the Crimson Gate for you. You would be honored guests. I should see that you were borne safely through, even taken safely to some hospitable land in your own world, for even if you passed through the gate there would be danger. The storms."

Elric appeared to deliberate.
"You have only a little time to make your decision, Prince Elric. I had hoped to reach my palace, Fhaligarn, by now. I shall not allow you very much longer. Come, make your decision. You know I speak the truth."
"You know that I can work some sorcery in your world, do you not?"
"You summoned a few friendly elementals to your aid, I know. But at what cost? Would you challenge me directly?"
"It would be unwise of me," said Elric.
Smiorgan was tugging at his sleeve. "Stop this useless talk. He knows that we have given our word
to the girl and that we must fight him!"

Earl Saxif D'Aan sighed. There seemed to be genuine sorrow in his voice. "If you are determined to
lose your lives..." he began.

"I should like to know why you set such importance upon the speed with which we make up our
minds," Elric said. "Why cannot we wait until we reach Fhaligarn?"

Earl Saxif D'Aan's expression was calculating, and again he looked full into Elric's crimson eyes. "I
think you know," he said, almost inaudibly.

But Elric shook his head. "I think you give me too much credit for intelligence."

"Perhaps."

Elric knew that Saxif D'Aan was attempting to read his thoughts; he deliberately blanked his mind,
and suspected that he sensed frustration in the sorcerer's demeanor.

And then the albino had sprung at his kinsman, his hand chopping at Saxif D'Aan's throat. The earl
was taken completely off guard. He tried to call out, but his vocal chords were numbed. Another blow,
and he fell to the deck, senseless.

"Quickly, Smiorgan," Elric shouted, and he had leaped into the rigging, climbing swiftly upward to
the top yards. Smiorgan, bewildered, followed, and Elric had drawn his sword, even as he reached the
crow's nest, driving upward through the rail so that the lookout was taken in the groin scarcely before he
realized it.

Next, Elric was hacking at the ropes holding the mainsail to the yard. Already a number of Saxif
D'Aan's ruffians were climbing after them.

The heavy golden sail came loose, falling to envelop the pirates and take several of them down with
it.

Elric climbed into the crow's nest and pitched the dead man over the rail in the wake of his
comrades. Then he had raised his sword over his head, holding it in his two hands, his eyes blank again,
his head raised to the blue sun, and Smiorgan, clinging to the mast below, shuddered as he heard a
peculiar crooning come from the albino's throat.

More of the cutthroats were ascending, and Smiorgan hacked at the rigging, having the satisfaction
of seeing half a score go flying down to break their bones on the deck below, or be swallowed by the
waves.

Earl Saxif D'Aan was beginning to recover, but he was still stunned.

"Fool!" he was crying. "Fool!" But it was not possible to tell if he referred to Elric or to himself.

Elric's voice became a wail, rhythmical and chilling, as he chanted his incantation, and the strength
from the man he had killed flowed into him and sustained him. His crimson eyes seemed to flicker with
fires of another, nameless color, and his whole body shook as the strange runes shaped themselves in a
throat which had never been made to speak such sounds.

His voice became a vibrant groan as the incantation continued, and Smiorgan, watching as more of
the crew made efforts to climb the mainmast, felt an unearthly coldness creep through him.

Earl Saxif D'Aan screamed from below:

"You would not dare!"

The sorcerer began to make passes in the air, his own incantation tumbling from his lips, and
Smiorgan gasped as a creature made of smoke took shape only a few feet below him. The creature
smacked its lips and grinned and stretched a paw, which became flesh even as it moved, toward
Smiorgan. He hacked at the paw with his sword, whimpering.

"Elric!" cried Count Smiorgan, clambering higher so that he grasped the rail of the crow's nest.

"Elric! He sends demons against us now!"

But Elric ignored him. His whole mind was in another world, a darker, bleaker world even than this
one. Through gray mists, he saw a figure, and he cried a name. "Come!" he called in the ancient tongue
of his ancestors. "Come!"

Count Smiorgan cursed as the demon became increasingly substantial. Red fangs clashed and green eyes glared at him. A claw stroked his boot and no matter how much he struck with his sword, the demon did not appear to notice the blows.

There was no room for Smiorgan in the crow's nest, but he stood on the outer rim, shouting with terror, desperate for aid. Still Elric continued to chant.

"Elric! I am doomed!"

The demon's paw grasped Smiorgan by his ankle.

"Elric!"

Thunder rolled out at sea; a bolt of lightning appeared for a second and then was gone. From nowhere there came the sound of a horse's hooves pounding, and a human voice shouting in triumph.

Elric sank back against the rail, opening his eyes in time to see Smiorgan being dragged slowly downward. With the last of his strength he flung himself forward, leaning far out to stab downward with Stormbringer. The runesword sank cleanly into the demon's right eye and it roared, letting go of Smiorgan, striking at the blade which drew its energy from it, and as that energy passed into the blade and thence to Elric, the albino grinned a frightful grin so that, for a second, Smiorgan became more frightened of his friend than he had been of the demon. The demon began to dematerialize, its only means of escape from the sword which drank its life-force, but more of Saxif D'Aan's rogues were behind it, and their blades rattled as they sought the pair.

Elric swung himself back over the rail, balanced precariously on the yard as he slashed at their attackers, yelling the old battle-cries of his people. Smiorgan could do little but watch. He noted that Saxif D'Aan was no longer on deck and he shouted urgently to Elric:

"Elric! Saxif D'Aan. He seeks out the girl."

Elric now took the attack to the pirates, and they were more than anxious to avoid the moaning runesword, some even leaping into the sea rather than encounter it. Swiftly the two leaped from yard to yard until they were again upon the deck.

"What does he fear? Why does he not use more sorcery?" panted Count Smiorgan, as they ran toward the cabin.

"I have summoned the one who rides the horse," Elric told him. "I had so little time-and I could tell you nothing of it, knowing that Saxif D'Aan would read my intention in your mind, if he could not in mine!"

The cabin doors were firmly secured from the inside. Elric began to hack at them with the black sword.

But the door resisted as it should not have resisted. "Sealed by sorcery and I've no means of unsealing it," said the albino.

"Will he kill her?"

"I don't know. He might try to take her into some other plane. We must-"

Hooves clattered on the deck and the white stallion reared behind them, only now it had a rider, clad in bright purple and yellow armor. He was bareheaded and youthful, though there were several old scars upon his face. His hair was thick and curly and blond and his eyes were a deep blue.

He drew tightly upon his reins, steadying the horse. He looked piercingly at Elric. "Was it you, Melnibonéan, who opened the pathway for me?"

"It was."

"Then I thank you, though I cannot repay you."

"You have repaid me," Elric told him, then drew Smiorgan aside as the rider leaned forward and spurred his horse directly at the closed doors, smashing through as though they were rotted cotton.

There came a terrible cry from within and then Earl Saxif D'Aan, hampered by his complicated robes of gold, rushed from the cabin, seizing a sword from the hand of the nearest corpse, darting Elric a
look not so much of hatred but of bewildered agony, as he turned to face the blond rider.

The rider had dismounted now and came from the cabin, one arm around the shivering girl, Vassliss, one hand upon the reins of his horse, and he said, sorrowfully:

"You did me a great wrong, Earl Saxif D'Aan, but you did Gratyesha an infinitely more terrible one. Now you must pay."

Saxif D'Aan paused, drawing a deep breath, and when he looked up again, his eyes were steady, his dignity had returned.

"Must I pay in full?" he said.

"In full."

"It is all I deserve," said Saxif D'Aan. "I escaped my doom for many years, but I could not escape the knowledge of my crime. She loved me, you know. Not you."

"She loved us both, I think. But the love she gave you was her entire soul and I should not want that from any woman."

"You would be the loser, then."

"You never knew how much she loved you."

"Only-only afterward...."

"I pity you, Earl Saxif D'Aan." The young man gave the reins of his horse to the girl, and he drew his sword. "We are strange rivals, are we not?"

"You have been all these years in Limbo, where I banished you-in that garden on Melnibonè?"

"All these years. Only my horse could follow you. The horse of Tendric, my father, also of Melnibonè, and also a sorcerer."

"If I had known that, then, I'd have slain you cleanly and sent the horse to Limbo."

"Jealousy weakened you, Earl Saxif D'Aan. But now we fight as we should have fought then-man to man, with steel, for the hand of the one who loves us both. It is more than you deserve."

"Much more," agreed the sorcerer. And he brought up his sword to lunge at the young man who, Smiorgan guessed, could only be Prince Carolak himself.

The fight was predetermined. Saxif D'Aan knew that, if Carolak did not. Saxif D'Aan's skill in arms was up to the standard of any Melnibonèan nobleman, but it could not match the skill of a professional soldier, who had fought for his life time after time.

Back and forth across the deck, while Saxif D'Aan's rascals looked on in openmouthed astonishment, the rivals fought a duel which should have been fought and resolved two centuries before, while the girl they both plainly thought was the reincarnation of Gratyesha watched them with as much concern as might her original have watched when Saxif D'Aan first encountered Prince Carolak in the gardens of his palace, so long ago.

Saxif D'Aan fought well, and Carolak fought nobly, for on many occasions he avoided an obvious advantage, but at length Saxif D'Aan threw away his sword, crying: "Enough. I'll give you your vengeance, Prince Carolak. I'll let you take the girl. But you'll not give me your damned mercy-you'll not take my pride."

And Carolak nodded, stepped forward, and struck straight for Saxif D'Aan's heart.

The blade entered clean and Earl Saxif D'Aan should have died, but he did not. He crawled along the deck until he reached the base of the mast, and he rested his back against it, while the blood pumped from the wounded heart. And he smiled.

"It appears," he said faintly, "that I cannot die, so long have I sustained my life by sorcery. I am no longer a man."

He did not seem pleased by this thought, but Prince Carolak, stepping forward and leaning over him, reassured him. "You will die," he promised, "soon."

"What will you do with her-with Gratyesha?"

"Her name is Vassliss," said Count Smiorgan insistently. "She is a merchant's daughter, from Jharkor."
"She must make up her own mind," Carolak said, ignoring Smiorgan. 

Earl Saxif D'Aan turned glazed eyes on Elric. "I must thank you," he said. "You brought me the one who could bring me peace, though I feared him."

"Is that why, I wonder, your sorcery was so weak against me?" Elric said. "Because you wished Carolak to come and release you from your guilt?"

"Possibly, Elric. You are wiser in some matters, it seems, than am I."

"What of the Crimson Gate?" Smiorgan growled. "Can that be opened? Have you still the power, Earl Saxif D'Aan?"

"I think so." From the folds of his bloodstained garments of gold, the sorcerer produced a large crystal which shone with the deep colors of a ruby. "This will not only lead you to the gate, it will enable you to pass through, only I must warn you..." Saxif D'Aan began to cough. "The ship--" he gasped, "the ship---like my body-has been sustained by means of sorcery-therefore..." His head slumped forward. He raised it with a huge effort and stared beyond them at the girl who still held the reins of the white stallion. "Farewell, Gratyesha, Princess of Fwem-Omeyo. I loved you." The eyes remained fixed upon her, but they were dead eyes now.

Carolak turned back to look at the girl. "How do you call yourself, Gratyesha?"

"They call me Vassliss," she told him. She smiled up into his youthful, battle-scarred face. "That is what they call me, Prince Carolak."

"You know who I am?"

"I know you now."

"Will you come with me, Gratyesha? Will you be my bride, at last, in the strange new lands I have found, beyond the world?"

"I will come," she said.

He helped her up into the saddle of his white stallion and climbed so that he sat behind her. He bowed to Elric of Melnibonè. "I thank you again, Sir Sorcerer, though I never thought to be helped by one of the royal blood of Melnibonè."

Elric's expression was not without humor. "In Melnibonè," he said, "I'm told it's tainted blood."

"Tainted with mercy, perhaps."

"Perhaps."

Prince Carolak saluted them. "I hope you find peace, Prince Elric, as I have found it."

"I fear my peace will more resemble that which Saxif D'Aan found," Elric said grimly. "Nonetheless, I thank you for your good words, Prince Carolak."

Then Carolak, laughing, had ridden his horse for the rail, leaped it, and vanished.

There was a silence upon the ship. The remaining ruffians looked uncertainly from one to the other. Elric addressed them:

"Know you this-I have the key to the Crimson Gate -and only I have the knowledge to use it. Help me sail the ship, and you'll have freedom from this world! What say you?"

"Give us our orders, Captain," said a toothless individual, and he cackled with mirth. "It's the best offer we've had in a hundred years or more!"

"VII"

It was Smiorgan who first saw the Crimson Gate. He held the great red gem in his hand and pointed ahead.

"There! There, Elric! Saxif D'Aan has not betrayed us!"

The sea had begun to heave with huge, turbulent waves, and with the mainsail still tangled upon the deck, it was all that the crew could do to control the ship, but the chance of escape from the world of the blue sun made them work with every ounce of energy and, slowly, the golden battle-barge neared the
towering crimson pillars.

The pillars rose from the gray, roaring water, casting a peculiar light upon the crests of the waves. They appeared to have little substance, and yet stood firm against the battering of the tons of water lashing around them.

"Let us hope they are wider apart than they look," said Elric. "It would be a hard enough task steering through them in calm waters, let alone this kind of sea."

"I'd best take the wheel, I think," said Count Smiorgan, handing Elric the gem, and he strode back up the tilting deck, climbing to the covered wheelhouse and relieving the frightened man who stood there.

There was nothing Elric could do but watch as Smiorgan turned the huge vessel into the waves, riding the tops as best he could, but sometimes descending with a rush which made Elric's heart rise to his mouth. All around them, then, the cliffs of water threatened, but the ship was taking another wave before the main force of water could crash onto her decks. For all this, Elric was quickly soaked through and, though sense told him he would be best below, he clung to the rail, watching as Smiorgan steered the ship with uncanny sureness toward the Crimson Gate.

And then the deck was flooded with red light and Elric was half blinded. Gray water flew everywhere; there came a dreadful scraping sound, then a snapping as oars broke against the pillars. The ship shuddered and began to turn, sideways to the wind, but Smiorgan forced her around and suddenly the quality of the light changed subtly, though the sea remained as turbulent as ever and Elric knew, deep within him, that overhead, beyond the heavy clouds, a yellow sun was burning again.

But now there came a creaking and a crashing from within the bowels of the battle-barge. The smell of mold, which Elric had noted earlier, became stronger, almost overpowering.

Smiorgan came hurrying back, having handed over the wheel. His face was pale again. "She's breaking up, Elric," he called out, over the noise of the wind and the waves. He staggered as a huge wall of water struck the ship and snatched away several planks from the deck. "She's falling apart, man!"

"Saxif D'Aan tried to warn us of this!" Elric shouted back. "As he was kept alive by sorcery, so was his ship. She was old before he sailed her to that world. While there, the sorcery which sustained her remained strong- but on this plane it has no power at all. Look!" And he pulled at a piece of the rail, crumbling the rotten wood with his fingers. "We must find a length of timber which is still good."

At that moment a yard came crashing from the mast and struck the deck, bouncing, then rolling toward them.

Elric crawled up the sloping deck until he could grasp the spar and test it. "This one's still good. Use your belt or whatever else you can and tie yourself to it!"

The wind wailed through the disintegrating rigging of the ship; the sea smashed at the sides, driving great holes below the waterline.

The ruffians who had crewed her were in a state of complete panic, some trying to unship small boats which crumbled even as they swung them out, others lying flat against the rotted decks and praying to whatever gods they still worshiped.

Elric strapped himself to the broken yard as firmly as he could and Smiorgan followed his example. The next wave to hit the ship full on lifted them with it, cleanly over what remained of the rail and into the chilling, shouting waters of that terrible sea.

Elric kept his mouth tight shut against swallowing too much water and reflected on the irony of his situation. It seemed that, having escaped so much, he was to die a very ordinary death, by drowning.

It was not long before his senses left him and he gave himself up to the swirling and somehow friendly waters of the ocean.

He awoke, struggling.

There were hands upon him. He strove to fight them off, but he was too weak. Someone laughed, a rough, good-humored sound.

The water no longer roared and crashed around him. The wind no longer howled. Instead there was
a gentler movement. He heard waves lapping against timber. He was aboard another ship.

He opened his eyes, blinking in warm, yellow sunlight. Red-cheeked Vilmirian sailors grinned down at him. "You're a lucky man—if man you be!" said one.

"My friend?" Elric sought for Smiorgan.

"He was in better shape than were you. He's down in Duke Avan's cabin now."

"Duke Avan?" Elric knew the name, but in his dazed condition could remember nothing to help him place the man. "You saved us?"

"Aye. We found you both drifting, tied to a broken yard carved with the strangest designs I've ever seen. A Melnibonèan craft, was she?"

"Yes, but rather old."

They helped him to his feet. They had stripped him of his clothes and wrapped him in woolen blankets. The sun was already drying his hair. He was very weak. He said:

"My sword?"

"Duke Avan has it, below."

"Tell him to be careful of it."

"We're sure he will."

"This way," said another. "The duke awaits you."

Book THREE

SAILING TO THE PAST

I

Elric sat back in the comfortable, well-padded chair and accepted the wine cup handed him by his host. While Smiorgan ate his fill of the hot food provided for them, Elric and Duke Avan appraised one another.

Duke Avan was a man of about forty, with a square, handsome face. He was dressed in a gilded silver breastplate, over which was arranged a white cloak. His britches, tucked into black knee-length boots, were of cream-colored doeskin. On a small sea-table at his elbow rested his helmet, crested with scarlet feathers.

"I am honored, sir, to have you as my guest," said Duke Avan. "I know you to be Elric of Melnibonè. I have been seeking you for several months, ever since news came to me that you had left your homeland (and your power) behind and were wandering, as it were, incognito in the Young Kingdoms."

"You know much, sir."

"I, too, am a traveler by choice. I almost caught up with you in Pikarayd, but I gather there was some sort of trouble there. You left quickly and then I lost your trail altogether. I was about to give up looking for your aid when, by the greatest of good fortune, I found you floating in the water!" Duke Avan laughed.

"You have the advantage of me," said Elric, smiling. "You raise many questions."

"He's Avan Astran of Old Hrolmar," grunted Count Smiorgan from the other side of a huge ham bone. "He's well known as an adventurer-explorer-trader. His reputation's the best. We can trust him, Elric."

"I recall the name now," Elric told the duke. "But why should you seek my aid?"

The smell of the food from the table had at last impinged and Elric got up. "Would you mind if I ate something while you explained, Duke Avan?"

"Eat your fill, Prince Elric. I am honored to have you as a guest."
"You have saved my life, sir. I have never had it saved so courteously!"
Duke Avan smiled. "I have never before had the pleasure of, let us say, catching so courteous a fish. If I were a superstitious man, Prince Elric, I should guess that some other force threw us together in this way."
"I prefer to think of it as coincidence," said the albino, beginning to eat. "Now, sir, tell me how I can aid you."
"I shall not hold you to any bargain, merely because I have been lucky enough to save your life," said Duke Avan Astran; "please bear that in mind."
"I shall, sir."
Duke Avan stroked the feathers of his helmet. "I have explored most of the world, as Count Smiorgan rightly says. I have been to your own Melnibonè and I have even ventured east, 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—the continent that has no name. Have you been there, Elric, in your travels?"
The albino shook his head. "I seek experience of other cultures, other civilizations—that is why I travel. There has been nothing, so far, to take me there. The continent is largely uninhabited, and then, where it is inhabited, only by savages, is it not?"
"So we are told."
"You have other intelligence?"
"You know that there is some evidence," said Duke Avan in a deliberate tone, "that your own ancestors came originally from that mainland?"
"Evidence?" Elric pretended lack of interest. "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."
Elric recalled his conversation with Earl Saxif D'Aan, and he smiled to himself. "You mean R'lin K'ren A'a?"
"Aye. A strange name." Duke Avan Astran leaned forward, his eyes alight with delighted curiosity. "You pronounce it more fluently than could I. You speak the secret tongue, the High Tongue, the Speech of Kings...."
"Of course."
"You are forbidden to teach it to any but your own children, are you not?"
"You appear conversant with the customs of Melnibonè, Duke Avan," Elric said, his lids falling so that they half covered his eyes. He leaned back in his seat as he bit into a piece of fresh bread with relish. "Do you know what the words mean?"
"I have been told that they mean simply 'Where the High Ones Meet' in the ancient speech of Melnibonè," Duke Avan Astran told him.
Elric inclined his head. "That is so. Doubtless only a small town, in reality. Where local chiefs gathered, perhaps once a year, to discuss the price of grain."
"You believe that, Prince Elric?"
Elric inspected a covered dish. He helped himself to veal in a rich, sweet sauce. "No," he said. "You believe, then, that there was an ancient civilization even before your own, from which your own culture sprang? You believe that R'lin K'ren A'a is still there, somewhere in the jungles of the west?"
Elric waited until he had swallowed. He shook his head. "No," he said. "I believe that it does not exist at all."
"You are not curious about your ancestors?"
"Should I be?"
"They were said to be different in character from those who founded Melnibonè. Gentler. . . ." Duke Avan Astran looked deep into Elric's face.

Elric laughed. "You are an intelligent man, Duke Avan of Old Hrolmar. You are a perceptive man. Oh, and indeed you are a cunning man, sir!"

Duke Avan grinned at the compliment. "And you know much more of the legends than you are admitting, if I am not mistaken."

"Possibly." Elric sighed as the food warmed him. "We are known as a secretive people, we of Melnibonè."

"Yet," said Duke Avan, "you seem untypical. Who else would desert an empire to travel in lands where his very race was hated?"

"An emperor rules better, Duke Avan Astran, if he has close knowledge of the world in which he rules."

"Melnibonè rules the Young Kingdoms no longer."

"Her power is still great. But that, anyway, was not what I meant. I am of the opinion that the Young Kingdoms offer something which Melnibonè has lost."

"Vitality?"

"Perhaps."

"Humanity!" grunted Count-Smiorgan Baldhead. "That is what your race has lost, Prince Elric. I say nothing of you—but look at Earl Saxif D'Aan. How can one so wise be such a simpleton? He lost everything—pride, love, power—because he had no humanity. And what humanity he had—why, it destroyed him."

"Some say it will destroy me," said Elric, "but perhaps 'humanity' is, indeed, what I seek to bring to Melnibonè, Count Smiorgan."

"Then you will destroy your kingdom!" said Smiorgan bluntly. "It is too late to save Melnibonè."

"Perhaps I can help you find what you seek, Prince Elric," said Duke Avan Astran quietly. "Perhaps there is time to save Melnibonè, if you feel such a mighty nation is in danger."

"From within," said Elric. "But I speak too freely."

"For a Melnibonèan, that is true."

"How did you come to hear of this city?" Elric wished to know. "No other man I have met in the Young Kingdoms has heard of R'lin K'ren A'a."

"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 forever, 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 Sorcerer's Isle while others went farther-blown by a great storm—and came at length to a larger island inhabited by dragons whose venom caused all it touched to burn ... to Melnibonè, 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 Melnibonèans had a culture unlike any others. The Melnibonèans 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 seek knowledge, Prince Elric, just as I do. Indeed, it could be said that if it had not been for your yearning for knowledge, your cousin would never have attempted to usurp the Ruby Throne of Melnibonè...."

"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 Melnibonè."

"You have been there recently?" Elric felt anger rise in him.

Duke Avan raised a hand. "I went there with a group of traders and I gave much for a particular 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 Melnibonè. 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 Melnibonè, 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 center 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 head...."

"Very well, take it. I will keep the map."

"When did you have it in mind to set off?"

Duke Avan's smile was sardonic. "We are already sailing around the southern coast to the Boiling Sea."

"There are few who have returned from that ocean," Elric murmured bitterly. He glanced across the
table and saw that Smiorgan 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, Smiorgan shrugged. "It seems it will be a little longer before I return to the Purple Towns."

II

The coast of Lormyr had disappeared in warm mist and Duke Avan Astran's schooner dipped its graceful prow toward the west and the Boiling Sea.

The Vilmirian crew of the schooner were used to a less demanding climate and more casual work than this and they went about their tasks, it seemed to Elric, with something of an aggrieved air.

Standing beside Elric in the ship's poop, Count Smiorgan Baldhead wiped sweat from his pate and growled: "Vilmirians are a lazy lot, Prince Elric. Duke Avan needs real sailors for a voyage of this kind. I could have picked him a crew, given the chance...."

Elric smiled. "Neither of us was given the chance, Count Smiorgan. It was a fait accompli. He's a clever man, Duke Astran."

"It is not a cleverness I entirely respect, for he offered us no real choice. A free man is a better companion than a slave, says the old aphorism."

"Why did you not disembark when you had the chance, then, Count Smiorgan?"

"Because of the promise of treasure," said the black-bearded man frankly. "I would return with honor to the Purple Towns. Forget you not that I commanded the fleet that was lost...."

Elric understood.

"My motives are straightforward," said Smiorgan. "Yours are much more complicated. You seem to desire danger as other men desire lovemaking or drinking-as if in danger you find forgetfulness."

"Is that not true of many professional soldiers?"

"You are not a mere professional soldier, Elric. That you know as well as I."

"Yet few of the dangers I have faced have helped me forget," Elric pointed out. "Rather they have strengthened the reminder of what I am-of the dilemma I face. My own instincts war against the traditions of my race." 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."

"But it is why you sail to R'lin K'ren A'a, eh? You hope that your remote ancestors had the answer you need?"

"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 Melnibonè. Time will have taken R'lin K'ren A'a away."

"And this statue, this Jade Man, Avan spoke of?"

"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, do you not, that it is all as Duke Avan says . . . ?" Count Smiorgan put a hand on Elric's arm. "Do you not?"

Elric stared ahead, into the writhing steam which rose from the sea. He shook his head.

"No, Count Smiorgan. I fear that it is all as Duke Avan says."

The wind blew whimsically and the schooner's passage was slow as the heat grew greater and the crew sweated still more and murmured fearfully. And upon each face, now, was a stricken look.

Only Duke Avan seemed to retain his confidence. He called to them all to take heart; he told them that they should all be rich soon; and he gave orders for the oars to be unshipped, for the wind could no longer be trusted. They grumbled at this, stripping off their shirts to reveal skins as red as cooked
lobsters. Duke Avan made a joke of that. But the Vilmirians no longer laughed at his jokes as they had done in the milder seas of their home waters.

Around the ship the sea bubbled and roared, and they navigated by their few instruments, 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. Count Smiorgan bore the heat silently and Duke Avan, seemingly oblivious to any discomfort, went cheerfully about the ship, calling encouragement to his men.

Count Smiorgan was fascinated by the waters. He had heard of them, but never crossed them. "These are only the outer reaches of this sea, Elric," he said in some wonder. "Think what it must be like at the middle."

Elric grinned. "I would rather not. As it is, I fear I'll be boiled to death before another day has passed."

Passing by, Duke Avan heard him and clapped him on the shoulder. "Nonsense, Prince Elric! The steam is good for you! There is nothing healthier!" Seemingly with pleasure, Duke Avan stretched his limbs. "It cleans all the poisons from the system."

Count Smiorgan offered him a glowering look and Duke Avan laughed. "Be of better cheer, Count Smiorgan. 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," said Count Smiorgan, but he smiled, infected by Avan's good humor.

But shortly thereafter the sea grew slowly less frenetic and the steam began to disperse until the heat became more tolerable.

At last they emerged into a calm ocean beneath a shimmering blue sky in which hung a red-gold sun.

But three of the Vilmirian crew had died to cross the Boiling Sea, and four more had a sickness in them which made them cough a great deal, and shiver, and cry out in the night.

For a while they were becalmed, but at last a soft wind began to blow and fill the schooner's sails and soon they had sighted their first land—a little yellow island where they found fruit and a spring of fresh water. Here, too, they buried the three men who had succumbed to the sickness of the Boiling Sea, for the Vilmirians had refused to have them buried in the ocean on the grounds that the bodies would be "stewed like meat in a pot."

While the schooner lay at anchor, just off the island, Duke Avan called Elric to his cabin and showed him, for a second time, that ancient map.

Pale golden sunlight filtered through the cabin's ports and fell upon the old parchment, beaten from the skin of a beast long since extinct, as Elric and Duke Avan Astran of Old Hrolmar bent over it.

"See," Duke Avan said, pointing. "This island's marked. 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," Smiorgan 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, could 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, his mother 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 Melnibonè. Instead he threatened to destroy what was left of that glory. They, like himself, had had no real place in this new age of the Young Kingdoms, but they 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, molded the character of its people with their somber pleasures, then-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 Melnibonè 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 ambience 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 might be the last of his kind and yet he was unlike his kind. Smiorgan 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.

III

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 Count Smiorgan 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 upward 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 gray thin semicircle 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 toward the poop deck before collapsing, the blood pumping from the obscene bole 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 Smiorgan's. The bald-pated man looked perturbed as he crouched against a rail on the starboard side. Elric had the impression of gray blurs whistling past, slashing into flesh and rigging, wood and canvas. Some fell to the deck and he saw that they were thin disks 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 disks and glimpsed something moving in the trees along the right bank. Then the disks 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 armor 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 disks 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 disks. 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 Melnibonè. 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 stilts 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," Smiorgan warned. "It has the habit of killing more than its master chooses."

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, plowing 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 labors all else depends! Nnuuurrr'r'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 Nnuuurrr'r'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, ruler of Melnibonè. My ancestors aided thee, Nnuuurrr'r'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, Nnuuurr'r'c'c'?"
"Hast thou no patron of thine own species? Some Lord of Chaos who can aid thee?"
"My patron is Arioch 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, Nnuuurr'r'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 Smiorgan ran 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," Smiorgan 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."

Smiorgan 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 islander. "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 Smiorgan 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 dazzling color—a rich blue, green, or red. They came spiraling down toward the ship and now both sides fell silent, staring skyward.

The flying things were like huge dragonflies and the brightness and richness of their coloring 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 backward 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?" Smiorgan asked.

Avan smiled grimly, indicating the farther 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.

Smiorgan glanced at it. "That blade looks as if it 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.

Count Smiorgan Baldhead looked at the new scum on the surface of the water and he shuddered.

IV

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. Smiorgan 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, Smiorgan 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," the black-bearded man 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 breeches. His sword was at his side. "We'll have to leave most of our men behind with the ship," he said regretfully. "We'll make what repairs they can while we press on to find R'lin K'ren A'a." He tugged his light cloak about him. "Is it my imagination, or is there an odd atmosphere?"

"We have already remarked on it," Smiorgan 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 had I 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 of 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 gray among the trees.
"Did you see what kind of creature it was?" Smiorgan 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," Smiorgan 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?"
Smiorgan asked, "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 toward 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'ren A'a.
V

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, gray, and green jade—the statue of a naked youth with a face of almost feminine beauty that turned sightless eyes toward 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'ren A’a 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'ren A’a. 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 colors 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'ren A’a 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 disk hummed past his head and smashed against a collapsing wall.

The next disk split the skull of a crewman and a third nicked Smiorgan's ear before they had thrown themselves flat among 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 disks clattered nearby, but it was plain that the party was temporarily out of sight of the reptiles. Smiorgan 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 something," Count Smiorgan said urgently. "Anything."

"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 that 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 Arioch—though it resembled no image of Arioch 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 disk had landed and chopped through a man’s forearm.

He drew Stormbringer and raised it, facing the jade statue.

"Arioch!" he cried. "Arioch-aid me!"

Black light burst from the blade and it began to sing, as if joining in Elric’s incantation.

"Arioch!"

Would the demon come? Often the patron of the kings of Melnibonè refused to materialize, claiming that more urgent business called him—business concerning the eternal struggle between Law and Chaos.

"Arioch!"

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 wrinkled.

"Arioch! 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 elsewhen...."

"I will not desert them."

"Thou art foolish, sweet Elric."

"Arioch-since Melnibonè’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 Smiorgan 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... ." Smiorgan 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," Smiorgan 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 center 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 disk protruding from his back. They broke into a panicky run. Ahead now was a red building of several stories 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," Smiorgan 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. Smiorgan saw it too. "What's that, friend Elric?"

Elric recognized the symbols as the written High Speech of old Melnibonè, 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, "of has it been there for a long while?"

Elric shrugged. "It could have been inscribed at any time during the past ten thousand years...."

Smiorgan walked up to the wall and reached out to touch it. "I would say it was fairly recent," he said. "The paint still being 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 Smiorgan 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?" Smiorgan asked.

Elric stooped and picked up one of the fragments. This had half a Melnibonèan 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!"

Smiorgan put a hand on his friend's arm and Elric shrugged it off. "I had hoped...."

Smiorgan cocked his bald 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 of men moved as silently as they 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
defracted 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!" Smiorgan 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 farther into the maze, the five others following
him.
"This smells of sorcery to me," Smiorgan 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.
"Smiorgan! Duke Avan!"
He heard voices murmuring, but they were not the voices of his friends.
"Count Smiorgan!"
But then the burly sea-lord faded away altogether and Elric was alone.

VI

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
multicolored 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 coloring 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 coloring.
"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 Smiorgan 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 a 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 Melnibonè. Yet these had a different cast to them which he could not at first define. Then he recognized what they had. It was tranquillity. 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 passersby, 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 despair that the gods brought"
Duke Avan nodded gravely. "I understand."
He turned back toward 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 Melnibonè, 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.
Smiorgan and one Vilmirian crewman stood there.
"Where are the others?" Avan demanded.
"Ask him," Smiorgan 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 the 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 farther 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!"

VII

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.

Smioorgan 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'rln Reyrl.
"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 center 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 the 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 quietly. "I am the last inheritor of that particular doom...."

J'osui C'rln Reyrl 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'rln Reyrl 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, Smiorgan came up to him. "What is it, Elric?"
Elric's hand clutched his head. "Our journey has been useless." Unconsciously he used the old Melnibonèan 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 Melnibonè, 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?"
Smiorgan 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'reln 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 Arioch 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'ren A'a."
"And when he walks away?"
"The curse goes with him."
Elric was thoughtful. If he did summon Arioch—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 Smiorgan 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 Arioch and lift the doom that is on R'lin K'ren 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 forever. 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 Arioch. 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 a threat in Elric's face of which even Elric was unaware.
"We must go outside," said J'osui C'reln Rey. "We must stand beneath the Jade Man."
"And when this is done," Elric asked suddenly, "how will we leave R'lin K'ren 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, Smiorgan, 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 pulled 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 swung around, twisting against Elric's grip, and plunging toward 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 as he ran to his master's aid. The action had been without thought.

"Now Arioch has his blood and his souls," he said coldly. "Let Arioch come!"
Smiorgan 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 forever."
"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 on this plane."
"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 toward the far corner of the square where Smiorgan and J'osui C'reln Reyr already 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 Reyre 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 Reyre—but a greater curse now lies upon your whole plane."
"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. Smiorgan blocked his ears.
"And now!" shouted J'osui C'reln Reyre. "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 any of the recent events. "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 Smiorgan.

The burly sea-lord turned away.

The sun began to rise. Gray 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 Melnibonè. But you thought otherwise. Now you know." With a sigh he got to his feet.

Smiorgan stood beside him. The sun was now touching the taller parts of the ruins. Smiorgan reached out and gripped his friend's shoulder.

"The Olab have vanished. I think they've had their fill of sorcery."

"Another man has been destroyed by me, Smiorgan. 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."

Smiorgan cleared his throat, but was otherwise 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."

Smiorgan began to stride across the square toward the east.

Elric tenderly picked up the body of Duke Avan and went toward 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 Melnibonè 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 to feed. In the dust of the city there was no earth to
Elric came back into the square and saw the body. For a moment, to Elric 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 Smiorgan returning. Elric looked up. "The Olab 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. "On the east side of the island."

It took them the rest of the day and all of that night to discover where J'osui C'reln Rey'r had hidden his boat. They pulled it down to the water in the diffused light of the morning and they inspected it. "It's a sturdy boat," said Count Smiorgan approvingly. "By the look of it, it's made of that same strange material we saw in the library of R'lin K'ren A'a." He climbed in and searched through the lockers.

Elric was staring back at the city, thinking of a man who might have become his friend, just as Count Smiorgan had become his friend. He had no friends, save Cymoril, in Melnibonè. He sighed. Smiorgan had opened several lockers and was grinning at what he saw there. "Pray the gods I return safe to the Purple Towns—we have what I sought! Look, Elric! Treasure! We have benefited from this venture, after all!"

"Aye..." Elric's mind was on other things. He forced himself to think of more practical matters. "But the jewels will not feed us, Count Smiorgan," he said. "It will be a long journey home."

"Home?" Count Smiorgan straightened his great back, a bunch of necklaces in either fist. "Melnibonè?"

"The Young Kingdoms. You offered to guest me in your house, as I recall."

"For the rest of your life, if you wish. You saved my life, friend Elric—now you have helped me save my honor."

"These past events have not disturbed you? You saw what my blade can do—to friends as well as enemies."

"We do not brood, we of the Purple Towns," said Count Smiorgan seriously. "And we are not fickle in our friendships. You know an anguish, Prince Elric, that I'll never feel—never understand—but I have already given you my trust. Why should I take it away again? That is not how we are taught to behave in the Purple Towns." Count Smiorgan brushed at his black beard and he winked. "I saw some cases of provisions among the wreckage of Avan's schooner. We'll sail around the island and pick them up."

Elric tried to shake the black mood from himself, but it was hard, for he had slain a man who had trusted him, and Smiorgan's talk of trust only made the guilt heavier.

Together they launched the boat into the weed-thick water and Elric looked back once more at the silent forest and a shiver passed through him. He thought of all the hopes he had entertained on the journey upriver and he cursed himself for a fool.

He tried to think back, to work out how he had come to be in this place, but too much of the past was confused with those singularly graphic dreams to which he was prone. Had Saxif D'Aan and the world of the blue sun been real? Even now, it faded. Was this place real? There was something dreamlike about it. It seemed to him he had sailed on many fateful seas since he had fled from Pikarayd. Now the promise of the peace of the Purple Towns was very dear to him.

Soon the time must come when he must return to Cymoril and the Dreaming City, to decide if he was ready to take up the responsibilities of the Bright Empire of Melnibonè, but until that moment he
would guest with his new friend, Smiorgan, and learn the ways of the simpler, more direct folk of Menii.

As they raised the sail and began to move with the current, Elric said to Smiorgan suddenly, "You trust me, then, Count Smiorgan?"

The sea-lord was a little surprised by the directness of the question. He fingered his beard. "Aye," he said at length, "as a man. But we live in cynical times, Prince Elric. Even the gods have lost their innocence, have they not?"

Elric was puzzled. "Do you think that I shall ever betray you-as-as I betrayed Avan, back there?"

Smiorgan shook his head. "It's not in my nature to speculate upon such matters. You are loyal, Prince Elric. You feign cynicism, yet I think I've rarely met a man so much in need of a little real cynicism." He smiled. "Your sword betrayed you, did it not?"

"To serve me, I suppose."

"Aye. There's the irony of it. Man may trust man, Prince Elric, but perhaps we'll never have a truly sane world until men learn to trust mankind. That would mean the death of magic, I think."

And it seemed to Elric, then, that his runesword trembled at his side, and moaned very faintly, as if it were disturbed by Count Smiorgan's words.
The Weird Of The White Wolf
By
Michael Moorcock

Prologue
THE DREAM OF EARL AUBEC

In which we learn something of how the Age of the Young Kingdoms emerged and of the part played by the Dark Lady, Myshella, whose fate would later be intertwined with that of Elric of Melnibone

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 hooves, 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 extin-guished the lantern which he had allowed to remain alight, drew greaves and hauberk on to him, placed his black plumed helm upon his head, put his broad-sword over his shoulder and sallied out of the stone tower which was all that remained whole of some an-cient 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 be-fore and that, he now realised, 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 occu-pant—the Dark Lady, a sorceress without mercy who commanded a legion of demons and other Chaos crea-tures.

He regarded the cliffs at midday and regarded the path leading upward 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 gen-eral 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 civilisation, no outpost of Man for many days' journey North, East, or West-can 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 only by the edge of the cliff. And, on the other side 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 indescrib-able 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 per-fectly flat, without blemish, green, obsidian, and re-flecting imperfectly the dancing Chaos-stuff from which he averted his eyes as much as he could. Kaneloon had many entrances, all dark and unwel-coming, 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 forever. 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 unsensed 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 battened it down, unslung 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 kept 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 recognisable 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 realised 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 realised 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 stylised 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 backward 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, multi-faceted eyes that, by their nature, seemed blank. Its face was angular and had a grey, metallic sheen. Most of its body was comprised 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 comprised 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 backward. 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 on to 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 ap-parently no real interest in Malador, the golem advanced like a blind man as the earl turned and leapt on to 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 can-not 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, leaped 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's 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 upward. 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. 'Gall 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 universe.'
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 as 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 farther?'
'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 is chin. 'Aye,' he said, 'Aye . .:
His great brows frowned deeply.
'New plains, new mountains, new seas—new popu-lations, 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 Lormyr! 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 adven-ture 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 on to 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 famil-lar, for it changed all the time. Now its tossing col-
ours were predominantly red and black. Tendrils of mauve and orange spiralled out of this and writhed
away.
Weird shapes flitted about in it, their outlines never clear, never quite recognisable. He said to her: 'The
Lords of Chaos rule this ter-ritory. 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 cause-way.'
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 win-dow. He did not look at her as he strode down the
causeway into the multicoloured mist. As she watched him disappear, she smiled to her-self. 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 un-willing 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 persua-
sion 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.
Yes 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 an-
other chamber to prepare for the transition of the castle to the new edge of the world. Thus were the seeds
sewn of the Age of the Young Kingdoms, the Age of Men, which was to produce the downfall of
Melnibone.

Book One
THE DREAMING CITY
Which tells how Elric came back to Imrryr, what he did there, and how, at last, his weird fell upon him . .
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ONE
"What's the hour?" The black-bearded man wrenched off his gilded helmet and flung it from him,
careless of where it fell. He drew off his leathern gauntlets and moved closer to the roaring fire, letting
the heat soak into his frozen bones. 'Midnight is long past,' growled one of the other armoured men who
gathered around the blaze. 'Are you still sure he'll come?'
'It's said that he's a man of his word, if that com-forts you.'
It was a tall, pale-faced youth who spoke. His thin lips formed the words and spat them out mali-ciously.
He grinned a Wolf-grin and stared the new arrival in the eyes, mocking him.
The newcomer turned away with a shrug. 'That's so—for all your irony, Yaris. He'll come.' He spoke as a
man does when he wishes to reassure himself. There were six men, now, around the fire. The sixth was
Smiorgan—Count Smiorgan Baldhead of the Purple Towns. He was a short, stocky man of fifty years with
a scarred face partially covered with a thick, black growth of hair. His eyes smouldered morosely and his
lumpy fingers plucked nervously at his rich-hilted longsword. His pate was hairless, giving him his
name, and over his ornate, gilded ar-mour hung a loose woollen cloak, dyed purple. Smiorgan said
thickly, 'He has no love for his cousin. He has become bitter. Yyrkoon sits on the Ruby Throne in his
place and has proclaimed him an outlaw and a traitor. Elric needs us if he would take his throne and his
bride back. We can trust him.' 'You're full of trust tonight, Count,' Yaris smiled thinly, 'a rare thing to
find in these troubled times. I say this—' He paused and took a long breath, stating at his comrades,
summing them up. His gaze flicked from lean-faced Dharmite of Jharkor to Fadan of Lor-myr who pursed
his podgy lips and looked into the fire.
, 'Speak up, Yaris,' petulantly urged the patrician-featured Vilmirian, Naclon. 'Let's hear what you have
to say, lad, if it's worth hearing.' Yaris looked towards Jiku the dandy, who yawned impolitely and
scratched his long nose. 'Well!' Smiorgan was impatient. 'What d'you say, Yaris?'
'I say that we should start now and' waste no more time waiting on Elric's pleasure! He's laughing at us in
some tavern a hundred miles from here—or else plotting with the Dragon Princes to trap us. For years we
have planned this raid. We have little time in which to strike—our fleet is too big, too notice-able. Even if
Elric has not betrayed us, then spies will soon be running eastwards to warn the Dragons that there is a
fleet massed against them. We stand to win a fantastic fortune—to vanquish the greatest merchant city in
the world—to reap immeasurable riches—or horrible death at the hands of the Dragon Princes, if we wait
overlong. Let's bide our time no more and set sail before our prize hears of our plan and brings up
reinforcements!'

'You always were too ready to mistrust a man, Yaris.' King Naclon of Vilmir spoke slowly, Care-fully-
distastefully eyeing the taut-featured youth. 'We could not reach Imrryr without Elric's knowledge of the
maze-channels which lead to its secret ports. If Elric will not join us-then our en-deavour will be fruitless-
hopeless. We need him. We must wait for him—or else give up our plans and return to our homelands.'

'At least I'm willing to take a risk,' yelled Yaris, anger lancing from his slanting eyes. 'You're getting old-
all of you. Treasures are not won by care and forethought but by swift slaying and reckless attack.' 'Fool!' Dharmit's voice rumbled around the fire-flooded hall. He laughed wearily. 'I spoke thus in my youth-and
lost a fine fleet soon after. Cunning and Elric's knowledge will win us Imrryr-that and the mightiest fleet
to sail the Sighing Sea since Melnibone's banners fluttered over all the nations of the Earth. Here we are-
the most powerful Sea Lords in the world, masters, every one of us, of more than a hundred swift
vessels. Our names are feared and famous-our fleets ravage the coasts of a score of lesser nations. We
hold power!' He clenched his great fist and shook it in Yaris' face. His tone became more level and he
smiled viciously, glaring at the youth and choosing his words with precision. 'But all this is worthless-
meaningless-without the power which Elric has. That is the power of knowledge-of sorcery, if I must use
the cursed word. His fathers knew of the maze which guards Imrryr from sea-attack. And his fathers
passed that secret on to him. Imrryr, the Dreaming City, dreams in peace—and will continue to do so
unless we have a guide to help us steer a course through the treacher-ous waterways which lead to her
harbours. We need Elric—we know it, and he knows it. That's the truth!' 'Such confidence, gentlemen, is
warming to the heart.' There was irony in the heavy voice which came from the entrance to the hall. The
heads of the six Sea Lords jerked towards the doorway. Yaris' confidence fled from him as he met the
eyes of Elric of Melnibon. They were old eyes in a fine featured, youthful face. Crimson eyes which
stared into eternity. Yaris shuddered, turned his back on Elric, preferring to look into the bright glare of
the fire.

Elric smiled warmly as Count Smiorgan gripped his shoulder. There was a certain friendship be-tween
the two. He nodded condescendingly to the other four and walked with lithe grace towards the fire. Yaris
stood aside and let him pass. Elric was tall, broad-shouldered and slim-hipped. He wore his long hair
bunched and pinned at the nape of his neck and, for an obscure reason, affected the dress of a Southern
barbarian. He had long, knee-length boots of soft doe-leather, a breastplate of strangely wrought silver, a
jerkin of chequered blue and white linen, britches of scarlet wool and a cloak of rustling green velvet. At
his hip rested his runesword of black iron- the feared Stormbringer, forged by ancient and alien sorcery.
His bizarre dress was tasteless and gaudy, and did not match his sensitive face and long-fingered, almost
delicate hands, yet he flaunted it since it emphasised the fact that he did not belong in any company-that
he was an outsider and an outcast. But, in reality, he had little need to wear such outlandish gear-for his
eyes and skin were enough to mark him. Elric, Last Lord of Melniborne, was a pure albino who drew
his power from a secret and terrible source.

Smiorgan sighed. 'Well, Elric, when do we raid Imrryr?'

Elric shrugged. 'As soon as you like; I care not.

Give me a little time in which to do certain things.' 'Tomorrow? Shall we sail tomorrow?' Yaris said
hesitantly, conscious of the strange power dormant in the man he had earlier accused of treachery. Elric
smiled, dismissing the youth's statement. 'Three days' time,' he said. 'Three-or more., 'Three days! But
Imrryr will be warned of our presence by then!' Fat, cautious Fadan spoke. 'I'll be in the Dreaming City in
less than a day,' Elric said softly, with finality.

Smiorgan shrugged. 'If you say so, I'll believe it- but why this necessity to visit the city ahead of the
fleet?
'raid?'
'I have my own compunctions, Count Smiorgan. But worry not, I shan't betray you. I'll lead the raid myself, be sure of that.' His dead-white face was lighted eerily by the fire and his red eyes smouldered.
One lean hand firmly gripped the hilt of his runesword and he appeared to breathe more heavily. 'Imrryr fell, in spirit, five hundred years ago—she will fall completely soon-for ever! I have a little debt to settle. This is my only reason for aiding you. As you know I have made only a few conditions— that you raze the city to the ground and a certain man and woman are not harmed. I refer to my cousin Yyrkoon and his sister Cymoril...' Yaris' thin lips felt uncomfortably dry. Much of his blustering manner resulted from the early death of his father. The old sea-king had died-leaving young Yaris as the new ruler of his lands and his fleets. Yaris was not at all certain that he was capable of commanding such a vast kingdom—
tried to appear more confident than he actually felt. Now he said: 'How shall we hide the fleet, Lord Elric?' The Melnibonean acknowledged the question. I'll hide it for you,' he promised. 'I go now to do this— but make sure all your men are off the ships first— will you see to it, Smiorgan?'
'Aye,' rumbled the stocky count.
He and Elric departed from the hall together, leaving five men behind; five men who sensed an air of icy doom hanging about the overheated hall. 'How could he hide such a mighty fleet when we, who know this fjord better than any, could find nowhere?' Dharmit of Jharkor said bewilderedly. None answered him.
They waited, tensed and nervous, while the fire flickered and died untended. Eventually Smiorgan returned, stamping noisily on the boarded floor. There was a haunted haze of fear surrounding him; an almost tangible aura, and he was shivering, terribly. Tremendous, racking undulations swept up his body and his breath came short.
'Well? Did Elric hide the fleet—all at once? What did he do?' Dharmit spoke impatiently, choosing not to heed Smiorgan's ominous condition. 'He has hidden it.' That was all Smiorgan said, and his voice was thin, like that of a sick man, weak from fever.
Yaris went to the entrance and tried to stare beyond the fjord slopes where many campfires burned, tried to make out the outlines of ships' masts and rigging, but he could see nothing.
'The night mist's too thick,' he murmured, 'I can't tell whether our ships are anchored in the fiord or not.' Then he gasped involuntarily as a white face loomed out of the clinging fog. 'Greetings, Lord Elric,' he stuttered, noting the sweat on the Melnibonean's strained features.
Elric staggered past him, into the hall. 'Wine,' he mumbled, 'I've done what's needed and it's cost me hard.'
Dharmit fetched a jug of strong Cadsandrian wine and with a shaking hand poured some into a carved wooden goblet. Wordlessly he passed the cup to Elric who quickly drained it. 'Now I will sleep,' he said, stretching himself into a chair and wrapping his green cloak around him. He dosed his disconcerting crimson eyes and fell into a slumber born of utter weariness.
Fadan scurried to the door, closed it and pulled the heavy iron bar down.
None of the six slept much that night and, in the morning, the door was unbarred and Elric was missing from the chair. When they went outside, the mist was so heavy that they soon lost sight of one another, though scarcely two feet separated any of them.
Elric stood with his legs astraddle on the shingle of the narrow beach. He looked back at the entrance to the fjord and saw, with satisfaction, that the mist was still thickening, though it lay only over the fjord itself, hiding the mighty fleet. Elsewhere, the weather was clear and overhead a pale winter sun shone sharply on the black rocks of the rugged cliffs which dominated the coastline. Ahead of him the sea rose and fell monotonously, like the chest of a sleeping water-giant, grey and pure, glinting in the cold sunlight. Elric fingered the raised runes on the hilt of his black broadsword and a steady north wind blew into the voluminous folds of his dark green cloak, swirling it around his tall, lean frame. The albino felt fitter than he had done on the previous night when he had expended all his strength in conjuring the mist. He was well-versed in the art of nature-wizardry, but he did not have the reserves of power which
the Sorcerer Emperors of Melnibone had possessed when they had ruled the world. His ancestors had passed their knowledge down to him—but not their mystic vitality and many of the spells and secrets that he had were unusable, since he did not have the reservoir of strength, either of soul or of body, to work them. But for all that, Elric knew of only one other man who matched his knowledge—his cousin Yyrkoon. His hand gripped the hilt tighter as he thought of the cousin who had twice betrayed his trust, and he forced himself to concentrate on his present task—the speaking of spells to aid him on his voyage to the Isle of the Dragon Masters whose only city, Imryr the Beautiful, was the object of the Sea Lords’ massing. Drawn up on the beach, a tiny sailing-boat lay—Elric’s own small ship, sturdy and far stronger, far older—than it appeared. The brooding sea flung surf around its timbers as the tide withdrew, and Elric re-allowed that he had little time in which to work his helpful sorcery. His body tensed and he blanked his conscious mind, summoning secrets from the dark depths of his soul. Swaying, his eyes staring unseeingly, his arms jerking out ahead of him and making Unholy signs in the air, he began to speak in a sibilant monoton. Slowly the pitch of his voice rose, resembling the scarcely heard shriek of a distant gale as it comes closer—then, quite suddenly, the voice rose higher until it was howling wildly to the skies and the air began to tremble and quiver. Shadow-shapes began slowly to form and they were never still but darted around Elric’s body as, stiff-legged, he started forward towards his boat. His voice was inhuman as it howled insistently, summoning the wind elementals—the sylphs of the breeze; the sharnahs, makers of gales, the h’Haar, shanns, builders of whirlwinds—hazy and formless, they eddied around him as he summoned their aid with the Mien words of his forefathers who had, ages before, made unthinkable pacts with the elemental., in order to procure their services. Still stiff-limbed, Elric entered the boat and, like an automaton, his fingers ran up the sail and set it. Then a great wave erupted out of the placid sea, rising higher and higher until it towered over the vessel. With a surging crash, the water smashed down on the boat, lifted it and bore it out to sea. Sitting blank-eyed in the stem, Elric still crooned his hideous song of sorcery as the spirits of the air plucked at the sail and sent the boat flying over the water faster than any mortal ship could speed. And all the while, the deafening, unholy shriek of the released elementals filled the air about the boat as the shore vanished and open sea was all that was visible.

TWO

So it was, with wind-demons for shipmates, that Elric, last Prince of the Royal line of Melnibone, returned to the last city still ruled by his own race—the last city and the final remnant of Melnibonean architecture. The cloudy pink and subtle yellow tints of her nearer towers came into sight within a few hours of Elric’s leaving the fjord and just off-shore of the Isle of the Dragon Masters the elementals left the boat and fled back to their secret haunts among the peaks of the highest mountains in the world. Elric awoke, then, from his trance, and regarded with fresh wonder the beauty of his own city’s delicate towers which were visible even so far away, guarded still by the formidable sea-wall with its great gate, the five-doored maze and the twisting, high-walled channels, of which only one led to the inner harbour of Imryr.

Elric knew that he dare not risk entering the harbour by the maze, though he knew the route perfectly. He decided, instead, to land the boat further up the coast in a small inlet of which he had knowledge. With sure, capable hands, he guided the little craft towards the hidden inlet which was obscured by a growth of shrubs loaded with ghastly blue berries of a type decidedly poisonous to men since their juice first turned one blind and then slowly mad. This berry, the nodoil, grew only on Imryr as did other rare and deadly plants. Light, low-hanging cloud wisps streamed slowly across the sun-painted sky, like fine cobwebs caught by a sudden breeze. All the world seemed blue and gold and green and white, and Elric, pulling his boat up on the beach, breathed the clean, sharp air of winter and savoured the scent of decaying leaves and rotting undergrowth. Somewhere a bitch-fox barked her pleasure to her mate and
Elric regretted the fact that his depleted race no longer appreciated natural beauty, preferring to stay close to their city and spend many of their days in drugged slumber. It was not the city which dreamed, but its overcivilised in. habitants. Elric, smelling the rich, clean winter. scents, was wholly glad that he had his birthright and did not rule the city as he had been born to do. Instead, Yyrkoon, his cousin, sprawled on the Ruby Throne of Imrryr the Beautiful and hated El-tic because he knew that the albino, for all his dis-gust with crowns and rulership, was still the rightful King of the Dragon Isle and that he, Yyrkoon, was an ‘usurper, not elected by Elric to the throne, as Melnibonean tradition demanded. But Elric had better reasons for hating his cousin. For those reasons the ancient capital would fall in all its magnificent splendour and the last fragment of a glorious Empire would be obliterated as the pink, the yellow, the purple and white towers crumbled-if Elric had his way and the Sea Lords were success-ful. On foot, Elric strode inland, towards Imrryr, and as he covered the miles of soft turf, the sun cast an ochre pall over the land and sank, giving way to a dark and moonless night, brooding and full of evil portent.

At last he came to the city. It stood out in stark black silhouette, a city of fantastic magnificence, in conception and in execution. It was the oldest city in the world, built by artists and conceived as a work of art rather than a functional dwelling place, but Elric knew that squalor lurked in many narrow streets and that the Lords of Imrryr left many of the towers empty and uninhabited rather than let the bastard population of the city dwell therein. There were few Dragon Masters left; few who would claim Melnibonean blood.

Built to follow the shape of the ground, the city had an organic appearance, with winding lanes spiralling to the crest of the hill where stood the castle, tall and proud and many-spired, the final, crowning masterpiece of the ancient, forgotten artist who had built it. But there was no life-sound ema-nating from Imrryr the Beautiful, only a sense of sop-orific desolation. The city slept-and the Dragon Masters and their ladies and their special slaves dreamed drug-induced dreams of grandeur and in-credible horror while the rest of the population, or-dered by curfew, tossed on tawdry mattresses and tried not to dream at all.

Elric, his hand ever near his sword-hilt, slipped through an unguarded gate in the city wall and be-gan to walk cautiously through the unlighted streets, moving upwards, through the winding lanes, towards Yyrkoon's great palace.

Wind sighed through the empty rooms of the Dragon towers and sometimes Elric would have to withdraw into places where the shadows were deeper when he heard the tramp of feet and a group of guards would pass, their duty being to see that the curfew was rigidly obeyed. Often he would hear wild laughter echoing from one ;of the towers, still ablaze with bright torchlight which flung strange, disturbing shadows on the walls; often, too, he would hear a chilling scream and a frenzied, idiot's yell as some wretch of a slave died in obscene agony to please his master.

Elric was not appalled by the sounds and the dim sights. He appreciated them. He was still a Melnibonean-their rightful leader if he chose to regain his powers of kinship-and though' he had an obscure urge to wander and sample the less sophisticated pleasures of the outside world, ten thousand years of a cruel, brilliant and malicious culture was behind him and the pulse of his ancestry beat strongly in his deficient veins.

Elric knocked impatiently upon the heavy, black-wood door. He had reached the palace and now stood by a small back entrance, glancing cautiously around him, for he knew that Yyrkoon had given the guards orders to slay him if he entered Imrryr. A bolt squealed on the other side of the door and it moved silently inwards. A thin, seamed face con-fronted Elric.

'Is it the king?' whispered the man, peering out into the night. He was a tall, extremely thin individ-ual with long, gnarled limbs which shifted awk-wardly as he moved nearer, straining his beady eyes to get a glimpse of Elric.

'It's Prince Elric,' the albino said. 'But you forget, Tanglebones, my friend, that a new king sits on the Ruby Throne.'
Tanglebones shook his head and his sparse hair fell over his face. With a jerking movement he brushed it back and stood aside for Elric to enter. 'The Dragon Isle has but one king—and his name is Elric, whatever usurper would have it otherwise.' Elric ignored this statement, but he smiled thinly and waited for the man to push the bolt back into place.

'She still sleeps, sire,' Tanglebones murmured as he climbed unlit stairs, Elric behind him. 'I guessed that,' Elric said. 'I do not underestimate my good cousin's powers of sorcery.' Upwards, now, in silence, the two men climbed until at last they reached a corridor which was aflare with dancing torchlight. The marble walls reflected the flames and showed Elric, crouching with Tanglebones behind a pillar, that the room in which he was interested was guarded by a massive archer—a eunuch by the look of him—who was alert and wakeful.

The man was hairless and fat, his blue-black gleaming armour tight on his flesh, but his fingers were curled around the string of his short, bone bow and there was a slim arrow resting on the string. Elric guessed that this man was one of the crack eunuch archers, a member of the Silent Guard, Imrryr's finest company of warriors.

Tanglebones, who had taught the young Elric the arts of fencing and archery, had known of the guard's presence and had prepared for it. Earlier he had placed a bow behind the pillar. Silently he picked it up and, bending it against his knee, strung it. He fitted an arrow to the string, aimed it at the right eye of the guard and let fly—just at the eunuch turned to face him. The shaft missed. It clattered against the man's gorget and fell harmlessly to the reed-strewn stones of the floor.

So Elric acted swiftly, leaping forward, his rune-sword drawn and its alien power surging through him. It howled in a searing arc of black steel and cut through the bone bow which the eunuch had hoped would deflect it. The guard was panting and his thick lips were wet as he drew breath to yell. As he opened his mouth, Elric saw what he had expected, the man was tongueless and was a mute. His own shortsword came out and he just managed to parry Elric's next thrust. Sparks flew from the iron and Stormbringer bit into the eunuch's finely edged blade, he staggered and fell back before the nigro-mantic sword which appeared to be endowed with a life of its own. The clatter of metal echoed loudly up and down the short corridor and Elric cursed the fate which had made the man turn at the crucial moment. Grimly, swiftly, he broke down the eunuch's clumsy guard.

The eunuch saw only a dim glimpse of his opponent behind the black, whirling blade which appeared to be so light and which was twice the length of his own stabbing sword. He wondered, frenziedly, who his attacker could be and he thought he recognised the face. Then a scarlet eruption obscured his vision, he felt searing agony clutch at his face and then, philosophically, for eunuchs are necessarily given to a certain fatalism, he realised that he was to die.

Elric stood over the eunuch's bloated body and tugged his sword from the corpse's skull, wiping the mixture of blood and brains on his late opponent's cloak. Tanglebones had wisely vanished. Elric could hear the clatter of sandalled feet rushing up the stairs. He pushed the door open and entered the room which was lit by two small candles placed at either end of a wide, richly tapestried bed. He went to the bed and looked down at the raven-haired girl who lay there.

Elric's mouth twitched and bright tears leapt into his strange red eyes. He was trembling as he turned back to the door, sheathed his sword and pulled the bolts into place. He returned to the bedside and knelt down beside the sleeping girl. Her features were as delicate and of a similar mould as Elric's own, but she had an added, exquisite beauty. She was breathing shallowly, in a sleep induced not by natural weariness but by her own brother's evil sorcery.

Elric reached out and tenderly took one fine-fingered hand in his. He put it to his lips and kissed it. 'Cymoril,' he murmured, and an agony of longing throbbed in that name. 'Cymoril—wake up.' The girl did not stir, her breathing remained shal-low and her eyes remained shut. Elric's white features twisted and his red eyes blazed as he shook in terrible and passionate rage. He gripped the hand, so limp and nerveless, like the hand of a corpse; gripped it until he had to stop himself for fear that he would crush the delicate fingers. A shouting soldier began to beat at the door. Elric replaced the hand on the girl's
firm breast and stood up. He glanced uncomprehendingly at the door. A sharper, colder voice interrupted the soldier's yelling.

'What is happening-has someone tried to see my poor sleeping sister?'

'Yyrkoon, the black hellspawn,' said Elric to himself.

Confused babblings from the soldier and Yyrkoon's voice raised as he shouted through the door. 'Whoever is in there-you will be destroyed a thousand times when you are caught. You cannot escape. If my good sister is harmed in any way-then you will never die, I promise you that. But you will pray to your Gods that you could!'

'Yyrkoon, you paltry rabble-you cannot threaten one who is your equal in the dark arts. It is I, Elric-your rightful master. Return to your rabbit hole before I call down every evil power upon, above, and under the Earth to blast you!'

Yyrkoon laughed hesitantly. 'So you have returned again to try to waken my sister. Any such attempt will not only slay her-it will send her soul into the deepest hell-where you may join it, willingly!' By Arnara's six breasts-you it will be who samples the thousand deaths before long.'

'Enough of this.' Yyrkoon raised his voice. 'Soldiers-I command you to break this door down-and take that traitor alive. Elric-there are two things you will never again have-my sister's love and the Ruby Throne. Make what you can of the little time available to you, for soon you will be grovelling to me and praying for release from your soul's agony!' Elric ignored Yyrkoon's threats and looked at the narrow window to the room. It was just large enough for a man's body to pass through. He bent down and kissed Cymoril upon the lips, then he went to the door and silently withdrew the bolts. There came a crash as a soldier flung his weight against the door. It swung open, pitching the man forward to stumble and fall on his face. Elric drew his sword, lifted it high and chopped at the warrior's neck. The head sprang from its shoulders and Elric yelled loudly in a deep, rolling voice. 'Arioch! Arioch! I give you blood and souls-only aid me now! This man I give you, mighty King of Hell-aid your servant, Elric of Melnibone!' Three soldiers entered the room in a bunch. Elric struck at one and sheared off half his face. The man screamed horribly.

'Arioch, Lord of the Darks-I give you blood and souls. Aid me, evil one!' In the far corner of the gloomy room, a blacker mist began slowly, to form. But the soldiers pressed closer and Elric was hard put to hold them back. He was screaming the name of Arioch, Lord of the Higher Hell, incessantly, almost unconsciously as he was pressed back further by the weight of the war-riors' numbers. Behind them, Yyrkoon mouthed in rage and frustration, urging his men, still, to take Eltic alive. This necessity gave Elric some small ad- vantage-that and the runescword Stormbringer which was glowing with a strange black luminousness and the shrill howling it gave out was grating into the ears of those who heard it. Two more corpses now littered the carpeted floor of the chamber, their blood soaking into the fine fabric. "Blood and souls [or my lord Arioch!']' The dark mist heaved and began to take shape, Elric spared a look towards the corner and shud-dered despite his inurement to hell-born horror. The warriors now had their backs to the thing in the corner and Elric was by the window. The amor-phous mass that was a less than pleasant manifesta-tion of Elric's fickle patron God, heaved again and Elric made out its intolerably alien shape. Bile flooded into his mouth and as he drove the soldiers towards the thing which was sinuously flooding for-ward he fought against madness.

Suddenly, the soldiers seemed' to sense that there was something behind them. They turned, four of them, and each screamed insanely as the black hor-ror made one final rush to engulf them. Arioch crouched over them, sucking out their souls. Then, slowly, their bones began to give and snap and still shrieking bestially the men flopped like obnoxious invertebrates upon the floor: their spines broken, they still lived. Elric turned away, thankful for once that Cymoril slept, and leapt to the window ledge. He looked down and realised with despair that he was not going to escape by that route after all. Several hundred feet lay between him and the ground. He rushed to the door where Yyrkoon, his eyes wide with fear, was trying to drive Arioch back. Arioch was already fading.

Elric pushed past his cousin, spared a final glance for Cymoril, then ran the way he had come, his feet
flipping on blood. Tanglebones met him at the head of the dark stairway. 'What has happened, King Elric-what's in there?' Elric seized Tanglebones by his lean shoulder and made him descend the stairs. 'No time,' he panted, 'but we must hurry while Yyrkoon is still engaged with his current problem. In five days' time Imrryr will experience a new phase in her history-perhaps the last. I want you to make sure that Cymoril is safe. Is that dear?'

'Aye, Lord, but...'

They reached the door and Tanglebones shot the bolts and opened it. 'There is no time for me to say anything else. I must escape while I can. I will return in five days- with companions. You will realise what I mean when that time comes. Take Cymoril to the Tower of D'a'ruputna-and await me there.'

Then Elric was gone, soft-footed, running into the night with the shrieks of the dying still ringing through the blackness after him.

THREE

Elric stood unspeaking in the prow of Count Smior-gan's flagship. Since his return to the fjord and the fleet's subsequent sailing for open sea, he had spoken only orders, and those in the tersest of terms. The Sea Lords muttered that a great hate lay in him, that it festered his soul and made him a dangerous man to have as comrade or enemy; and even Count Smior-gan avoided the moody albino.

The reaver prows struck eastward and the sea was black with light ships dancing on the bright water in all directions; they looked like the shadow of some enormous sea-bird flung on the water. Nearly half a thousand fighting ships stained the ocean-all of them of similar form, long and slim and built for speed rather than battle, since they were for coast-raiding and trading. Sails were caught by the pale sun; bright colours of fresh canvas-orange, blue, black, purple, red, yellow, light green or white. And every ship had sixteen or more rowers-each rower a fighting man. The crews of the ships were also the warriors who would attack Imrryr-there was no wastage of good man-power since the sea-nations were underpopulated, losing hundreds of men each year in their regular raids.

In the centre of the great fleet, certain larger vessels sailed. These carried great catapults on their decks and were to be used for storming the sea wall of Imrryr. Count Smiorgan and the other Lords looked at their ships with pride, but Elric only stared ahead of him, never sleeping, rarely moving, his white face lashed by salt spray and wind, his white hand tight upon his swordhilt. The reaver ships ploughed steadily eastwards- forging towards the Dragon Isle and fantastic wealth-or hellish horror. Relentlessly, doom-driven, they beat onwards, their oars splashing in unison, their sails bellying taut with a good wind. Onwards they sailed, towards Imrryr the Beauti-ful, to rape and plunder the world's oldest city.

Two days after the fleet had set sail, the coastline of the Dragon Isle was sighted and the rattle of arms replaced the sound of oars as the mighty fleet hove to and prepared to accomplish what sane men thought impossible.

Orders were bellowed from ship to ship and the fleet began to mass into battle formation, then the oars creaked in their grooves and ponderously, with sails now furled, the fleet moved forward again. It was a clear day, cold and fresh, and there was a tense excitement about all the men, from Sea Lord to galley hand, as they considered the immediate fu-ture and what it might bring. Serpent prows bent towards the great stone wall which blocked off the first entrance to the harbour. It was nearly a hundred feet high and towers were built upon it- more functional than the lace-like spires of the city which shimmered in the distance, behind them. The ships of Imrryr were the only vessels allowed to pass through the great gate in the centre of the wall and the route through the maze-the exact entrance even-was a well-kept secret from outsiders. On the sea wall, which now loomed tall above the fleet, amazed guards scrambled frantically to their posts. To them, threat of attack was well-nigh un-thinkable, yet here it was-a great fleet, the greatest they had ever seen-come against Imrryr the Beauti-full They took to their posts, their yellow cloaks and kilts rustling, their bronze armour rattling, but they moved with bewildered reluctance
as if refusing to accept what they saw. And they went to their posts with desperate fatalism, knowing that even if the ships never entered the maze itself, they would not be alive to witness the reavers' failure. Dyvim Tarkan, Commander of the Wall, was a sensitive man who loved life and its pleasures. He was highbrowed and handsome, with a thin wisp of beard and a tiny moustache. He looked well in the bronze armour and high-plumed helmet; he did not want to die. He issued terse orders to his men and, with well-ordered precision, they obeyed him. He lis-tened with concern to the distant shouts from the ships and he wondered what the first move of the reavers would be. He did not wait long for his an-swer.

A catapult on one of the leading vessels twanged throatily and its throwing arm rushed up, releasing a great rock which sailed, with every appearance of leisurely grace, towards the wall. It fell short and splashed into the sea which frothed against the stones of the wall.

Swallowing hard and trying to control the shake in his voice, Dyvim Tarkan ordered his own catapult to discharge. With a thudding crash the release rope was cut and a retaliatory iron ball went hurtling towards the enemy fleet. So tight-packed were the ships that the ball could not miss-it struck flail on the deck of the flagship of Dharmit of Jharkor and crushed the timbers in. Within seconds, accompanied by the cries of maimed and drowning men, the ship had sunk and Dharmit with it. Some of the crew were taken aboard other vessels but the wounded were left to drown.

Another catapult sounded and this time a tower full of archers was squarely hit. Masonry erupted outwards and those who still lived fell sickeningly to die in the foam-tipped sea lashing the wall. This time, angered by the deaths of their comrades Imrryrian archers sent back a stream of slim arrow into the enemy's midst. Reavers howled as red fletched shafts buried themselves thirstily in flesh But reavers returned the arrows liberally and soot only a handful of men were left on the wall as fur ther catapult rocks smashed into towers and men destroying their only war-machine and part of the wall besides. Dyvim Tarkan still lived, though red blood stained his yellow tunic and an arrow shaft pro truded from his left shoulder. He still lived when the first ram-ship moved intractably towards the great wooden gate and smashed against it, weakening it. A second ship sailed in beside it and, between them, they stoke in the gate and glided through the entrance; the first non-Imrryrian ships ever to do such a thing. Perhaps it was outraged horror that tradition had been broken which caused poor Dyvim Tarkan to lose his footing at the edge of the wall and fall screaming down to break his neck on the deck of Count Smiorgan's flagship as it sailed tri umphantly through the gate.

Now the ram-ships made way for Count Smiorg-an's craft, for Elric had to lead the way through the maze. Ahead of them loomed five tall entrances black gaping maws all alike in shape and size. Elric pointed to the third from the left and with short strokes the oarsmen began to paddle the ship into the dark mouth of the entrance. For some minutes, they sailed in darkness. 'Flares!' shouted Elric. 'Light the flares!' Torches had already been prepared and these were now lighted. The men saw that they were in a vast tunnel hewn out of natural rock which twisted tortuously in all directions.

'Keep close,' Elric ordered and his voice was mag-nified a score of times in the echoing cavern. Torch-light blazed and Elric's Face was a mask of shadow and frisking light as the torches threw up long tongues of flame on the bleak roof. Behind him, men could be heard muttering in awe and, as more craft entered the maze and lit their own torches, Elric could see some torches waver as their bearers trembled in superfurious fear. Elric felt some dis-comfort as he glanced through the flickering shadows and his eyes, caught by torchflare, gleamed fever-bright.

With dreadful monotony, the oars splashed on-wards as the tunnel widened and several more cave-mouths came into sight. 'The middle entrance,' Elric ordered.' The steersman in the stern nodded and guided the ship towards the entrance Elric had indi-cated. Apart from the muted murmur of some men and the splash of oars, there was a grim and ominous silence in the towering cavern.

Elric stared down at the cold, dark water and shuddered. Eventually they moved once again into bright sun-light and the men looked Upwards, marvelling at the height of the great walls above them. Upon those walls squatted more yellow-clad, bronze-armoured
archers and as Count Smiorgan's vessel led the way out of the black caverns, the torches still burning in the cool winter air, arrows began to hurtle down into the narrow canyon, biting into throats and limbs. 'Faster!' howled Elric. 'Row faster—speed is our only weapon now!'

With frantic energy the oarsmen bent to their sweeps and the ships began to pick up speed even though Imrryrian arrows took heavy toll of the reaver crewmen. Now the high-walled channel ran straight and Elric saw the quays of Imrryr ahead of him.

"Faster! Faster? Our prize is in sight?" Then, suddenly, the ship broke past the wails and was in the calm waters of the harbour, facing the warriors drawn up on the quay. The ship halted, waiting for reinforcements to plunge out of the channel and join them. When twenty ships were through, Elric gave the command to attack the quay and now Stormbringer howled from its scabbard. The flagship's port side thudded against the quay as arrows rained down upon it. Shafts whistled all around Elric but, miraculously, he was unscathed as he led a bunch of yelling rearers on to land. Imrryrian axe-men bunched forward and confronted the reavers, but it was plain that they had little spirit for the fight—they were too disconcerted by the course which events had taken.

Elric's black blade struck with frenzied force at the throat of the leading axe-man and sheared off his head. Howling demonically now that it had again tasted blood, the sword began to writh in Elric's grasp, seeking fresh flesh in which to bite. There was a hard, grim smile on the albino's colourless lips and his eyes were narrowed as he smacked without discrimination at the warriors.

He planned to leave the fighting to those he had led to Imrryr, for he had other things to do—and quickly. Behind the yellow-garbed soldiers, the tall towers of Imrryr rose, beautiful in their soft and scintillating colours of coral pink and powdery blue, of gold and pale yellow, white and subtle green. One such tower was Elric's objective—the tower of D'a'rputna where he had ordered Tanglebones to take Cymoril, knowing that in the confusion this would be possible.

Elric hacked a blood-drenched path through those who attempted to halt him and men fell back, screaming horribly as the runesword drank their souls. Now Elric was past them, leaving them to the bright blades of the reavers who poured on to the quayside, and was running up through the twisting streets, his sword slaying anyone who attempted to stop him. Like a white-faced ghoul he was, his clothing tattered and bloody, his armour chipped and scratched, but he ran speedily over the cobble-stones of the twisting streets and came at last to the slender tower of hazy blue and soft gold—the Tower of D'a'rupnut. Its door was open, showing that someone was inside, and Elric rushed through it and entered the large ground-floor chamber. No one greeted him. 'Tanglebones!' he yelled, his voice roaring loudly even in his own ears. 'Tanglebones—are you here?' He leapt up the stairs in great bounds, calling his servant's name. On the third floor he stopped sud-denly, hearing a low groan from one of the rooms. 'Tanglebones—is that you?' Elric strode towards the room, hearing a strangled gasping. He pushed open the door and his stomach seemed to twist within him as he saw the old man lying upon the bare floor of the chamber, striving vainly to stop the flow of blood which gouted from a great wound in his side. 'What's happened man—where's Cymoril?' Tanglebones' old face twisted in pain and grief.

'She—I brought her here, master, as you ordered. But—' he coughed and blood dribbled down his wizened chin, 'but-Prince Yyrkoon—he he appre-hended me—must have followed us here. He-struck me down and took Cymoril back with him—said she'd be-safe in the Tower of B'aal'nezbett. Mas-ter—I'm sorry...'

'So you should be,' Elric retorted savagely. Then his tone softened. 'Do not worry, old friend—I'll avenge you and myself. I can still reach Cymoril now I know where Yyrkoon has taken her. Thank you for trying, Tanglebones—may your long journey down the last river be uneventful.'

He turned abruptly on his heel and left the cham-ber, running down the stairs and out into the street again.

The Tower of B'aal'nezbett was the highest tower in the Royal Palace. Elric knew it well, for it was there that his ancestors had studied their dark sor-cceries and conducted frightful experiments. He shuddered as...
he thought what Yyrkoon might be doing to his own sister. The streets of the city seemed hushed and strangely deserted, but Elric had no time to ponder why this should be so. Instead he dashed towards the palace, found the main gate unguarded and the main entrance to the building deserted. This too was unique, but it constituted luck for Elric as he made his way upwards, climbing familiar ways towards the topmost tower. Finally, he reached a door of shimmering black crystal which had no bolt or handle to it. Frenziedly, Elric struck at the crystal with his sorcerous blade but the crystal appeared only to flow and re-form. His blows had no effect.

Elric racked his mind, seeking to remember the single alien word which would make the door open. He dared not put himself in the trance which would have, in time, brought the word to his lips, instead he had to dredge his subconscious and bring the word forth. It was dangerous but there was little else he could do. His whole frame trembled as his face twisted and his brain began to shake. The word was coming as his vocal chords jerked in his throat and his chest heaved. He coughed the word out and his whole mind and body ached with the strain. Then he cried: 'I command thee-open!'

He knew that once the door opened, his cousin would be aware of his presence, but he had to risk it. The crystal expanded, pulsating and seething, and then began to flow out. It flowed into nothingness, into something beyond the physical universe, beyond time. Elric breathed thankfully and passed into the Tower of B’aal’nezbett. But now an eerie fire, chilling and mind-shattering, was licking around Elric as he struggled up the steps towards the central chamber. There was a strange music surrounding him, uncanny music which throbbed and sobbed and pounded in his head. Above him he saw a leering Yyrkoon, a black runesword also in his hand, the mate of the one in Elric's own grasp.

'Hellspawn!' Elric said thickly, weakly, 'I see you have recovered Mournblade—well, test its powers against its brother if you dare. I have come to destroy you, cousin.' Stormbringer was giving forth a peculiar moaning sound which sighed over the shrieking, unearthly music accompanying the licking, chilling fire. The runesword writhed in Elric's fist and he had difficulty in controlling it. Summoning all his strength he plunged up the last few steps and aimed a wild blow at Yyrkoon. Beyond the eerie fire bubbled yel-low-green lava, on all sides, above and beneath. The two men were surrounded only by the misty fire and the lava which lurked beyond it—they were outside the Earth and facing one another for a final battle. The lava seethed and began to ooze inwards, dispersing the fire. The two blades met and a terrible shrieking roar went up. Elric felt his whole arm go numb and it tingled sickeningly. Elric felt like a puppet. He was no longer his own master—the blade was deciding his actions for him. The blade, with Elric behind it, roared past its brother sword and cut a deep wound in Yyrkoon's left arm. He howled and his eyes widened in agony. Mournblade struck back at Stormbringer, catching Elric in the very place he had wounded his cousin. He sobbed in pain, but continued to move upwards, now wounding Yyrkoon in the right side with a blow strong enough to have killed any other man.

Yyrkoon laughed then—laughed like a gibbering demon from the foulest depths of Hell. His sanity had broken at last and Elric now had the advantage. But the great sorcery which his cousin had conjured was still in evidence and Elric felt as if a giant had grasped him,—was crushing him as he pressed his advantage. Yyrkoon's blood spouting from the wound and covering Elric, also. The lava was slowly withdrawing and now Elric saw the entrance to the central chamber. Behind his cousin another form moved. Elric gasped. Cymoril had awakened and, with horror on her face, was shrieking at him. The sword still swung in a black arc, cutting down Yyrkoon's brother blade and breaking the usurper's guard.

'Elric!' cried Cymoril desperately. 'Save me—save me now, else we are doomed for eternity.' Elric was puzzled by the girl's words. He could not understand the sense of them. Savagely he drove Yyrkoon upwards towards the chamber. 'Elric—put Stormbringer away. Sheath your sword or we shall part again.'
But even if he could have controlled the whistling blade, Elric would not have sheathed it. Hate dominated his being and he would sheathe it in his cousin's evil heart before he put it aside. Cymoril was weeping, now, pleading with him. But Elric could do nothing. The drooling, idiot thing which had been Yyrkoon of Imrryr, turned at its sister's cries and stared leeringly at her. It cackled and reached out one shaking hand to seize the girl by her shoulder. She struggled to escape, but Yyrkoon still had his evil strength. Taking ad- vantage of his opponent's distraction, Elric cut deep through his body, almost severing the trunk from the waist.

And yet, incredibly, Yyrkoon remained alive, drawing his vitality from the blade which still clashed against Elric's own rune-carved sword. With a final push he flung Cymoril forward and she died screaming on the point of Stormbringer. Then Yyrkoon laughed one final cackling shriek and his black soul went howling down to hell. The tower resumed its former proportions, all fire and lava gone. Elric was dazed-unable to marshal his thoughts. He looked down at the dead bodies of the brother and the sister. He saw them, at first, only as corpses—a man's and a woman's.

Then dark truth dawned on his clearing brain and he moaned in grief, like an animal. He had slain the girl he loved. The runesword fell from his grasp, stained by Cymoril's lifeblood, and clattered un-heeded down the stairs. Sobbing now, Elric dropped beside the dead girl and lifted her in his arms. 'Cymoril,' he moaned, his whole body throbbing.

'Cymoril—I have slain you.'

FOUR

Elric looked back at the roaring, crumbling, tumbling, flame-spewing ruins of Imrryr and drove his sweating oarsmen faster. The ship, sail still un-furled, bucked as a contrary current of wind caught it and Elric was forced to cling to the ship's side lest he be tossed overboard. He looked back at Imrryr and felt a tightness in his throat as he realised that he was truly rootless, now; a renegade and a woman-slayer, though involuntarily the latter. He had lost the only woman he had loved in his blind lust for re-venge. Now it was finished—everything was finished. He could envisage no future, for his future had been bound up with his past and now, effectively, that past was flaming in ruins behind him. Dry sobs eddied in his chest and he gripped the ship's rail yet more firmly.

His mind reluctantly brooded on Cymoril. He had laid her corpse upon a couch and had set fire to the Tower. Then he had gone back to find the reavers successful, straggling back to their ships loaded with loot and girl-slaves, jubilantly firing the tall and beautiful, buildings as they went. He had caused to be destroyed the last tangible sign that the grandiose, magnificent Bright Empire had ever existed. He felt that most of himself was gone with it.

Elric looked back at Imrryr and suddenly a greater sadness overwhelmed him as a tower, as deli-cate and as beautiful as fine lace, cracked and toppled with flames leaping about it. He had shattered the last great monument to the earlier race—his own race. Men might have learned again, one day, to build strong, slender towers like those of Imrryr, but now the knowledge was dying with the thundering chaos of the fall of the Dream-ing City and the fast-diminishing race of Melnibone. But what of the Dragon Masters? Neither they nor their golden ships had met the attacking reavers—only their foot-soldiers had been there to defend the city. Had they hidden/their ships in some secret waterway and fled inland when the reavers overran the city? They had put up too short a fight to be truly beaten. It had been far too easy. Now that the ships were retreating, were they planning some sud-den retaliation? Elric felt that they might have such a plan—perhaps a plan concerning dragons. He shud-dered. He had told the others nothing of the beasts which Melniboneans had controlled for centuries. Even now, someone might be unlocking the gates of the underground Dragon Caves. He turned his mind away from the unnerving prospect.

As the fleet headed towards open sea, Elrics eyes were still looking sadly towards Imrryr as he paid silent homage to the city of his forefathers and the dead Cymoril. He felt hot bitterness sweep over him again as the memory of her death upon his own sword-point came sharply to him. He recalled her
warning, when he had left her to go adventuring in the Young Kingdoms, that by putting Yyrkoon on the Ruby Throne as Regent, by relinquishing his power for a year, he doubled them both. He cursed himself. Then a muttering, like a roll of distant thunder, spread through the fleet and he wheeled sharply, intent on discovering the cause of the consternation.

Thirty golden-sailed Melnibonean battle barges had appeared on both sides of the harbour, issuing from two mouths of the maze. Elric realised that they must have hidden in the other channels, waiting to attack the fleet when they returned, satiated and depleted. Great war-galleys they were, the last ships of Melnibone and the secret of their building was unknown. They had a sense of age and slumbering might about them as they rowed swiftly, each with four or five banks of great sweeping oars, to en-circle the raven ships.

Elric's fleet seemed to shrink before his eyes until it seemed as though it were a bobbing collection of wood-shavings against the towering splendour of the shimmering battle barges. They were well-equipped and flesh for a fight, whereas the weary reapers were intensely battle-tired. There was only one way to save a small part of the fleet, Elric knew. He would have to conjure a witch-wind for sailpower. Most of the flagships were around him and he now occupied that of Yaris, for the youth had got himself wildly drunk and had died by the knife of an Melnibonean slave wench. Next to Elric's ship was Count Smiorgan's and the stocky Sea Lord was frowning, knowing full well that he and his ships, for all their superior numbers, would not stand up to a sea-fight. But the conjuring of winds great enough to move many vessels was a dangerous thing, for it released colossal power and the elementals who controlled the winds were apt to turn upon the sorcerer himself if he was not more than careful. But it was the only chance, otherwise the rams which sent ripples from the golden prows would smash the reaver ships to driftwood.

Steeling himself, Elric Began to speak the ancient and terrible, many-vowelled names of the beings who existed in the air. Again, he could not risk the trance-state, for he had to watch for signs of the elementals turning upon him. He called to them in a speech that was sometimes high like the cry of a gannet, sometimes rolling like the roar of shore-bound surf, and the dim shapes of the Powers of the Wind began to flit before his blurred gaze. His heart throbbed horribly in his ribs and his legs felt weak. He summoned all his strength and conjured a wind which shrieked wildly and chaotically about him, rocking even the huge Melnibonean ships back and forth. Then he directed the wind and sent it into the sails of some forty of the reaver ships. Many he could not save for they lay even outside his wide range. But forty of the craft escaped the smashing rams and, amidst the sound of howling wind and sun-dered timbers, leapt on the waves, their masts creaking as the wind cracked into their sails. Oars were torn from the hands of the rowers, leaving a wake of broken wood on the white salt trail which boiled behind each of the reaver ships.

Quite suddenly, they were beyond the slowly dawning circle of Melnibonean ships and careering madly across the open sea, while all the crews sensed a difference in the air and caught glimpses of strange, soft-shaped forms around them. There was a disconcerting sense of evil about the beings which aided them, an awesome alienness.

Smiorgan waved to Elric and grinned thankfully. 'We're safe, thanks to you, Elric!' he yelled across the water. 'I knew you'd bring us luck!' Elric ignored him.

Now the Dragon Lords, vengeance-bent, gave chase. Almost as fast as the magic-aided reaver fleet were the golden barges of Imrryr, and some reaver galleys, whose masts cracked and split beneath the force of the wind driving them, were caught. Elric saw mighty grappling hooks of dully gleaming metal swing out from the decks of the Imrryrian galleys and thud with a moan of wrenched timber into those of the fleet which lay broken and power-less behind him. Fire leapt from catapults upon the Dragon Lords' ships and careered towards many a fleeing reaver craft. Seating, foul-stinking flame hissed like lava across the decks and ate into planks like vitriol into paper. Men shrieked, beating vainly at brightly burning clothes, some leaping into water which would not extinguish the fire. Some sank beneath the sea and it was possible to trace their descent as, flaming even below the surface, men and ships fluttered to
the bottom like blazing, tired moths. Reaver decks, untouched by fire, ran red with reaver blood as the enraged Imrryrian warriors swung down the grappling ropes and dropped among the raiders, wielding great swords and battle-axes and wreaking terrible havoc amongst the sea-ravens. Imrryrian arrows and Imrryrian javelins swooped from the towering decks of Imrryrian gal-leys and tore into the panicky men on the smaller ships.

All this Elric saw as he and his vessels began slowly to overhaul the leading Imrryrian ship, flag-galley of Admiral Magum Colim, commander of the Melnibonean fleet.

Now Elric spared a word for Count Smiorgan. 'We've outrun them!' he shouted above the howling wind to the next ship where Smiorgan stood star-ing wide-eyed at the sky. 'But keep your ships heading westwards or we're finished!'

But Smiorgan did not reply. He still looked sky-ward and there was horror in his eyes; in the eyes of a man who, before this, had never known the quiver-ing bite of fear. Uneasily, Elric let his own eyes follow the gaze of Smiorgan. Then he saw them. They were dragons, without doubt! The great reptiles were some miles away, but Elric knew the stamp of the huge flying beasts. The average wing-span of these near-extinct monsters was some thirty feet across. Their snake-like bodies, beginning in a narrow-snouted head and terminating in a dreadful whip of a tail were forty feet long and although they did not breathe the legendary fire and smoke, Elric knew that their venom was combustible and could set fire to wood or Fabric on contact. Imrryrian warriors rode the dragon backs. Armed with long, spear-like goads, they blew strangely shaped horns which sang out curious notes over the turbulent sea and calm blue sky. Nearing the golden fleet, now half-a-league away, the leading dragon sailed down and circled towards the huge golden flag-galley, its wings making a sound like the crack of lightning as they beat through the air. The grey-green, scaled monster hovered over the golden ship as it heaved in the white-foamed turbu-lent sea. Framed against the cloudless sky, the dragon was in sharp perspective and it was possible for Elric to get a clear view of it. The goad which the Dragon Master waved to Admiral Magum Colim was a long, slim spear upon which the strange pen-nant of black and yellow zig-zag lines was, even at this distance, noticeable. Elric recognised the insig-nia on the pennant.

Dyvim Tvar, friend of Elric's youth, Lord of the Dragon Caves, was leading his charges to claim ven-geance for Imrryr the Beautiful.

Elric howled across the water to Smiorgan. 'These are your main danger, now. Do what you can to stave them off!' There was a rattle of iron as the men prepared, near-hopelessly, to repel the new menace. Witch-wind would give little advantage over the fast-flying dragons. Now Dyvim Tvar had evidently conferred with Magum Colim and his goad lashed out at the dragon throat. The huge reptile jerked upwards and began to gain altitude. Eleven other dragons were behind it, joining it now. With seeming slowness, the dragons began to beat relentlessly towards the reaver fleet as the crewmen prayed to their own Gods for a miracle. They were doomed. There was no escaping the fact. Every reaver ship was doomed and the raid had been fruitless.

Elric could see the despair in the faces of the men as the masts of the reaver ships continued to bend under the strain of the shrieking witch-wind. They could do nothing, now, but die... Elric fought to rid his mind of the swirling uncer-tainty which filled it. He drew his sword and felt the pulsating, evil power which lurked in rune-carved Stormbringer. But he hated that power now-for it had caused him to kill the only human he had cher-is hed. He realised how much of his strength he owed to the black-iron sword of his fathers and how weak he might be without it. He was an albino and that meant that he lacked the vitality of a normal human being. Savagely, futilely, as the mist in his mind was replaced by red fear, he cursed the pretensions of re-venge he had held, cursed the day when he had agreed to lead the raid on Imrryr and most of all he bitterly vilified dead Yyrkoon and his twisted envy which had been the cause of the whole doom-ridden course of events.

But it was too late now for curses of any kind. The loud slapping of beating dragon wings filled the air and the monsters loomed over the fleeing reaver craft. He had to make some kind of decision-though he had no love for life, he refused to die by the hands of his own people. When he died, he promised
himself, it would be by his own hand. He made his decision, hating himself. He called off the witch-wind as the dragon venom seared down and struck the last ship in line. He put all his powers into sending a stronger wind into the sails of his own boat while his bewildered comrades in the suddenly becalmed ships called over the water, inquiring desperately the reason for his act. Elric’s ship was moving fast, now, and might just escape the dragons. He hoped so. He deserted the man who had trusted him, Count Smiorgan, and watched as venom “poured from the sky and engulfed him in blazing green and scarlet flame. Elric fled, keeping his mind from thoughts of the future, and sobbed aloud, that proud prince of ruins; and he cursed the malevolent Gods for the black day when idly, for their amusement, they had spawned men.

Behind him, the last reaver ships flared into sudden appalling brightness and, although half-thankful that they had escaped the fate of their comrades, the crew looked at Elric accusingly. He sobbed on, not heeding them, great griefs racking his soul. A night later, off the coast of an island called Pan Tang, when the ship was safe from the dreadful re-criminations of the Dragon Masters and their beasts, Elric stood brooding in the stern while the men eyed him with fear and hatred, muttering of betrayal and heartless cowardice. They appeared to have forgot-ten their own fear and subsequent safety., Elric brooded, and he held the black runesword in his two hands. Stormbringer was more than an ordinary battle-blade, this he had known for years, but now he realised that it was possessed of more sen-tience than he had imagined. The frightful thing had used its wielder and had made Elric destroy Cymoril. Yet he was horribly dependent upon it: he realised this with soul-rending certainty. But he feared and resented the sword’s power—hated it bit-terly for the chaos it had wrought in his brain and spirit. In an agony of uncertainty he held the blade in his hands and forced himself to weigh the factors involved. Without the sinister sword, he would lose pride—perhaps even life—but he might know the soothing tranquillity of pure rest; with it he would have power and strength—but the sword would guide him into a doom-racked future. He would sa-vour power—but never peace.

He drew a great, sobbing breath and, blind mis-giving influencing him, threw the sword into the moon-drenched sea. Incredibly, it did not sink. It did not even float on the water. It fell point forwards into the sea and stuck there, quivering as if it were embedded in timber. It remained throbbing in the water, six inches of its blade immersed, and began to give off a weird devil-scream—a howl of horrible malevolence. With a choking curse Elric stretched out his slim, whitely gleaming hand, trying to recover the sen-tient hellblade. He stretched further, leaning far out over the rail. He could not grasp it—it lay some feet from him, still. Gasping, a sickening sense of defeat overwhelming him, he dropped over the side and plunged into the bone-chilling water, striking out with strained, grotesque strokes, towards the hovering sword. He was beaten—the sword had won. He reached it and put his fingers around the hilt. At once it settled in his hand and Elric felt strength seep slowly back into his aching body. Then he real-ised that he and the sword were interdependent, for though he needed the blade, Stormbringer, parasitic, required a user—without a man to wield it, the blade was also powerless.

‘We must be bound to one another then,’ Elric murmured despairingly. ‘Bound by hell-forged chains and fate-haunted circumstance. Well, then—let it be thus so-and men will have cause to tremble and flee when they hear the names of Elric of Melni-bone and Stormbringer, his sword. We are two of a kind-produced by an age which has deserted us. Let us give this age cause to hate us!’ Strong again, Elric sheathed Stormbringer and the sword settled against his side; then, with powerful strokes, he began to swim towards the island while the men he left on the ship breathed with relief and speculated whether he would live or perish in the bleak waters of that strange and nameless sea...

Book Two
WHILE THE GODS LAUGH
I, while the gods laugh, the world’s vortex am;
Maelstrom of passions in that hidden sea Whose waves of all-time lap the coasts of me, And in small compass the dark waters cram.
Mervyn Peake, Shapes and Sounds, 1941.

ONE
One night, as Elric sat moodily drinking alone in a tavern, a wingless woman of Myyrrhn came gliding out of the storm and rested her lithe body against him.
Her face was thin and frail-boned, almost as white as Elric's own albino skin, and she wore flimsy pale-green robes which contrasted well with her dark red hair.
The tavern was ablaze with candle-flame and alive with droning argument and gusty laughter, but the words of the woman of Myyrrhn came clear and liquid, carrying over the zesty din.
'I have sought you twenty days,' she said to Elric who regarded her insolently through hooded crimson eyes and lazed in a high-backed chair; a silver wine-cup in his long-fingered right hand and his left on the pommel of his sorcerous runesword Storm-bringer.
'Twenty days,' murmured the Melnibonean softly, speaking as if to himself; deliberately rude. 'A long time for a beautiful and lonely woman to be wandering the world.' He opened his eyes a trifle wider and spoke to her directly: 'I am Elric of Melnibone, as you evidently know. I grant no favours and ask none. Bearing this in mind, tell me why you have sought me for twenty days.'
Equably, the woman replied, undaunted by the albino's supercilious tone. 'You are a bitter man, Elric; I know this also-and you are grief-haunted for reasons which are already legend. I ask you no favours-but bring you myself and a proposition. What do you desire most in the world?'
'Peace,' Elric told her simply. Then he smiled ironically and said: 'I am an evil man, lady, and my destiny is hell-doomed, but I am not unwise, nor un-fair. Let me remind you a little of the truth. Call this legend if you prefer-I do not care. 'A woman died a year ago, on the blade of my trusty sword.' He patted the blade sharply and his eyes were suddenly hard and self-mocking. 'Since then I have courted no woman and desired none. Why should I break such secure habits? If asked; I grant you that I could speak poetry to you, and that you have a grace and beauty which moves me to interesting speculation, but I would not! Oad any part of my dark burden upon one as exquisite as you. Any relationship between us, other than formal, would necessitate my unwilling shifting of part of that burden.' He paused for an instant and then said slowly: 'I should admit that I scream in my sleep sometimes and am often tortured by incommunicable self-loathing. Go while you can, lady, and forget Elric for he can bring only grief to your soul.' With a quick movement he turned his gaze from her and lifted the silver wine-cup, draining it and re-plenishing it from a jug at his side. 'No,' said the wingless Woman of Myyrrhn calmly, 'I will not. Come with me.'
She rose and gently took Elric's hand. Without knowing why, Elric allowed himself to be led from the tavern and out into the wild, rainless storm which howled around the Filkharian city of Raschil. A protective and cynical smile hovered about his mouth as she drew him towards the sea-lashed quay-side where she told him her name. Shaarilla of the Dancing Mist, wingless daughter of a dead necromancer-a cripple in her own strange land, and an outcast. - Elric felt uncomfortably drawn to this calm-eyed woman who wasted few words. He felt a great surge of emotion well within him; emotion, he had never thought to experience again, and he wanted to take her finely moulded shoulders and press her slim body to his. But he quelled the urge and studied her marble delicacy and her wild hair which flowed in the wind about her head.
Silence rested comfortably between them while the chaotic wind howled mournfully over the sea. Here, Elric could ignore the warm stink of the city and he felt almost relaxed. At last, looking away from him towards the swirling sea, her green robe curling in the wind, she said: 'You have heard, of course, of the
Dead Gods' Book?'
Elric nodded. He was interested, despite the need he felt to disassociate himself as much as possible from his fellows. The mythical book was believed to contain knowledge which could solve many problems that had plagued men for centuries—it held a holy and mighty wisdom which every sorcerer desired to sample. But it was believed destroyed, hurled into the sun when the Old Gods were dying in the cosmic wastes which lay beyond the outer reaches of the solar system. Another legend, apparently of later origin, spoke vaguely of the dark ones who had interrupted the book's sunward coursing and had stolen it before it could be destroyed. Most scholars discounted this legend, arguing that, by this time, the book would have come to light if it did still exist.

Elric made himself speak flatly so that he appeared to be disinterested when he answered Shaarilla.

'Why do you mention the Book?' 'I know that it exists,' Shaarilla replied intensely, 'and I know where it is. My father acquired the knowledge just before he died. Myself—And the book—you may have if you will help me get it.' Could the secret of peace be contained in the book? Elric wondered. Would he, if he found it, be able to dispense with Stormbringer? 'If you want it so badly that you seek my help,' he said eventually, 'why do you not wish to keep it?' 'Because I would be afraid to have such a thing perpetually in my custody—it is not a book for a woman to own, but you are possibly the last mighty nigromancer left in the world and it is fitting that you should have it. Besides, you might kill me to obtain it—I would never be safe with such a volume in my hands. I need only one small part of its wisdom.' What is that?' Elric inquired, studying her patti-clan beauty with a new pulse stirring within him. Her mouth set and the lids fell over her eyes. 'When we have the book in our hands—then you will have your answer. Not before.'

'This answer is good enough,' Elric remarked quickly, seeing that he would gain no more information at that stage. 'And the answer appeals to me.' Then, half before he realised it, he seized her shoulders in his slim, pale hands and pressed his colourless lips to her scarlet mouth.

Elric and Shaarilla rode westwards, towards the Silent Land, across the lush plains of Shazaar where their ship had berthed two days earlier. The border country between Shazaar and the Silent Land was a lonely stretch of territory, unoccupied even by peasant dwellings; a no-man's land, though fertile and rich in natural wealth. The inhabitants of Shazaar had deliberately refrained from extending their borders further, for though the dwellers in the Silent Land rarely ventured beyond the Marshes of the Mist, the natural borderline between the two lands, the inhabitants of Shazaar held their unknown neighbours in almost superstitious fear. The journey had been clean and swift, though ominous, with several persons who should have known nothing of their purpose warning the tray-tilers of nearing danger. Elric brooded, recognising the signs of doom but choosing to ignore them and communicate nothing to Shaarilla who, for her part, seemed content with Elric's silence. They spoke little in the day and so saved their breath for the wild love-play of the night.

The thud of the two horses' hooves on the soft turf, the muted creak and darer of Elric's harness and sword, were the only sounds to break the stillness of the clear winter day as the pair rode steadily, nearing the quaking, treacherous trails of the Marshes of the Mist.

One gloomy night, they reached the borders of the Silent Land, marked by the marsh, and they halted and made camp, pitching their silk tent on a hill overlooking the mist-shrouded wastes. Banked like black pillows against the horizon, the clouds were ominous. The moon lurked behind them, sometimes piercing them sufficiently to send a pale tentative beam down on to the glistening marsh or its ragged, grassy frontiers. Once, a moonbeam glanced off silver, illuminating the dark silhouette of Elric, but, as if repelled by the sight of a living creature on that bleak hill, the moon once again slunk behind its clouds, leaving Elric thinking deeply. Leaving Elric in the darkness he desired. Thunder rumbled over distant mountains, sound-ing like the laughter of far-off Gods. Elric shivered, pulled his blue cloak more tightly about him, and continued to stare over the misted lowlands. Shaarilla came to him soon, and she stood beside him, swathed in a thick woollen cloak which could not keep out all the damp chill in the air.

'The Silent Land,' she murmured. 'Are all the stories true, Elric? Did they teach you of it in old
Melnibone?"
Elric frowned, annoyed that she had disturbed his thoughts. He turned abruptly to look at her, staring blankly through his crimson-irised eyes for a moment and then saying flatly:
'The inhabitants are unhuman and feared. This I know. Few men ventured into their territory, ever. None have returned, to my knowledge. Even in the days when Melnibone was a powerful Empire, this was one nation my ancestors never ruled—nor did they desire to do so. The denizens of the Silent Land are said to be a dying race, far more evil than my ancestors ever were, who enjoyed dominion over the Earth long before men gained any sort of power. They rarely venture beyond the confines of their ter-ritory, nowadays, encompassed as it is by marshland and mountains.'
Shaarilla laughed, then, with little humour. 'So they are unhuman are they, Elric? Then what of my people, who are related to them? What of me, Elric?' 'You're human enough for me,' replied Elric insouciantly, looking her in the eyes. She smiled. 'No compliment,' she said, 'but I'll take it for one—until your glib tongue finds a better.' That night they slept restlessly and, as he had predicted, Elric screamed agonisingly in his turbulent, terror-filled sleep and he called a name which made Shaarilla's eyes fill with pain and jealousy. That name was Cymoril. Wide-eyed in his grim sleep, Elric seemed to be staring at the one he named, speaking other words in a sibilant language which made Shaarilla block her ears and shudder.
The next morning, as they broke camp, folding the rustling fabric of the yellow silk tent between them, Shaarilla avoided looking at Elric directly but later, since he made no move to speak, she asked him a question in a voice which shook somewhat. It was a question which she needed to ask, but one which came hard to her lips. 'Why do you desire the Dead Gods' Book, Elric? What do you believe you will find in it?'
Elric shrugged, dismissing the question, but she repeated her words less slowly, with more insistence. 'Very well then,' he said eventually. 'But it is not easy to answer you in a few sentences. I desire, if you like, to know one of two things.'
'And what is that, Elric?'
The tall albino dropped the folded tent to the grass and sighed. His fingers played nervously with the pommel of his runesword. 'Can an ultimate God exist—or not? That is what I need to know, Shaarilla, if my life is to have any direction at all. 'The Lords of Law and Chaos now govern our lives. But is there some being greater than them?' Shaarilla put a hand on Elric's arm. 'Why must you know?' she said. 'Despairingly, sometimes, I seek the comfort of a benign God, Shaarilla. My mind goes out, lying awake at night, searching through black barrenness for something—anything—which will take me to it, warm me, protect me, tell me that there is order in the chaotic tumble of the universe; that it is consistent, this precision of the planets, not simply a brief, bright spark of sanity in an eternity of malevolent anarchy.'
Elric sighed and his quiet tones were tinged with hopelessness. 'Without some confirmation of the order of things, my only comfort is to accept the anarchy. This way, I can revel in chaos and know, without fear, that we are all doomed from the start—that our brief existence is both meaningless and damned. I can accept then, that we are more than forsaken, because there was never anything there to forsake us. I have weighed the proof, Shaarilla, and must believe that anarchy prevails, in spite of all the laws which seemingly govern our actions, our sorcery, our logic. I see only chaos in the world. If the Book we seek tells me otherwise, then I shall gladly believe it. Until then, I will put my trust only in my sword and myself.'
Shaarilla stared at Elric strangely. 'Could not this philosophy of yours have been influenced by recent events in your past? Do you fear the consequences of your murder and treachery? Is it not more comforting for you to believe in deserts which are rarely just?'
Elric turned on her, crimson eyes blazing in anger, but even as he made to speak, the anger fled him and he dropped his eyes towards the ground, huddling them from her gaze. 'Perhaps,' he said lamely. 'I do not know. That is the only real truth, Shaarilla. I do not know:
Shaarilla nodded, her face lit by an enigmatic sympathy; but Elric did not see the look she gave him, for
his own eyes were full of crystal tears which flowed down his lean, white face and took his strength and will momentarily from him. 'I am a man possessed,' he groaned, 'and without this devil-blade I carry I would not be a man at all.'

TWO
They mounted their swift, black horses and spurred them with abandoned savagery down the hillside towards the Marsh, their cloaks whipping behind them as the wind caught them, lashing them high into the air. Both rode with set, hard faces, re-fusing to acknowledge the aching uncertainty which lurked within them.

And the horses' hooves had splashed into quaking bogland before they could halt.
Cursing, Elric tugged hard on his reins, pulling his horse back on to firm ground. Shaarilla, too, fought her own panicky stallion and guided the beast to the safety of the turf.

'Hoo do we cross?' Elric asked her impatiently.

'There was a map-' Shaarilla began hesitantly.

'Where is it?'

'It-it was lost. I lost it. But I tried hard to memo-rise it. I think I'll be able to get us safely across.' 'How did you lose it-and why didn't you tell me of this before?' Elric stormed.

'I'm sorry, Elric-but for a whole day, just before I found you in that tavern, my memory was gone. Somehow, I lived through a day without knowing it-and when I awoke, the map was missing.' Elric frowned. 'There is some force working against us, I am sure,' he muttered, 'but what it is, I do not know.' He raised his voice and said to her. 'Let us hope that your memory is not too faulty, now. These Marshes are infamous the world over, but by all accounts, only natural hazards wait for us.' He grimaced and put his fingers around the hilt of his runesword. 'Best go first, Shaarilla, but stay close. Lead the way.'

She nodded, dumbly, and turned her horse's head towards the north, galloping along the bank until she came to a place where a great, tapering rock loomed. Here, a grassy path, four feet or so across, led out into the misty marsh. They could only see a little distance ahead, because of the dingy mist, but it seemed that the trail remained firm for some way. Shaarilla walked her horse on to the path and jolted forward at a slow trot, Elric following immediately behind her.

Through the swirling, heavy mist which shone whitely, the horses moved hesitantly and their riders had to keep them on short, tight rein. The mist padded the marsh with silence and the gleaming, watery fens around them stank with foul putrescence. No animal scurried, no bird shrieked above them. Everywhere was a haunting, fear-laden silence which made both horses and riders uneasy. With panic in their throats, Elric and Shaarilla rode on, deeper and deeper into the unnatural Marshes of the Mist, their eyes wary and even their nostrils quivering for scent of danger in the stinking morass.

Hours later, when the sun was long past its zenith, Shaarilla's horse reared, screaming and whinnying. She shouted for Elric, her exquisite features twisted in fear as she stared into the mist. He spurred his own bucking horse forwards and joined her. Something moved, slowly, menacingly in the dingy whiteness. Elric's right hand whipped over to his left side and grasped the hilt of Stormbringer. The blade shrieked out of its scabbard, a black fire gleaming along its length and alien power flowing from it into Elric's arm and through his body. A weird, unholy light leapt into Elric's crimson eyes and his mouth was wrenched into a hideous grin as he forced the frightened horse further into the skulking mist.

'Arioch, Lord of the Seven Darks, be with me now!' Elric yelled as he made out the shifting shape ahead of him. It was white, like the mist, yet somehow darker. It, stretched high above Elric's head. It was nearly eight feet tall and almost as broad. But it was still only an outline, Seeming to have no face or limbs-only movement: darting, malevolent move-ment! But Arioch, his patron god, chose not to hear. Elric could feel his horse's great heart beating between his legs as the beast plunged forward under its rider's iron control. Shaarilla was screaming something behind him, but he could not hear the words.
Elric hacked at the white shape, but his sword met only mist and it howled angrily. The fear-crazed horse would go no further and Elric was forced to dismount.

'Keep hold of the steed,' he shouted behind him to Shaarilla and moved on light feet towards the darting shape which hovered ahead of him, blocking his path.

Now he could make out some of its saliencies. Two eyes, the colour of thin, yellow wine, were set high in the thing's body, though it had no separate head. A mouthing, obscene slit, filled with fangs, lay just beneath the eyes. It had no nose or ears that Elric could see. Four appendages sprang from its upper parts and its lower body slithered along the ground, unsupported by any limbs. Elric's eyes ached as he looked at it. It was incredibly disgusting to behold and its amorphous body gave off a stench of death and decay. Fighting down his fear, the albino inched forward warily, his sword held high to parry any thrust the thing might make with its arms. Elric recognised it from a description in one of his grimoires. It was a Mist Giant—possibly the only Mist Giant, Bellbane. Even the wisest wizards were uncertain how many existed—one or many. It was a ghoul of the swamp-lands which fed off the souls and the blood of men and beasts. But the Marshes of this Mist were part to the east of Bellbane's reputed haunts.

Elric ceased to wonder why so few animals inhabited that stretch of the swamp. Overhead the sky was beginning to darken.

Stormbringer throbbed in Elric's grasp as he called the names of the ancient Demon-Gods of his people. The nauseous ghoul obviously recognised the names, For an instant, it wavered backwards. Elric made his legs move towards the thing. Now he saw that the ghoul was not white at all. But it had no colour to it that Elric could recognise. There was a suggestion of orangeness dashed with sickening greenish yellow, but he did not see the colours with his eyes—he only sensed the alien, unholy tinctures. Then Elric rushed towards the thing, shouting the names which now had no meaning to his surface consciousness. "Balaan-Marthim! Aesma! Alastor! Sae-bos! Verdelet! Nizilfkm! Haborym! Haborym of the Fires Which Destroy!" His whole mind was torn in two. Part of him wanted to run, to hide, but he had no control over the power which now gripped him and pushed him to meet the horror.

His sword blade hacked and slashed at the shape. It was like trying to cut through water-sentient, pulsating water. But Stormbringer had effect. The whole shape of the ghoul quivered as if in dreadful pain. Elric felt himself plucked into the air and his vision went. He could see nothing—do nothing but hack and cut at the thing which now held him. Sweat poured from him as, blindly, he fought on. Pain which was hardly physical—a deeper, horrifying pain, filled his being as he howled now in agony and struck continually at the yielding bulk which embraced him and was pulling him slowly towards its gaping maw. He struggled and writhed in the obscene grasp of the thing. With powerful arms, it was holding him, almost lasciviously, drawing him closer as a rough lover would draw a girl. Even the mighty power intrinsic in the runesword did not seem enough to kill the monster. Though its efforts were somewhat weaker than earlier, it still drew Elric nearer to the gnashing, slavering mouth-slit. Elric cried the names again, while Stormbringer danced and sang an evil song in his right hand. In agony, Elric writhed, praying, begging and promising, but still he was drawn inch by inch towards the grinning maw.

Savagely, grimly, he fought and again he screamed for Arioch. A mind touched his—sardonic, powerful, evil—and he knew Arioch responded at last! Almost imperceptibly, the Mist Giant weakened. Elric pressed his advantage and the knowledge that the ghoul was losing its strength gave him more power. Blindly, agony piercing every nerve of his body, he struck and struck. Then, quite suddenly, he was falling. He seemed to fall for hours, slowly, weightlessly until he landed upon a surface which yielded beneath him. He began to sink.

Far off, beyond time and space, he heard a distant voice calling to him. He did not want to hear it; he was content to lie where he was as the cold, comforting stuff in which he lay dragged him slowly into itself. Then some sixth sense made him realise that it was Shaarilla's voice calling him and he forced himself—
to make sense out of her words. "Elric-the marshy You're in the marsh. Don't move!"

He smiled to himself. Why should he move? Down he was sinking, slowly, calmly-down into the welcoming marsh ... Had there been another time like this; another marsh? - With a mental jolt, full awareness of the situation came back to him and he jerked his eyes open. Above him was mist. To one side a pool of unnam-able colouring was slowly evaporating, giving off a foul odour. On the other side he could just make out a human form, gesticulating wildly. Beyond the human form were the barely discernible shapes of two horses. Shaarilla was there. Beneath him-- . Beneath him was the marsh. Thick, stinking slime was sucking him downwards as he lay spread-eagled upon it, half-submerged already. Stormbringer was still in his right hand. He could just see it if he turned his head. Carefully, he tried to lift the top half of his body from the sucking morass. He succeeded, only to feel his legs sink deeper. Sitting upright, he shouted to the girl

'Shaarilla! Quickly-a rope!'

'There is no rope, Elric!' She was ripping off her top garment, frantically tearing it into strips. Still Elric sank, his feet finding no purchase beneath them.

Shaarilla hastily knotted the strips of cloth. She flung the makeshift rope inexpertly towards the sinking albino. It fell short. Fumbling in her haste, she threw it again. This time his groping left hand found it. The girl began to haul on the fabric. Elric felt himself rise a little and then stop.

'It's no good, Elric-I haven't the strength.' Cursing her, Elric shouted: 'The horse-tie it to the horse!' She ran towards one of the horses and looped the cloth around the pommel of the saddle. Then she tugged at the beast's reins and began to walk it away.

Swiftly, Elric was dragged from the sucking bog and, still gripping Stormbringer was pulled to the inadequate safety of the strip of turf. Gasping, he tried to stand, but found his legs in-credibly weak beneath him. He rose; staggered, and fell. Shaarilla knelt down beside him. 'Are you hurt?'

Elric smiled in spite of his weakness. 'I don't think SO.'

'It was dreadful. I couldn't see properly what was happening. You seemed to disappear and then-then you screamed that-that name!' She was trembling, her face pale and taut.

'What name?' Elric was genuinely puzzled. 'What name did I scream?'

She shook her head. 'It doesn't matter-but what-ever it was-it saved you. You reappeared soon afterwards and fell into the marsh...'

Stormbringer's power was still flowing into the albino. He already felt stronger.

With an effort, he got up and stumbled unsteadily towards his horse.

'I'm sure that the Mist Giant does not usually haunt this marsh-it was sent here. By what-or whom-I don't know, but we must get to firmer ground while we can.'

Shaarilla said: 'Which way-back or forward?' Elric frowned. 'Why, forward, of course. Why do you ask?'

She swallowed and shook her head. 'Let's hurry, then,' she said.

They mounted their horses and rode with little caution until the marsh and its cloak of mist was behind them.

Now the journey took on a new urgency as Elric realised that some force was attempting to put obstacles in their way. They rested little and savagely rode their powerful horses to a virtual standstill. On the fifth day they were riding through barren, rocky country and a light rain was Falling. The hard ground was slippery so that they were forced to ride more slowly, huddled over the sodden necks of their horses, muffled in cloaks which only inadequately kept out the drizzling rain. They had ridden in silence for some time before they heard a ghastly cackling baying ahead of them and the rattle of hooves.

Elric motioned towards a large rock looming to their right. 'Shelter there,' he said. 'Something comes towards us-possibly more enemies. With luck, they'll pass us.' Shaarilla mutely obeyed him and together they waited as the hideous baying grew nearer.

'One rider-several other beasts,' Elric said, listen-ing intently. 'The beasts either follow or pursue the rider.'

Then they were in sight-racing through the rain. A man frantically spurring an equally frightened horse-
and behind him, the" distance decreasing, a pack of what at first appeared to be dogs. But these were not dogs—they were half-dog and half-bird, with the lean, shaggy bodies and legs of dogs but possessing birdlike talons in place of paws and savagely curved beaks which snapped where muzzles should have been.

'The hunting dogs of the Dharzi!' gasped Shaa-rilla. 'I thought that they, like their masters, were long extinct!'

'I, also,' Elric said. 'What are they doing in these parts? There was never contact between the Dharzi and the dwellers of this Land.'

'Brought here-by something; Shaaarilla whispered.

'Those devil-dogs will scent us to be sure.' Elric reached for his runesword. 'Then we can lose nothing by aiding their quarry,' he said, urging his mount forward. 'Wait here, Shaaarilla.' By this time, the devil-pack and the man they pur-sued were rushing past the sheltering rock, speeding down a narrow defile. Elric spurred his horse down the slope.

'Ho there!' he shouted to the frantic rider. 'Turn and stand, my friend—I'm here to aid you!' His moaning runesword lifted high, Elric thun-dered towards the snapping, howling devil-dogs and his horse's hooves struck one with an impact which broke the unnatural beast's spine. There were some five or six of the weird dogs left. The rider turned his horse and drew a long sabre from a scabbard at his waist. He was a small man, with a broad ugly mouth. He grinned in relief.

'A lucky chance, this meeting, good master!' This was all he had time to remark before two of the dogs were leaping at him and he was forced to give his whole attention to defending himself from their slashing talons and snapping beaks. The other three dogs concentrated their vicious at-tention upon Elric. One leapt high, its beak aimed at Elric's throat. He felt foul breath on his Face and hastily brought Stormbringer round in an arc which chopped the dog in two. Filthy blood spattered Elric and his horse and the scent of it seemed to increase the fury of the other dogs' attack. But the blood made the dancing black runesword sing an almost ecstatic tune and Elric felt it write in his grasp and stab at another of the hideous dogs. The point Elric said coldly, 'The Lady Shaaarilla-Master Moonglum of--?'

'Of Elwher,' Moonglum supplied, 'The mercantile capital of the East-the finest city in the world.' Elric recognised the name. 'So you are from El-her, Master Moonglum. I have heard of the place. A new city, is it not? Some few centuries old. You have ridden far.'

'Indeed I have, sir. Without knowledge of the lan-guage used in these parts, the journey would have been harder, but luckily the slave who inspired me with tales of his homeland taught me the speech thoroughly.'

'But why do you travel these parts-have you not heard the legends?' Shaaarilla spoke incredulously.

'Those very legends were what brought me hence—and I'd begun to discount them, until those unpleasant pups set up on me. For what reason they decided to give chase, I will not know, for I gave them no cause to take a dislike to me. This is, indeed, a barbarous land;' Elric was uncomfortable. Light talk of the kind which Moonglum seemed to enjoy was contrary to his own brooding nature. But in spite of this, he found that he was liking the man more and more. It was Moonglum who suggested that they travel together for a while. Shaaarilla objected, giving Elric a warning glance, but he ignored it. 'Very well then, friend Moonglum, since three are stronger than two, we'd appreciate your company. We ride towards the mountains.' Elric, himself, was feeling in a more cheerful mood.

'And what do you seek there?, Moonglum inquired.

'A secret,' Elric said, and his new-found compan-ion was discreet enough to drop the question.

THREE
So they rode, while the rainfall increased and splashed and sang among the rocks with the sky like dull steel above them and the wind crooning a dirge about their ears. Three small figures riding swiftly towards the black mountain barrier which rose over the world like a brooding God. And perhaps it was a
God that laughed sometimes as they neared the foothills of the range, or perhaps it was the wind
whistling through the dark mystery of canyons and precipices and the tumble of basalt and granite which
climbed towards lonely peaks: Thunder clouds formed around those peaks and lightning smashed
downwards like a monster finger searching the earth for grubs. Thunder rattled over the range and
Shaarilla spoke her thoughts at last to Elric; spoke them as the mountains came in sight. 'Elric-let us go
back, I beg you. Forget the Book-there are too many forces working against us. Take heed of the signs,
Elric, or we are doomed!' But Elric was grimly silent, for he had long been aware that the girl was losing
her enthusiasm for the quest she had started.

'Elric-please. We will never reach the Book. Elric, turn back.: She rode beside him, pulling at his garments until impatiently he shrugged himself clear of her grasp and said:
"I am intrigued too much to stop now. Either continue to lead the way-or tell me what you know and
stay here. You desired to sample the Book's wisdom once-but now a few minor pitfalls on our journey
have frightened you. What was it you needed to learn, Shaarilla?"
She did not answer him, but said instead: 'And what was it you desired, Elric? Peace, you told me. Well,
I warn you, you'll find no peace in those grim mountains-if we reach them at all.' 'You have not been
frank with me, Shaarilla,' Elric said coldly, still looking ahead of him at the black peaks. 'You know
something of the forces seeking to stop us.'
She shrugged. 'It matters not-I know little. My father spoke a few vague warnings before he died, that is
all.'
'What did he say?'
'He said that He who guards the Book would use all his power to stop mankind from using its wis-dom.'
'What else?'
'Nothing else. But it is enough, now that I see that my father's warning was truly spoken. It was this
guardian who killed him, Elric—or one of the guardian's minions. I do not wish to suffer that fate, in spite
of what the Book might do for me. I had thought you Powerful enough to aid me—but now I doubt it.'
'I have protected you so far,' Elric said simply.
'Now tell me what you seek from the Book?''
'I am too ashamed.'
Elric did not press the question, but eventually she spoke softly, almost whispering. 'I sought my wings,'
she said.
'Your wings—you mean the Book might give you a spell so that you could grow wings!' Elric smiled
ironically. 'And that is why you seek the vessel of the world's mightiest wisdom!'
'If you were thought deformed in your own land—it would seem important enough to you,' she shouted
defiantly.
Elric turned his face towards her, his crimson-irised eyes burning with a strange emotion. He put a hand
to his dead white skin and a crooked smile twisted his lips. 'I, too, have felt as you do,' he said quietly.
That was all he said and Shaarilla dropped behind him again, shamed.
They rode on in silence until Moonglum, who had been riding discreetly ahead, cocked his overlarge
skull on one side and suddenly drew rein. Elric joined him. 'What is it, Moonglum?'
'I hear horses coming this way,' the little man said. 'And voices which are disturbingly familiar. More of
those devil-dogs, Elric—and this time accompanied by riders!'
Elric, too, heard the sounds, now, and shouted a warning to Shaarilla.
'Perhaps you were right,' he called. 'More trouble comes towards us.'
'What now?' Moonglum said, frowning. 'Ride for the mountains,' Elric replied, 'and we may yet
outdistance them.'
They spurred their steeds into a fast gallop and sped towards the hills.
But their flight was hopeless. Soon a black, pack was visible on the horizon and the sharp birdlike baying
of the devil-dogs-drew nearer. Elric stared backward at their pursuers. Night was beginning to fall, and
visibility was decreasing with every passing moment but he had a vague impression of the riders who raced behind the pack. They were swathed in dark cloaks and carried long spears. Their faces were invisible, lost in the shadow of the hoods which covered their heads.

Now Elric and his companions were forcing their horses up a steep incline, seeking the shelter of the rocks which lay above.

'We'll halt here,' Elric ordered, 'and try to hold them off. In the open they could easily surround us.' Moonglum nodded affirmatively, agreeing with the good sense contained in Elric's words. They pulled their sweating steeds to a standstill and prepared to join battle with the howling pack and their dark-cloaked masters.

Soon the first of the devil-dogs were rushing up the incline, their beak-jaws slavering and their talons rattling on stone. Standing between two rocks, blocking the way between with their bodies, Elric and Moonglum met the first attack and quickly dispatched three of the animals. Several more took the place of the dead and the first of the riders was visible behind them as night crept closer. 'Arioch!' swore Elric, suddenly recognising the riders. 'These are the Lords of Dharzi—dead these ten centuries. We're fighting dead men, Moonglum, and the too-tangible ghosts of their dogs. Unless I can think of a sorcerous means to defeat them, we're doomed!'

The zombie-men appeared to have no intention of taking part in the attack for the moment. They waited, their dead eyes eerily luminous, as the devil-dogs attempted to break through the swinging network of steel with which Elric and his companion defended themselves. Elric was racking his brains—trying to dredge a spoken spell from his memory which would dismiss these living dead. Then it came to him, and hoping that the forces he had to invoke would decide to aid him, he began to chant:

'Let the Laws which govern all things
Not so lightly be dismissed;
Let the Ones who flaunt the Earth Kings
With a fresher death be kissed.'

Nothing happened. 'I've failed.' Elric muttered hopelessly as he met the attack of a mapping devil-dog and spitted the thing on his sword. But then—the ground rocked and seemed to seethe beneath the feet of the horses upon whose backs the dead men sat. The tremor lasted a few seconds and then subsided.

'The spell was not powerful enough,' Elric sighed. The earth trembled again and small craters formed in the ground of the hillside upon which the dead Lords of Dharzi impassively waited: Stones crumbled and the horses stamped nervously. Then the earth rumbled.

'Back!' yelled Elric warningly. 'Back—or we'll go with them!' They retreated—backing towards Shaa-rilla and their waiting horses as the ground gagged beneath their feet. The Dharzi mounts were rearing and snorting and the remaining dogs turned nervously to regard their masters with puzzled, uncertain eyes.

A low moan was coming from the lips of the living dead. Suddenly, a whole area of the surrounding hillside split into cracks, and yawning crannies appeared in the surface. Elric and his companions swung themselves on to their horse, as, with a frightful multi-voiced scream, the dead Lords were swallowed by the earth, returning to the depths from which they had been summoned.

A deep unholy chuckle arose from the shattered pit. It was the mocking laughter of the Earth Kings taking their rightful prey back into their keeping. Whining, the devil-dogs slunk towards the edge of the pit, sniffing around it. Then, with one accord, the black pack hurled itself down into the chasm, following its masters to whatever cold doom awaited them.

Moonglum shuddered. 'You are on familiar terms with the strangest people, friend Elric,' he said shakily and turned his horse towards the mountains again.

They reached the black mountains on the following day and nervously Shaarilla led them along the rocky route she had memorised. She no longer pleaded with Elric to return—she was resigned to whatever fate awaited them. Elric's obsession was burning within him and he was filled with impatience—certain that he would find, at last, the ultimate truth of existence in the Dead Gods' Book. Moonglum was cheerfully skeptical, while Shaarilla was consumed with foreboding.

Rain still fell and the storm growled and crackled above them, And, as the driving rainfall increased with fresh insistence, they came, at last, to the black, gaping mouth of a huge cave.
'I can lead you no further,' Shaarilla said wearily. 'The Book lies somewhere beyond, the entrance to this cave.'

Elric and Moonglum looked uncertainly at one another, neither of them sure what move to make next. To have reached their goal seemed somehow anticlimactic - for nothing blocked the cave entrance and nothing appeared to guard it. 'It is inconceivable,' said Elric, 'that the dangers which beset us were not engineered by something, yet here we are - and no one seeks to stop us entering. Are you sure that this is the right cave, Shaarilla?' The girl pointed upwards to the rock above the entrance. Engraved in it was a curious symbol which Elric instantly recognised.

'The sigh of Chaos!' Elric exclaimed. 'Perhaps I should have guessed.'

'What does it mean, Elric?' Moonglum asked. 'That is the symbol of everlasting disruption and anarchy,' Elric told him. 'We are standing in, terri- tory presided over by the Lords of Entropy or one of their minions. So that is who our enem y is! This can only mean one thing - the Book is of extreme impor- tance to the order of things on this plane - possibly all the myriad planes of the universe. It was why Arioch was reluctant to aid me-he, too, is a Lord of Chaos!'

Moonglum stared at him in puzzlement. 'What do you mean, Elric?'

'Know you not that two forces govern the world-fighting an eternal battle?' Elric replied: 'Law and Chaos. The upholders of Chaos state that in such a world as they rule, all things are possible. Opponents of Chaos-those who ally themselves with the forces of Law-say that without Law nothing material is possible.

"Some stand apart, believing that a balance be-tween the two is the proper state of things, but we cannot. We have become embroiled in a dispute be-tween the two forces. The Book is valuable to either faction, obviously, and I could guess that the min-ions of Entropy are worried what power we might release if we obtain this Book. Law and Chaos rarely interfere directly in Men's lives-that is why we have not been fully aware of their presence. Now perhaps, I will discover at last the answer to the one question which concerns me-do es an ultimate force rule over the opposing factions of Law and Chaos?"

Elric stepped through the cave entrance, peering into the gloom while the others hesitantly followed him. 'The cave stretches back a long way. All we can do is press on until we find its far wall,' Elric said. 'Let's hope that its far wall lies not downwards,' Moonglum said ironically as he motioned Elric to lead on.

They stumbled forward as the cave grew darker and darker. Their voices were magnified and hollow to their own ears as the floor of the cave slanted sharply down. 'This is no cave,' Elric whispered, 'it's a tunnel- but I cannot guess where it leads.' " For several hours they pressed onwards in pitch darkness, dinging to one another as they reeled for-ward, uncertain of their footing and still aware that they were moving down a gradual incline. They lost all sense of time and Elric began to feel as if he were living through a dream. Events seemed to have be-come so unpredictable and beyond his control that he could no longer cope with thinking about them in ordinary terms. The tunnel was long and dark and wide and cold. It offered no comfort and the floor eventually became the only thing which had any reality. It was firmly beneath his feet. He began to feel that possibly he was not moving-that the floor, after all, was moving and he was remaining station-ary. His companions clung to him but he was not aware of them. He was lost and his brain was numb. Sometimes he swayed and felt that he was on the edge of a precipice. Sometimes he fell and his groan-ing body met hard stone, disproving the proximity of the gulf down which he half-expected to fall. All the While he made his legs perform walking motions, even though he was not at all sure whether he was actually moving forward. And time meant nothing-became a meaningless concept with relation to nothing.

Until, at last, he was aware of a faint, blue glow ahead of him and he knew that he had been moving forward. He began to run down the incline, but found that he was going too fast and had to check "his speed. There was a scent of alien strangeness in the cool air of the cave tunnel and fear was a fluid force which surged over him, something separate from himself.

The others obviously felt it, too, for though they said nothing, Elric could sense it. Slowly they moved
downward, drawn like automatons towards the pale blue glow below them.
And then they were out of the tunnel, staring awestruck at the unearthly vision which confronted them.
Above them, the very air seemed of the strange blue colour which had originally attracted them. They
were standing on a jutting slab of rock and, although it was still somehow dark, the eerie blue glow
illuminated a stretch of glistening silver beach beneath them. And the beach was lapped by a surging dark
sea which moved restlessly like a liquid giant in disturbed slumber. Scattered along the silver beach
were the dim shapes of wrecks—the bones of peculiarly designed boats, each of a different pattern from
the rest. The sea surged away into darkness and there was no horizon-only blackness. Behind them, they
could see a sheer cliff which was also lost in darkness beyond a certain point. And it was cold-bitterly
cold, with an unbelievable sharp-ness. For though the sea thresher beneath them, there was no dampness
in the air—no smell of salt. It was a bleak and awesome sight and, apart from the sea, they were the only
things that moved—the only things to make sound, for the sea was horribly silent in its restless movement.
'What now, Elric?' whispered Moonglum, shivering.
Elric shook his head and they continued to stand there for a long time until the albino—his white face and
hands ghastly in the alien light said: 'Since it is impracticable to return—we shall venture over the sea' His
voice was hollow and he spoke as one who was unaware of his words.
Steps, cut into the living rock, led down towards the beach and now Elric began to descend them. The
others allowed him to lead them staring around them, their eyes lit by a terrible fascination.
FOUR
Their feet profaned the silence as they reached the silver beach of crystalline stones and crunched across
it. Elric's crimson eyes fixed upon one of the objects littering the beach and he smiled. He shook his head
savagely from side to side, as if to clear it. Trembling, he pointed to one of the boats, and the pair saw
that it was intact, unlike the others. It was yellow and red-vulgarily gay in this environment and nearing it
they observed that it was made of wood, yet unlike any wood they had seen. Moon-glum ran his stubby
fingers along its length. 'Hard as iron,' he breathed. 'No wonder it has not rotted as the Others have.' He
peered inside and shuddered. 'Well the owner won't argue if we take it,' he said wryly.
Elric and Shaarilla understood him when they saw the unnaturally twisted skeleton which lay at the
bottom of the boat. Elric reached inside and pulled the thing out, hurling it on to the stones. It rattled and
Rolled over the gleaming shingle, disintegrating as it did so, scattering bones over a wide area. The skull
came to rest by the edge of the beach, seeming to stare sightlessly out over the disturbing ocean. As
Elric and Moonglum strove to push and pull the boat down the beach towards the sea, Shaarilla moved
ahead of them and squatted down, putting her hand into the wetness. She stood up sharply, shaking the
stuff from her hand.
'This is not water as I know it,' she said. They heard her, but said nothing.
'We'll need a sail,' Elric murmured. The cold breeze was moving out over the ocean. 'A cloak should
serve.' He stripped off his cloak and knotted it to the mast of the vessel. 'Two of us will have to hold this
at either edge,' he said. 'That way we'll have some slight control over the direction the boat takes. It's
makeshift—but the best we can manage.' They shoved off, taking care not to get their feet in the sea.
The wind caught the sail and pushed the boat out over the ocean; moving at a faster pace than Elric had
at first reckoned. The boat began to hurtle for-ward as if possessed of its own volition and Elric's and
Moonglum's muscles ached as they clung to the bottom ends of the sail.
Soon the silver beach was out of sight and they could see little—the pale blue light above them scarcely
penetrating the blackness. It was then that they heard the dry flap of wings over their heads and looked up.
Silently descending were three massive ape-like creatures, borne on great leathery wings. Shaarilla
recognised them and gasped.
"Clakars!"
Moonglum shrugged as he hurriedly drew his sword—'A name only—what are they?' But he received no answer for the leading winged ape de-seemed with a rush, mouthing and gibbering, showing long fangs in a slavering snout. Moonglum dropped his portion of the sail and slashed at the beast but it veered away, its huge wings beating, and sailed upwards again.

Elric unsheathed Stormbringer—and was astounded. The blade remained silent, its Familiar howl of glee muted. The blade shuddered in his hand and instead of the rush of power which usually flowed up his arm, he felt only a slight tingling. He was panic-stricken for a moment—without the sword, he would soon lose all vitality. Grimly fighting down his fear, he used the sword to protect himself from the rush-ing attack of one of the winged apes. The ape gripped the blade, bowling Elric over, but it yelled in pain as the blade cut through one knotted hand, Severing fingers which lay twitching and bloody on the narrow deck. Elric gripped the side of the boat and hauled himself upright once more. Shrieking its agony, the winged ape attacked again, but this time with more caution. Elric sum-moned all his strength and swung the heavy sword in a two-handed grip, ripping off one of the leathery wings so that the mutilated beast flopped about the deck. Judging the place where its heart should be, Elric drove the blade in under the breast-bone. The ape's movements subsided.

Moonglum was lashing wildly at two of the winged apes which were attacking him from both sides. He was-down on one knee, vainly hacking at random. He had opened up the whole side of a beast's head but, though in pain, it still came at him. Elric hurled Stormbringer through the darkness and it struck the wounded beast in the throat, point first. The blade clutched with clawing fingers at the steel and fell overboard. Its corpse floated on the liquid but slowly began to sink. Elric grabbed with frantic fingers at the hilt of his sword, reaching far over the side of the boat. Incredibly, the blade was sinking with the beast. Knowing Stormbringer's properties as he did, Elric was amazed—once when he had hurled the runesword into the ocean, it had refused to sink. Now it was being dragged beneath the surface as any ordinary blade would bedraggled. He gripped the hilt and hauled the sword out of the winged ape's carcass.

His strength was seeping swiftly from him. It was incredible. What alien laws governed this cavern world? He could not guess—and all he was concerned with was regaining his wanng strength. Without the runesword's power, this was impossible! Moonglum's curved blade had disemboweled the remaining beast and the little man was busily tossing the dead thing over the side. He turned, grinning triumphantly, to Elric.

'A good fight,' he said.

Elric shook his head. 'We must cross this sea speedily,' he replied, 'else we're lost-finished. My power is gone' 'How? Why?'

'I know not—unless the forces of Entropy rule more strongly here. Make haste—there is no time for speculation.'

Moonglum's eyes were disturbed. He could do nothing but act as Elric said.

Elric was trembling in his Weakness, holding the billowing sail with draining strength. Shaarilla moved to help him, her thin hands close to his; her deep-set eyes bright with sympathy. 'What were those things?' Moonglum gasped, his teeth naked and white beneath his back-drawn lips, his breath coming short.

'Clakars,' Shaarilla replied. 'They are the primeval ancestors of my people, older in origin than recorded time. My people are thought the oldest inhabitants of this planet.'

'Whoever seeks to stop us in this quest of yours had best find some-original means.' Moonglum grinned. 'The old methods don't work.' But the other two did not smile, for Elric was half-fainting and the woman was concerned only with his plight. Moonglum shrugged, staring ahead.

When he spoke again, sometime later, his voice was excited. 'We're nearing land!' Land it was, and they were traveling fast, towards it. Too fast. Elric heaved himself upright and spoke heavily and with difficulty. 'Drop the sail!' Moonglum obeyed him. The boat sped on, struck another stretch of silver beach and ground up it, the prow ploughing a dark scar through the glinting shingle. It stopped
suddenly, tilting violently to one side so that the three were tumbled against the boat's rail. Shaarilla and Moonglum pulled themselves up-right and dragged the limp and nerveless albino on to the beach. Carrying him between them, they struggled up the beach until the crystalline shingle gave way to thick, fluffy moss, padding their foot-falls. They laid the albino down and stared at him worriedly, uncertain of their next actions. Elric strained to rise, but was unable to do so. 'Give me time,' he gasped. 'I Won't die--but already my eyesight is fading. I can only hope that the blade's power will return on dry land.' With a mighty effort, he pulled Stormbringer from its scabbard and he smiled in relief as the evil runesword moaned faintly and then, slowly, its song increased in power as black flame flickered along its length. Already the power was flowing into Elric's body, giving him renewed vitality. But even as strength returned, Elric's crimson eyes flared with terrible misery. 'Without this black blade,' he groaned, 'I am noth-ing, as you see. But what is it making of me? Am I to be bound to it for ever?'

The others did not answer him and they were both moved by an emotion they could not define-an emotion blended of fear, hate and pity-linked with something else ...

Eventually, Elric rose, trembling, and silently led them up the mossy hillside towards a more natural light which filtered from above. They could see that it came from a wide chimney, leading apparently to the upper air. By means of the light, they could soon make out a dark, irregular shape which towered in the shadow of the gap.

As they neared the shape, they saw that it was a castle of black stone-a sprawling pile covered with dark green crawling lichen which curled over its an-cient bulk with an almost sentient protectiveness. Towers appeared to spring at random from it and it covered a vast area. There seemed to be no windows in any part of it and the only orifice was a rearing doorway blocked by thick bars of a metal which glowed with dull redness, but without heat. Above this gate, in flaring amber, was the sign of the Lords of Entropy, representing eight arrows radiating from a central hub in all directions. It appeared to hang in the air without touching the black, Lichen-covered stone.

'I think our quest ends here,' Elric said grimly. 'Here, or nowhere.'

'Before I go further, Elric, I'd like to know what it is you seek,' Moonglum murmured. 'I think I've earned the right.'

'A book,' Elric said carelessly. 'The Dead Gods' Book. It lies within those castle walls--of that I'm certain. We have reached the end of our journey.' Moonglum shrugged. 'I might not have asked,' he smiled, 'for all your words mean to me. I hope that I will be allowed some small share of whatever treasure it represents.'

Elric grinned, in spite of the coldness which gripped his bowels, but he did not answer Moonglum 'We need to enter the castle, first,' he said instead. As if the gates had heard him, the metal bars flared to a pale green and then their glow faded back to red and finally dulled into non-existence. The en-trance was unbarred and their way apparently clear. 'I like not that,' grumbled Moonglum. 'Too easy. A trap awaits us--are we to spring it at the pleasure of whoever dwells within the castle confines?' 'What else can we do?' Elric spoke quietly. 'Go back-or forward. Avoid the castle-do not tempt He who guards the Book!' Shaarilla was grip-ping the albino's right arm, her whole face moving with fear, her eyes pleading. 'Forget the Book, Elric!' 'Now?' Elric laughed humourlessly. 'Now-after this journey? No, Shaarilla, not when the truth is so close. Better to die than never to have tried to secure the wisdom in the Book when it lies so near.' Shaarilla's clutching fingers relaxed their grip and her shoulders slumped in hopelessness. 'We cannot do battle with the minions of Entropy...' 'Perhaps we will not have to.' Elric did not believe his own words but his mouth was twisted with some dark emotion, intense and terrible. Moonglum glanced at Shaarilla. 'Shaarilla is right,' he said with conviction. 'You'll find nothing but bitterness, possibly death, inside those castle walls. Let us, instead, climb yonder steps and attempt to reach the surface.' He pointed to some twisting steps which led towards the yawning rent in the cavern roof.
Elric shook his head. 'No. You go if you like.' Moonglum grimaced in perplexity. 'You're a stub-born one, friend Elric. Well, if it's all or nothing- then I'm with you. But personally, I have always pre-ferred compromise.'

Elric began to walk slowly forward towards the dark entrance of the bleak and towering castle. In a wide, shadowy courtyard a tall figure, wreathed in scarlet fire, stood awaiting them. Elric marched on, passing the gateway. Moonglum and Shaarilla nervously followed.

Gusty laughter roared from the mouth of the giant and the scarlet fire fluttered about him. He was naked and unarmed, but the power which flowed from him almost forced the three back. His skin was scaly and of smoky purple colouring. His massive body was alive with rippling muscle as he rested lightly on the balls of his feet. His skull was long, slanting sharply backwards at the forehead and his eyes were like slivers of blue steel, showing no pupil. His whole body shook with mighty, malicious joy.

"Greetings to you, Lord Elric of Melnibone-I con-gratulate you for your remarkable tenacity?" 'Who are you?' Elric growled, his hand on his sword.

"My name is Orunlu the Keeper and this is a stronghold of the Lords of Entropy." The giant smiled cynically. "You need not finger your puny blade so nervously, for you should know that I can-not harm you now. I gained power to remain in your realm only by making that vow." Elric's voice betrayed his mounting excitement.-'You cannot stop us?'

"I do not dare to-since my oblique efforts have failed. But your foolish endeavours perplex me somewhat, I'll admit. The Book is of importance to us--but what can it mean to you? I have guarded it for three hundred centuries and have never been curious enough to seek to discover why my Masters place so much importance upon it-why they both-ered to rescue it on its sunward course and incarcer-ate it on this boring ball of earth populated by the capering, briefly-lived clowns called Men?"

'I seek in it the Truth,' Elric said guardedly. "What rules above the forces of Law and Chaos?" Elric asked. 'What controls your destinies as it con-trols mine?'

The giant frowned. "That question, I cannot answer. I do not know, There is only the Balance."

'Then perhaps the Book will tell us who holds it.' Elric said purposefully. 'Let me pass-tell me where it lies.'

The giant moved back, smiling ironically. "It lies in a small chamber in the central tower. I have sworn never to venture there, otherwise I might even lead the way. Go if you like-my duty is over." Elric, Moonglum and Shaarilla stepped towards the entrance of the castle, but before they entered, the giant spoke warningly from behind them. 'I have been told that the knowledge contained in the Book could swing the balance on the side of the forces of Law. This disturbs me-but, it appears, there is another possibility which disturbs me even more.'

'What is that?' Elric said.

'It could create such a tremendous impact on the multiverse that complete entropy would result. My Masters do not desire that, for it could mean the destruction of all matter in the end. We exist only to fight-not to win, but to preserve the eternal struggle.'

'I care not,' Elric told him. 'I have little to lose, Orunlu the Keeper.'

"Then go." The giant strode across the courtyard into blackness.

Inside the tower, light of a pale quality illumi-nated winding steps leading upwards. Elric began to climb them in silence, moved by his own doom-filled purpose. Hesitantly, Moonglum and Shaarilla fob lowed in his path, their faces set in hopeless accept-ante.

On and upward the steps mounted, twisting tortu-ously towards their goal, until at last they came to the chamber, full of blinding light, many-coloured and scintillating, which did not penetrate outwards at all-but remained confined to the room which housed it.
Blinking, shielding his red eyes with his arm, Elric pressed forward and, through slitted pupils saw the source of the light lying on a small stone dais in the centre of the room.

Equally troubled by the bright light, Shaarilla and Moonglum followed him into the room and stood in awe at what they saw.

It was a huge book—the Dead Gods' Book, its covers encrusted with alien gems from which the light sprang. It gleamed, it throbbed with light and brilliant colour.

'At last,' Elric breathed, 'At last—the Truth!' He stumbled forward like a man made stupid with drink, his pale hands reaching for the thing he had sought with such savage bitterness. His hands touched the pulsating cover of the Book and, trembling, turned it back.

'Now, I shall learn,' he said, half-gloatingly. With a crash, the cover fell to the floor, sending the bright-gems skipping and dancing over the paving stones.

Beneath Elric's twitching hands lay nothing but a pile of yellowish dust.

'No!' His scream was anguished, unbelieving. 'No!' Tears flowed down his contorted face as he ran his hands through the fine dust. With a groan which racked his whole being, he fell forward, his face hitting the disintegrated parchment, Time had destroyed the Book—untouched, possibly forgotten, for three hundred centuries. Even the wise and powerful Gods who had created it had perished—and now its knowledge followed them into oblivion.

They stood on the slopes of the high mountain, staring down into the green valleys below them. The sun shone and the sky was clear and blue. Behind them lay the gaping hole which led into the stronghold of the Lords of Entropy.

Elric looked with sad eyes across the world and his head was lowered beneath a weight of weariness and dark despair. He had not spoken since his companions had dragged him sobbing from the chamber of the Book. Now he raised his pale face and spoke in a voice tinged with self-mockery, sharp with bitterness—a lonely voice: the calling of hungry seabirds circling cold skies above bleak shores. 'Now,' he said, 'I will live my life without ever knowing why I live it—whether it has purpose or not. Perhaps the Book could have told me. But would I have believed it, even then? I am the eternal sceptic—never sure that my actions are my own; never certain that an ultimate entity is not guiding me.

'I envy those who know. All I can do now is to continue my quest and hope, without hope, that before my span is ended, the truth will be presented to me.' Shaarilla took his limp hands in hers and her eyes were wet.

'Elric—let me comfort you.'

The albino sneered bitterly. 'Would that we'd never met, Shaarilla of the Dancing Mist. For a while, you gave me hope—I had thought to be at last at peace with myself. But, because of you, I am left more hopeless than before. There is no salvation in this world—only malevolent doom. Goodbye.' He took his hands away from her grasp and set off down the mountainside.

Moonglum darted a glance at Shaarilla and then at Elric. He took something from his purse and put it in the girl's hand.

'Good luck,' he said, and then he was running after Elric until he caught him up.

Still striding, Elric turned at Moonglum's approach and, despite his brooding misery said: 'What is it, friend Moonglum? Why do you follow me?' I've followed you thus far, Master Elric, and I see no reason to stop,' grinned the little man. 'Besides, unlike yourself, I'm a materialist. We'll need to eat, you know.'

Elric frowned, feeling a warmth growing within him. 'What do you mean, Moonglum?'

Moonglum chuckled. 'I take advantage of situations of any kind, where I may,' he answered. He reached into his purse and displayed something on his outstretched hand which shone with a dazzling brilliancy. It was one of the jewels from the cover of the Book. 'There are more in my purse,' he said, 'And each one worth a fortune.' He took Elric's arm. 'Come, Elric—what new lands shall we visit so that we may change these baubles into wine and pleasant company?'

Behind them, standing stock still on the hillside, Shaarilla stared miserably after them until they were no longer visible. The jewel Moonglum had given her dropped from her fingers and fell, bouncing and bright, until it was lost amongst the heather. Then she turned—and the dark mouth of the cavern yawned...
before her.

Book Three
THE SINGING CITADEL
In which Elric has his first dealings with Pan Tang, Yishana of Jharkor, the sorcerer The-leb K'aarna, and learns something more of the Higher Worlds...

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, Darmit, had died in the ill-fated raid on Imrryr, and Elric had heard that the men of Jharkor blamed him for the young king's death, though this was not the case. He cared little whether they blamed him or not, for he was still disdaoufl of the greater part of mankind. 'Another hour will see nightfall, and it's unlikely we'll sail at night,' Moonglum said. 'I'm 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 Melnibone. 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 realised 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 loathe 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 where the Tarkeshites waited. 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 realised 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 realised 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 sink-hag galley's decks of attackers. "Howling like a wolf, Elric grabbed a" rope-part of the black and gold 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, staggering, and fell to the deck, rolling as the broadsword thudded into the deck, just missing his shoulder. Stormbringer seemed to-raise 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 Eric's own reactions. He drove the blade up towards the man's heart. The magic treated armour stopped it for a second; but then Storm-bringer shrielled 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 breast-bone 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 hell-blade 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 he needed the sword the more he used 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, realising 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 recognised. 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.

Two

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 Melnibone?' '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 Yolan, 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 Yolan. What is your message?'

Yolan'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 Darmit 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. Darmit died on board his flagship during the first attack on Imrryr's sea-maze, not in the subsequent battle.'

'You sneer at my questions and then proffer lame lies to cover your own cowardly deed,' Yolan said bitterly. 'If I had my way you'd be fed to your hell-blade 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 am not used to such familiarity, young man.'

Yolan's hand fell away. 'Forgive me. I was self-in-dulgent and should not have let my emotions over-ride 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 ex-plain my actions;' Elric spoke impatiently. 'In the past my help has not always been to the advantage of those who've sought it. Darmit, 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 ur-gent.' He climbed the stairs, leaving a gape-mouthed Yolan sitting alone in the quiet of the tavern. Theleb K'aarna 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'aarna stood high in the hierarchy of Pan Tang, it was clear to her that she was in no danger from the sorcerer. Indeed, her in-tuition 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'aarna continued to scowl at her. 'How can that decadent spell-singer help you where I can-not?' he muttered, sitting down on the bed and stroking her bejewelled 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 some-thing 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 wil-ful child is loved, yet loved with firm loyalty. Now she laughed quietly, mockingly at her sorcerer lover.

'You're probably right, Theleb K'aarna, 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 intui-tive-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, none the less. 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 an-swers where you fail,' she smiled. Then he got up and looked through the window at the sky 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 Darmit'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 un-successful in the matter of the citadel and, if Elric displaced him, he could lose everything. He began to think very deeply,' very carefully.

THREE
Though he claimed lack of conscience, Elric's tor-mented eyes belied the claim as he sat at his win-dow, 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 God's 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 bro-ken 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 char-coal 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 fea-tures and the masses of black hair which framed them. She contrasted strongly with the slender, aes-thetic 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 curtsey. 'Queen Yishana,' he acknowledged the curtsey with a slight bow. Now that she confronted him, he 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 sug-gested,' 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 Melnibonean 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 sec-ond 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 cita-del 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 marvellous sight, Lord Elric,' Yishana continued. 'The citadel scintillated with shining, rainbow colours-colours that were constantly alter-hag, 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 promoted 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, beauti-ful, unearthly, painful—Theleb K'aarna shouted to me to ride as swiftly as I could away from it. I dab lied, 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 es-cap-ed—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'aarna 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'aarna is right. Why, your very Gods are Lords of Chaos.' 'That is exactly true, Yishana—and because our pa-tron 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 am. '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 de-tided; for, if Elric could be useful in the matter of the citadel, there was no point in destroying him yet ....

FOUR

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 dis-tance. If Elric was at all embarrassed by this display on the part of the man he had ousted in Yishana's af-fections, 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 Moon-glum 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 The-leb 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 smoulder-ing 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 increas-ing his power. As you know, sorcerer, the Lords of Law and Chaos are usually in perfect balance, nei-ther 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-al-low ing 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, gen-uinely 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 recognised 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 Melnibone, 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'arna 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 ser-\vant to the Lords. Yet,' he frowned, 'not exactly a servant .... '  
'Ach! You speak in riddles. Theleb K'arna turned his horse to ride down the hills, away from the citadel.
'I know you Melniboneans! Starving, you'd rather have a paradox than food!'
Elric and Yishana followed him some distance,
then Elric stopped. Elric 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 Cos-mic Hand that holds both Chaos and Law in bal-ance, 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 pur-pose 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 be-
come 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 Melniboneans 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 Chain nor Law; they are elementals:
lords of fire, earth, air, and water, entities with affin-ities 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 bi-zarre symphonies of old Melnibone—and it did not draw him as it drew Yishana. He recognised 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. Al-though 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 left hand moved to the hilt of his rune-sword, 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 halt-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 recognised 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 Yishana had for now guessed gone, by he had lost sight of the gateway or any of its mirage images.

He realised 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 invo-cation that he might need later. Arioch, Lord of Chaos, patron god-demon of his ancestors, was a negligent power and whimful—he could not rely on Arioch 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 tour-mured 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 crea-ture.
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 Storm-bringer high, and
brought the sword down on the golden creature's skull. The skull shattered as ice might shatter.
Elric rang forward into the passage and, once 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 spi-ral 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 dis-ciplined himself to climb on.
Upwards, as he looked, was the same as down' wards. 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 scintillat-ing 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 hyp-notic pull as he had had 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 reformed 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 pro-portions, 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 in-credible 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—he was the ghost!

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 Melnibone. 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” 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 pleasures 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 Melnibone, 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 realise 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 quarrelled 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 Melnibonean—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 curiosi-ties 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 Melnibone.'

'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 miner' 'Unfortunately, Lord Balo, I do not possess your range of humour and am unfitted for such an exalt-ed 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?'

'Aha, 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 des-perate.

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 gibber-ing thing that had, until now, been Arioch's fa-voured 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 puls-ing 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 realise only the Kings of Melnibone 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, in-human 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 unfortu-nate 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 am 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 an-cestors. 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 incor-porated into our Realm and you will join the hierar-chy of Chaos, become immortal as we are!' 'Immortality offers little to me, my lord.' 'Ah, Elric, have the men of Melnibone become as the half-apes who now dominate Earth with their puny "civilisations"? Are you no better than these 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 demi-god. 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.

FIVE

As they staggered past the blasted ruins of Tho-kara, 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 realised 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 Storm-bringer
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 en-folding 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 en-gage 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 super-natural 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 realise 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 Haasaahaa-taak; 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 Haashaastaak, 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 atten-tion. 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..."
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 sud-denly.

‘Haaashaastaak,’ he cried pointing at the butterfly-creature, ‘mokik ankkuh!’

The lizard lord turned its jewelled 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 re-quested,’ he said, ‘since you suspected treachery from Theleb K’aarna. But than 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 The-leb 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 eves 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,’ Moon-glum 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 King-doms. In my eyes you are redeemed for my brother's death.’

‘Oh, I thank you, madam,’ said Elric with a mock-hag tone.

She laughed, ‘You are still a Melnibonean.’

‘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 op-portunity.’

She gave him a hard look. ‘Why?’

‘Your resume 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 Melnibonean! 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 yon 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 yon naked in the city square.' 'You are familiar with our customs.' 'We Melniboneans 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 antechamber. 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 unto 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 de-ciphering 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 The-leb 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 intro-spective, he wondered if Yisbana had perhaps af-fected 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 re-turn to Dhakos. Then he shrugged and clapped his heels to his steed's flank, racing to catch up with Elric as the cold dawn rose, wondering if they would continue towards Pan Tang once Dhakos was far enough be-hind. But Elric's head contained no thoughts, only emo-tion flooded him—emotion he did not wish to ana-lyse. 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 con-flict within him.
In Dhakos that morning, other eyes held misery, but not for too long. Yishana was a pragmatic queen.
...and then did Elric leave Jharkor in pursuit of a certain sorcerer who had, so Elric claimed, caused him some inconvenience...

-The Chronicle of the Black Sword

CHAPTER ONE
Pale Prince on a Moonlit Shore
In the sky, a cold moon, cloaked in clouds, sent down faint light that fell upon a sullen sea where a ship lay at anchor off an uninhabited coast.

From the ship a boat was being lowered. It swayed in its harness. Two figures, swathed in long capes, watched the seamen lowering the boat while they, themselves, tried to calm horses which stamped their hooves on the unstable deck and snorted and rolled their eyes.

The shorter figure clung hard to his horse's bridle and grumbled.

"Why should this be necessary? Why could not we have disembarked at Trepesaz? Or at least some fishing harbour boasting an inn, however lowly. . . ."

"Because, friend Moonglum, I wish our arrival in Lormyr to be secret. If Theleb K'aarna knew of my coming-as he soon would if we went to Trepesaz -then he would fly again and the chase would begin afresh. Would you welcome that?"

Moonglum shrugged. "I still feel that your pursuit of this sorcerer is no more than a surrogate for real activity. You seek him because you do not wish to seek your proper destiny. . . ."

"And what of it? You need not accompany me if you do not wish to. . . ."

Again Moonglum shrugged his shoulders. "Aye. I know. Perhaps I stay with you for the same reasons that you pursue the sorcerer of Pan Tang." He grinned. "So that's enough of debate, eh, Lord Elric?"

"Debate achieves nothing," Elric agreed. He patted his horse's nose as more seamen, clad in colourful Tarkeshite silks, came forward to take the horses and hoist them down to the waiting boat.

Struggling, whinnying through the bags muffling their heads, the horses were lowered, their hooves thudding on the bottom of the boat as if they would stave it in. Then Elric and Moonglum, their bundles on their backs, swung down the ropes and jumped into the rock-ing craft. The sailors pushed off from the ship with their oars and then, bodies bending, began to row for the shore.

The late autumn air was cold. Moonglum shivered as he stared towards the bleak cliffs ahead. "Winter is near and I'd rather be domiciled at some friendly tavern than roaming abroad. When this business is done with the sorcerer, what say we head for Jadmar or one of the other big Vilmirian cities and see what mood the warmer clime puts us in?"

But Elric did not reply. His strange eyes stared into the darkness and they seemed to be peering into the depths of his own soul and not liking what they saw.

Moonglum sighed and pursed his lips. He huddled deeper in his cloak and rubbed his hands to warm them. He was used to his friend's sudden lapses of silence, but familiarity did not make him enjoy them any better. From somewhere on the shore a nightbird shrieked and a small animal squealed. The sailors grunted as they pulled on their oars.

The moon came out from behind the clouds and it shone on Elric's grim, white face, made his crimson
eyes seem to glow like the coals of hell, revealed the barren cliffs of the shore.
The sailors shipped their oars as the boat's bottom ground on shingle. The horses, smelling land, snorted and moved their hooves. Elric and Moonglum rose to steady them.
Two seamen leaped into the cold water and brought the boat up higher. Another patted the neck of Elric's horse and did not look directly at the albino as he spoke. "The captain said you would pay me when we reached the Lormyrian shore, my lord."
Elric grunted and reached under his cloak. He drew out a jewel that shone brightly through the darkness of the night. The sailor gasped and stretched out his hand to take it. "Xiombarg's blood, I have never seen so fine a gem!"
Elric began to lead the horse into the shallows and Moonglum hastily followed him, cursing under his breath and shaking his head from side to side.
Laughing among themselves, the sailors shoved the boat back into deeper water.
As Elric and Moonglum mounted their horses and the boat pulled through the darkness towards the ship, Moonglum said: "That jewel was worth a hundred times the cost of our passage!"
"What of it?" Elric fitted his feet in his stirrups and made his horse walk towards a part of the cliff which was less steep than the rest. He stood up in his stirrups for a moment to adjust his cloak and settle himself more firmly in his saddle. "There is a path here, by the look of it. Much overgrown."
"I would point out," Moonglum said bitterly, "that if it were left to you, Lord Elric, we should have no means of livelihood at all. If I had not taken the precaution of retaining some of the profits made from the sale of that trireme we captured and auctioned in Dhakos, we should be paupers now."
"Aye," returned Elric carelessly, and he spurred his horse up the path that led to the top of the cliff.
In frustration Moonglum shook his head, but he followed the albino.
By dawn they were riding over the undulating landscape of small hills and valleys that made up the terrain of Lormyr's most northerly peninsula.
"Since Theleb K'aarna must needs live off rich patrons," Elric explained as they rode, "he will almost certainly go to the capital, Iosaz, where King Montan rules. He will seek service with some noble, perhaps King Montan himself."
"And how soon shall we see the capital, Lord Elric?"
Moonglum looked up at the clouds.
"It is several days' ride, Master Moonglum."
Moonglum sighed. The sky bore signs of snow and the tent he carried rolled behind his saddle was of thin silk, suitable for the hotter lands of the East and West.
He thanked his gods that he wore a thick quilted jerkin beneath his breastplate and that before he had left the ship he had pulled on a pair of woollen breeks to go beneath the gaudier breeks of red silk that were his outer wear. His conical cap of fur, iron and leather had earflaps which were now drawn tightly and secured by a thong beneath his chin and his heavy deer-skin cape was drawn closely around his shoulders. Elric, for his part, seemed not to notice the chill weather. His own cape flapped behind him. He wore breeks of deep blue silk, a high collared shirt of black silk, a steel breastplate lacquered a gleaming black, like his helmet, and embossed with patterns of delicate silverwork. Behind his saddle were deep panniers and across this was a bow and a quiver of arrows. At his side swung the huge runesword Stormbringer, the source of his strength and his misery, and on his right hip was a long dirk, presented him by Queen Yishana of Jharkor.
Moonglum bore a similar bow and quiver. On each hip was a sword, one short and straight, the other long and curved, after the fashion of the men of Elwher, his homeland. Both blades were in scabbards of beautifully worked Ilmioran leather, embellished with stitching of scarlet and gold thread.
Together the pair looked, to those who had not heard of them, like free travelling mercenaries who had been more successful than most in their chosen careers.
Their horses bore them tirelessly through the country-side. These were tall Shazarian steeds, known all over the Young Kingdoms for their stamina and intelligence.

After several weeks cooped up in the hold of the Tarke-shite ship they were glad to be moving again. Now small villages-squat houses of stone and thatch-came in sight, but Elric and Moonglum were careful to avoid them.

Lormyr was one of the oldest of the Young Kingdoms and much of the world's history had been made there. Even the Melniboneans had heard the tales of Lormyr's hero of ancient times, Aubec of Malador of the province of Klant, who was said to have carved new lands from the stuff of Chaos that had once existed at the World's Edge. But Lormyr had long since declined from her peak of power (though still a major nation of the South-west) and had mellowed into a nation that was at once picturesque and cultured. Elric and Moonglum passed pleasant farmsteads, well-nurtured fields, vineyards and orchards in which the golden-leaved trees were sur-rounded by time-worn, moss-grown walls. A sweet land and a peaceful land in contrast to the rawer, bustling North-western nations of Jharkor, Tarkesh and Dhari-jor which they had left behind.

Moonglum gazed around him as they slowed their horses to a trot. "Theleb K'aarna could work much mis-chief here, Elric. I am reminded of the peaceful hills and plains of Elwher, my own land."

Elric nodded. "Lormyr's years of turbulence ended when she cast off Melnibone's shackles and was first to proclaim herself a free nation. I have a liking for this restful landscape. It soothes me. Now we have another reason for finding the sorcerer before he begins to stir his brew of corruption."

Moonglum smiled quietly. "Be careful, my lord, for you are once again succumbing to those soft emotions you so despise. . . ."

Elric straightened his back. "Come. Let's make haste for Iosaz."
"The sooner we reach a city with a decent tavern and a warm fire, the better." Moonglum drew his cape tighter about his thin body.

"Then pray that the sorcerer's soul is soon sent to Limbo, Master Moonglum, for then I'll be content to sit before the fire all winter long if it suits you."

And Elric made his horse break into a sudden gallop as grey evening closed over the tranquil hills.

CHAPTER TWO

White Face Staring Through Snow

Lormyr was famous for her great rivers. It was her rivers that had helped make her rich and had kept her strong.

After three days' travelling, when a light snow had begun to drift from the sky, Elric and Moonglum rode out of the hills and saw before them the foaming waters of the Schlan River, tributary of the Zaphra-Trepek which flowed from beyond Iosaz down to the sea at Trepesaz.

No ships sailed the Schlan at this point, for there were rapids and huge waterfalls every few miles, but at the old town of Stagasaz, built where the Schlan joined the Zaphra-Trepek, Elric planned to send Moonglum into town and buy a small boat in which they could sail up the Zaphra-Trepek to Iosaz where Theleb K'aarna was almost certain to be.

They followed the banks of the Schlan now, riding hard and hoping to reach the outskirts of the town before nightfall. They rode past fishing villages and the houses of minor nobles, they were occasionally hailed by friendly fishermen who trawled the quieter reaches of the river, but they did not stop. The fishermen were typical of the area, with ruddy features and huge curl-ing moustaches, dressed in heavily embroidered linen smocks and leather boots that reached almost to their thighs; men who in past times had been ever ready to lay down their nets, pick up swords and halberds and mount horses to go to the defence of their homeland.

"Could we not borrow one of their boats?" Moonglum suggested. But Elric shook his head. "The fishermen of the Schlan are well known for their gossiping. The news of our presence might well precede us and warn Theleb K'aarna."
"You seem needlessly cautious. ..."
"I have lost him too often."

More rapids came in sight. Great black rocks glistened in the gloom and roaring water gushed over them, sending spray high into the air. There were no houses or villages here and the paths beside the banks were narrow and treacherous so that Elric and Moon-glum were forced to slow their pace and make their way with caution.

Moonglum shouted over the noise of the water:
"We'll not reach Stagasaz by nightfall now!"
Elric nodded. "We'll make camp below the rapids. There."

The snow was still falling and the wind drove it against their faces so that it became even more difficult to pick their way along the narrow track that now wound high above the river. But at last the tumult began to die and the track widened out and the waters calmed and, with relief, they looked about them over the plain to find a likely camping place.

It was Moonglum who saw them first. His finger was unsteady as he pointed into the sky towards the north. "Elric. What make you of those?"
Elric peered up into the lowering sky, brushing snowflakes from his face. His expression was at first puzzled. His brow fur-rowed and his eyes narrowed.

Black shapes against the sky. Winged shapes.

It was impossible at this distance to judge then: scale, but they did not fly the way birds fly. Elric was reminded of another flying creature—a creature he had last seen when he and the Seallords fled burning Imrryr and the folk of Melnibone had released their vengeance upon the reavers. That vengeance had taken two forms.
The first form had been the golden battle-barges which had waited for the attack as they left the Dreaming City.
The second form had been the great dragons of the Bright Empire.

And these creatures in the distance had something of the look of dragons. Had the Melniboneans discovered a means of waking the dragons before the end of their normal sleeping time? Had they unleashed their dragons to seek out Elric, who had slain his own kin, betrayed his own un-human kind in order to have revenge on his cousin Yyrkoon who had usurped Elric's place on the Ruby Throne of Imrryr?

Now Elric's expression hardened into a grim mask. His crimson eyes shone like polished rubies. His left hand fell upon the hilt of his great black battleblade, the runesword Stormbringer, and he controlled a rising sense of horror.

For now, in mid-air, the shapes had changed. No longer did they have the appearance of dragons, but this time they seemed to be like multicoloured swans, whose gleaming feathers caught and diffracted the few remaining rays of light.

Moonglum gasped as they came nearer.
"They are huge!"
"Draw your swords, friend Moonglum. Draw them now and pray to whatever gods rule over Elwher. For these are creatures of sorcery and they are doubtless sent by Theleb K'aarna to destroy us. My respect for that conjurer increases."
"What are they, Elric?"
"Creatures of Chaos. In Melnibone" they are called the Oonai. They can change shape at will. A sorcerer of great mental discipline, of superlative powers, who knows the apposite spells can master them and determine their appearance. Some of my ancestors could do such things, but I thought no mere conjurer of Pan Tang could master the chimerae!"
"Do you know no spell to counter them?"
"None comes readily to mind. Only a Lord of Chaos such as my patron demon Arioch could dismiss them."
Moonglum shuddered. "Then call your Arioch, I beg you!"
Elric darted a half-amused glance at Moonglum. "These creatures must fill you with great fear indeed if you are prepared to entertain the presence of Arioch, Master Moonglum."
Moonglum drew his long, curved sword. "Perhaps they have no business with us," he suggested. "But it is as well to be prepared."
Elric smiled. "Aye."
Then Moonglum drew his straight sword, curling his horse's reins around his arm.
A shrill, cackling sound from the skies.
The horses pawed at the ground.
The cackling grew louder. The creatures opened their beaks and called to one another and it was very plain now that they were indeed something other than gigantic swans, for they had curling tongues. And there were slim, sharp fangs bristling in those beaks. They changed direction slightly, winging straight for the two men.
Elric flung back his head and drew out his great sword and raised it skyward. It pulsed and moaned and a strange, black radiance poured from it, casting peculiar shadows over its owner's blanched features.
The Shazarian horse screamed and reared and words began to pour from Elric's tormented face.
"Arioch! Arioch! Arioch! Lord of the Seven Darks, Duke of Chaos, aid me! Aid me now, Arioch!"
Moonglum's own horse had backed away in panic and the little man was having great difficulty in controlling it. His own features were almost as pale as Elric's.
"Arioch!"
Overhead the chimerae began to circle.
"Arioch! Blood and souls if you will aid me now!"
Then, some yards away, a dark mist seemed to well up from nowhere. It was a boiling mist that had strange, disgusting shapes in it
"Arioch!"
The mist grew still thicker.
"Arioch! I beg you-aid me now!"
The horse pawed at the air, snorting and screaming, its eyes rolling, its nostrils flaring. Yet Elric, his lips curled back over his teeth so that he looked like a rabid wolf, continued to keep his seat as the dark mist quivered and a strange, unearthly face appeared in the upper part of the shifting column. It was a face of won-derful beauty, of absolute evil. Moonglum turned his head away, unable to regard it.
A sweet, sibilant voice issued from the beautiful mouth. The mist swirled languidly, becoming a mottled scarlet laced with emerald green.
"Greetings, Elric," said the face. "Greetings, most beloved of my children."
"Aid me, Arioch!"
"Ah," said the face, its tone full of rich regret. "Ah, that cannot be. ..."
"You must aid me!"
The chimerae had hesitated in their descent, sighting the peculiar mist.
"It is impossible, sweetest of my slaves. There are other matters afoot in the Realm of Chaos. Matters of enormous moment to which I have already referred. I offer only my blessings.
"Arioch-I beg thee!"
"Remember your oath to Chaos and remain loyal to us in spite of all. Farewell, Elric."
And the dark mist vanished.
And the chimerae came closer.
And Elric drew a racking breath while the rune-sword whined in his hand and quivered and its radiance
dimmed a little.
Moonglum spat on the ground. "A powerful patron,
Elric, but a damned inconstant one." Then he flung
himself from his saddle as a creature which changed
its shape a dozen times as it arrowed towards him
reached out huge claws which clashed in the air where he had been. The riderless horse reared again,
striking out at the beast of Chaos.
A fanged snout snapped.
Blood vomited from the place where the horse's head had been and the carcass kicked once more be-fore falling to the ground to pour more gore into the greedy earth.
Bearing the remains of the head in what was first a scaled snout, then a beak, then a sharklike mouth, the
Oonai thrashed back into the air.
Moonglum picked himself up. His eyes contem-plated nothing but his own imminent destruction.
Elric, too, leapt from his horse and slapped its flank so that convulsively it began to gallop away towards
the river. Another chimera followed it.
This tune the flying thing seized the horse's body in claws which suddenly sprouted from its feet. The
horse struggled to get free, threatening to break its own back-bone in its struggles, but it could not. The
chimera flapped towards the clouds with its catch.
Snow fell thicker now, but Elric and Moonglum were oblivious of it as they stood together and awaited
the next attack of the Oonai.
Moonglum said quietly: "Is there no other spell you know, friend Elric?"
The albino shook his head. "Nothing specific to deal with these. The Oonai always served the folk of
Melni-bone. They never threatened us. So we needed no spell against them. I am trying to think. . . ."
The chimerae cackled and yelled in the air above the two men's heads.
Then another broke away from the pack and dived to the Earth.
"They attack individually," Elric said in a somewhat detached tone, as if studying insects in a bottle.
"They never attack in a pack. I know not why."
The Oonai had settled on the ground and it had now assumed the shape of an elephant with the huge
head of a crocodile.
"Not an aesthetic combination," said Elric.
The ground shook as it charged towards them.
They stood shoulder to shoulder as it approached.
It was almost upon them-
-and at the last moment they divided, Elric throw-ing himself to one side and Moonglum to the other.
The chimera passed between them and Elric struck at the thing's side with his runesword.
The sword sang out almost lasciviously as it bit deep into the flesh which instantly changed and became
a dragon dripping flaming venom from its fangs.
But it was badly wounded.
Blood ran from the deep wound and the chimera screamed and changed shape again and again as if
seeking some form in which the wound could not exist.
Black blood now burst from its side as if the strain of the many changes had ruptured its body all the
more.
It fell to its knees and the lustre faded from its feath-ers, died from its scales, disappeared from its skin. It
kicked out once and then was still-a heavy, black, piglike creature whose lumpen body was the ugliest
Elric and Moonglum had ever seen.
Moonglum grunted.
"It is not hard to understand why such a creature should want to change its form...."
He looked up.
Another was descending.
This had the appearance of a whale with wings, but with curved fangs, like those of a stomach fish, and a
tail like an enormous corkscrew.
Even as it landed it changed shape again. Now it had assumed human form. It was a huge, beautiful
figure, twice as tall as Elric. It was naked and perfectly proportioned, but its stare was vacant and it had
the drooling lips of an idiot child. Lithely it ran at them, its huge hands reaching out to grasp them as a
child might reach for a toy.
This time Elric and Moonglum struck together, one at each hand.
Moonglum's sharp sword cut the knuckles deeply
and Elric's lopped off two fingers before the Oonai altered its shape again and began first to be an
octopus, then a monstrous tiger, then a combination of both, until at last it was a rock in which a fissure
grew to reveal white, snapping teeth.
Gasping, the two men waited for it to resume the at-tack. At the base of the rock some blood was oozing.
This put a thought into Elric's mind.
With a sudden yell he leapt forward, raised his sword over his head and brought it down on top of the
rock, splitting it in twain.
Something like a laugh issued from the black sword then as the sundered shape flickered and became an-
other of the piglike creatures. This was completely cut in two, its blood and its entrails spreading
themselves upon the ground.
Then, through the snowy dusk, another of the Oonai came down, its body a glowing orange, its shape
that of a winged snake with a thousand rippling coils.
Elric struck at the coils, but they moved too rapidly.
The other chimerae had been watching his tactics with their dead companions and they had now gauged
the skill of their victims. Almost immediately Elric's arms were pinned to his sides by the coils and he
found himself being borne upward as a second chimera with the same shape rushed down on Moonglum
to seize him in an identical way.
Elric prepared to die as the horses had died. He prayed that he would die swiftly and not slowly, at the
hands of Theleb K'aarna, who had always promised him a slow death.
The scaly wings flapped powerfully. No snout came down to snap his head off.
He felt despair as he realised that he and Moonglum were being carried swiftly northward over the great
Lormyrian steppe.
Doubtless Theleb K'aarna awaited them at the end of their journey.
CHAPTER THREE

Feathers Filling a Great Sky
Night fell and the chimerae flew on tire-lessly, their shapes black against the falling snow.
The coils showed no signs of relaxing, though Elric strove to force them apart, keeping tight hold of his
runesword and racking his brains for some means of defeating the monsters.
If only there were a spell. .. .
He tried to keep his thoughts from what Theleb K'aarna would do if, indeed, it was that wizard who had
set the Oonai upon them.
Elric's skill in sorcery lay chiefly in his command over the various elementals of air, fire, earth, water
and ether, and also over the entities who had affinities with the flora and fauna of the Earth.
He had decided that his only hope lay in summon-ing the aid of Fileet, Lady of the Birds, who dwelt in a
realm lying beyond the planes of Earth, but the invoca-tion eluded him.
Even if he could remember it, the mind had to be adjusted in a certain way, the correct rhythms of the
incantation remembered, the exact words and inflec-tions recalled, before he could begin to summon
Fileet's aid. For she, more than another elemental, was as difficult to invoke as the fickle Arioch.
Through the drifting snow he heard Moonglum call out something indistinct.
"What was that, Moonglum?" he called back.
"I only-sought to learn-if you still-lived, friend Elric."
"Aye-barely. ..."

His face was chill and ice had formed on his helmet and breastplate. His whole body ached both from the crushing coils of the chimera and from the biting cold of the upper air.

On and on through the northern night they flew while Elric forced himself to relax, to descend into a trance and to dredge from his mind the ancient knowledge of his forefathers.

At dawn the clouds had cleared and the sun's red rays spread over the snow like blood over damask. Everywhere stretched the steppe-a vast field of snow from horizon to horizon, while above it the sky was nothing but a blue sheet of ice in which sat the red pool of the sun.

And, tireless as ever, the chimerae flew on.

Elric brought himself slowly from his trance and prayed to his untrustworthy gods that he remembered the spell aright.

His lips were all but frozen together. He licked them and it was as if he licked snow. He opened them and bitter air coursed into his mouth. He coughed then, turning his head upwards, his crimson eyes glazing.

He forced his lips to frame strange syllables, to utter the old vowel-heavy words of the High Speech of Old Melnibone, a speech hardly suited to a human tongue at all.

"Fileet," he murmured. Then he began to chant the incantation. And as he chanted the sword grew warmer in his hand and supplied him with more energy so that the eldritch chant echoed through the icy sky.

Feathers fine our fates entwined
Bird and man and thine and mine,
Formed a pact that Gods divine
Hallowed on an ancient shrine,
When kind swore service unto kind.

Fileet, fair feathered queen of flight Remember now that fateful night And help your brother in his plight.

There was more to the summoning than the words of the invocation. There were the abstract thoughts in the head, the visual images which had to be retained in the mind the whole time, the emotions felt, the memories made sharp and true. Without everything being exactly right, the invocation would prove useless.

Centuries before, the Sorcerer Kings of Melnibone had struck this bargain with Fileet, Lady of the Birds: That any bird that settled in Imrryr's walls should be protected, that no bird would be shot by any of the Melnibonean blood. This bargain had been kept and dreaming Imrryr had become a haven for all species of bird and at one time they had cloaked her towers in plumage.

Now Elric chanted his verses, recalling that bargain and begging Fileet to remember her part of it.

Brothers and sisters of the sky
Hear my voice where'er ye fly
And bring me aid from kingdoms high...

Not for the first time had he called upon the elementals and those akin to them. But lately he had summoned Haaashaastaak, Lord of the Lizards, in his fight against Theleb K'aarna and still earlier he had made use of the services of the wind elementals-the sylphs, the sharnahs and the h'Haarshanns-and the earth elementals.

Yet, Fileet was fickle.
And now that Imrryr was no more than quaking ruins, she could even choose to forget that ancient pact.
He was weak from the invoking. He would not have the strength to battle Theleb K'aarna even if he found the opportunity.

And then the air was stirring and a huge shadow fell across the chimerae bearing Elric and Moonglum northward. Elric's voice faltered as he looked up. But he smiled and said:

"I thank you, Fileet."

For the sky was black with birds. There were eagles and robins and rooks and starlings and wren and kites and crows and hawks and peacocks and flamingoes and pigeons and parrots and doves and magpies and ravens and owls. Their plumage flashed like steel and the air was full of their cries. The Oonai raised its snake's head and hissed, its long tongue curling out between its front fangs, its coiled tail lashing. One of the chimerae not carrying Elric or Moonglum changed its shape into that of a gigantic condor and flapped up towards the vast array of birds.

But they were not deceived.

The chimera disappeared, submerged by birds. There was a frightful screaming and then something black and piglike spiralled to earth, blood and entrails streaming in its wake. Another chimera—the last not bearing a burden—assumed its dragon shape, almost completely identical to those which Elric had once mastered as ruler of Melnibone, but larger and with not quite the same grace as Flamefang and the others.

There was a sickening smell of burning flesh and feathers as the flaming venom fell upon Elric's allies. But now more and more birds were filling the air, shrieking and whistling and cawing and hooting, a million wings fluttering, and once again the Oonai was hidden from sight, once again a muffled scream sounded, once again a mangled, piglike corpse plummeted groundwards.

The birds divided into two masses, turning their attention to the chimerae bearing Elric and Moonglum. They sped down like two gigantic arrowheads, led, each group, by ten huge golden eagles which dived at the flashing eyes of the Oonai.

As the birds attacked, the chimerae were forced to change shape. Instantly Elric felt himself fall free. His body was numb and he fell like a stone, remembering only to keep his grip on Stormbringer, and as he fell he cursed at the irony. He had been saved from the beasts of Chaos only to hurtle to his death on the snow-covered ground below.

But then his cloak was caught from above and he hung swaying in the air. Looking up he saw that several eagles had grasped his clothing in their claws and beaks and were slowing his descent so that he struck the snow with little more than a painful bump.

The eagles flew back to the fray.

A few yards away Moonglum came down, deposited by another flight of eagles which immediately returned to where their comrades were fighting the remaining Oonai. Moonglum picked up the sword which had fallen from his hand. He rubbed his right calf. "I'll do my best never to eat fowl again," he said feelingly. "So you remembered a spell, eh?"

"Aye."

Two more piglike corpses thudded down not far away.

For a few moments the birds performed a strange, wheeling dance in the sky, partly a salute to the two men, partly a dance of triumph, and then they divided into their groups of species and flew rapidly away.

Elric picked up his bruised body and stiffly he sheathed his sword Stormbringer. He drew a deep breath and peered upwards.

"Fileet, I thank thee again."

Moonglum still seemed dazed. "How did you sum-mon them, Elric?"
Elric removed his helmet and wiped sweat from within the rim. In this clime that sweat would soon turn to ice. "An ancient bargain my ancestors made. I was hard-pressed to remember the lines of the spell."
"I'm mightily pleased that you did remember!"
Absently, Elric nodded. He replaced his helmet on his head, staring about him as he did so.
Everywhere stretched the vast, snow-covered Lor-myrian steppe.
Moonglum understood Elric's thoughts. He rubbed his chin.
"Aye. We are fairly lost, Lord Elric. Have you any idea where we may be?"
"I do not know, friend Moonglum. We have no means of guessing how far those beasts carried us, but I'm fairly sure it was well to the north of Iosaz. We are further away from the capital than we were. . . ."
"But then so must Theleb K'aarna be! If we were, indeed, being borne to where he dwells. . . ."
"It would be logical, I agree."
"So we continue north?"
"I think not."
"Why so?"
"For two reasons. It could be that Theleb K'aarna's idea was to take us to a place so far away from anywhere that we could not interfere with his plans. That might be considered a wiser action than confronting us and thus risking our turning the tables on him. . . ."
"Aye, I'll grant you that. And what's the other reason?"
"We would do better to try to make for Iosaz where we can replenish both our gear and our provisions and enquire of Theleb K'aarna's whereabouts if he is not there. Also we would be foolish to strike further north without good horses and in Iosaz we shall find horses and perhaps a sleigh to carry us the faster across this snow."
"And I'll grant you the sense of that, too. But I do not think much of our chances in this snow, whichever way we go."
"We must begin walking and hope that we can find a river that has not yet frozen over-and that the river will have boats upon it which will bear us to Iosaz."
"A faint hope, Elric."
"Aye. A faint hope." Elric was already weakened from the energy spent in the invocation to Fileet. He knew that he must almost certainly die. He was not sure that he cared overmuch. It would be a cleaner death than some he had been offered of late—a less painful death than any he might expect at the hands of the sorcerer of Pan Tang.
They began to trudge through the snow. Slowly they headed south, two small figures in a frozen landscape, two tiny specks of warm flesh in a great waste of ice.
CHAPTER FOUR
Old Castle Standing Alone
A day passed, a night passed.
Then the evening of the second day passed and the two men staggered on, for all that they had long since lost their sense of direction.
Night fell and they crawled.
They could not speak. Their bones were stiff, their flesh and their muscles numb.
Cold and exhaustion drove the very sentience from them so that when they fell in the snow and lay motionless they were scarcely aware that they had ceased to move. They understood no difference now between life and death, between existence and the cessation of existence.
And when the sun rose and warmed their flesh a little they stirred and raised their heads, perhaps in an effort to catch one last glimpse of the world they were leaving.
And they saw the castle.
It stood there in the middle of the steppe and it was ancient. Snow covered the moss and the lichen which grew on its worn, old stones. It seemed to have been there for eternity, yet neither Elric nor Moonglum
had ever heard of such a castle standing alone in the steppe. It was hard to imagine how a castle so old could exist in the land once known as World's Edge.

Moonglum was the first to rise. He stumbled through the deep snow to where Elric lay. With chapped hands he tried to lift his friend.

The tide of Elric's thin blood had almost ceased to move in his body. He moaned as Moonglum helped him to his feet. He tried to speak, but his lips were frozen shut.

Clutching each other, sometimes walking, sometimes crawling, they progressed towards the castle. Its entrance stood open. They fell through it and the warmth issuing from the ulterior revived them sufficiently to allow them to rise and stagger down a narrow passage into a great hall.

It was an empty hall.

It was completely bare of furnishings, save for a huge log fire that blazed in a hearth of granite and quartz built at the far end of the hall. They crossed flagstones of lapis lazuli to reach it.

"So the castle is inhabited."

Moonglum's voice was harsh and thick in his mouth. He stared around him at the basalt walls. He raised his voice as best he could and called:

"Greetings to whoever is the master of this hall. We are Moonglum of Elwher and Elric of Melnibone and we crave your hospitality, for we are lost in your land."

And then Elric's knees buckled and he fell to the floor.

Moonglum stumbled towards him as the echoes of his voice died in the hall. All was silent save for the crackling of the logs in the hearth.

Moonglum dragged Elric to the fire and lay him down near it.

"Warm your bones here, friend Elric. I'll seek the folk who live here."

Then he crossed the hall and ascended the stone stair leading to the next floor of the castle.

This floor was as bereft of furniture or decoration as the other. There were many rooms, but all of them were empty. Moonglum began to feel uneasy, scenting something of the supernatural here. Could this be Theleb K'aarna's castle?

For someone dwelt here, in truth. Someone had laid the fire and had opened the gates so that they might enter. And they had not left the castle in the ordinary way or he should have noticed the tracks in the snow outside.

Moonglum paused, then turned and slowly began to descend the stairs. Reaching the hall, he saw that Elric had revived enough to prop himself up against the chimneypiece.

"And-what-found you . . ." said Elric thickly.

Moonglum shrugged. "Nought. No servants. No mas-ter. If they have gone a-hunting, then they hunt on flying beasts, for there are no signs of hoofprints in the snow outside. I am a little nervous, I must admit." He smiled slightly. "Aye-and a little hungry, too. I'll seek the pantry. If danger comes, we'd do as well to face it on full stomachs."

There was a door set back and to one side of the hearth. He tried the latch and it opened into a short passage at the end of which was another door. He went down the passage, hand on sword, and opened the door at the end. A parlour, as deserted as the rest of the castle. And beyond the parlour he saw the castle's kitchens. He went through the kitchens, noting that there were cooking things here, all polished and clean but none in use, and came finally to the pantry.

Here he found the best part of a large deer hanging and on the shelf above it were ranked many skins and jars of wine. Below this shelf were bread and some pasties and below that spices.

Moonglum's first action was to reach up on tiptoe and take down a jar of wine, removing the cork and sniffing the contents.

He had smelled nothing more delicate or delicious in his life.

He tasted the wine and he forgot his pain and his weariness. But he did not forget that Elric still waited in
With his short sword he cut off a haunch of venison and tucked it under his arm. He selected some spices and put them into his belt-pouch. Under his other arm he put the bread and in both hands he carried a jar of wine.

He returned to the hall, put down his spoils and helped Elric drink from the jar. The strange wine worked almost instantly and Elric offered Moonglum a smile that had gratitude in it.

"You are a good friend—I wonder why..."

Moonglum turned away with an embarrassed grunt. He began to prepare the meat which he intended to roast over the fire.

He had never understood his friendship with the al-bino. It had always been a peculiar mixture of reserve and affection, a fine balance which both men were careful to maintain, even in situations of this kind. Elric, since his passion for Cymoril had resulted in her death and the destruction of the city he loved, had at all times feared bestowing any tender emotion on those he fell in with.

He had run away from Shaailla of the Dancing Mist, who had loved him dearly. He had fled from Queen Yishana of Jharkor, who had offered him her kingdom to rule, in spite of her subjects' hatred of him. He disdained most company save Moonglum's, and Moon-glum, too, became quickly bored by anyone other than the crimson-eyed Prince of Imrryr. Moonglum would die for Elric and he knew that Elric would risk any danger to save his friend. But was not this an unhealthy relationship? Would it not be better if they went their different ways? He could not bear the thought. It was as if they were part of the same entity—different aspects of the character of the same man.

He could not understand why he should feel this. And he guessed that, if Elric had ever considered the question, the Melnibonean would be equally hard put to find an answer.

He contemplated all this as he roasted the meat before the fire, using his long sword as a spit.

Meanwhile Elric took another draft of wine and began, almost visibly, to thaw out. His skin was still badly blistered by chilblains, but both men had escaped serious frostbite.

They ate the venison in silence, glancing around the hall, puzzling over the non-appearance of the owner, yet too tired to care greatly where he was. Then they slept, having put fresh logs on the fire, and in the morning they were almost completely recovered from their ordeal in the snow.

They breakfasted on cold venison and pasties and wine. Moonglum found a pot and heated water in it so that they might shave and wash and Elric found some salve in his pouch which they could put on their blisters.

"I looked in the stables," Moonglum said as he shaved with the razor he had taken from his own pouch. "But I found no horses. There are signs, however, that some beasts have been kept there recently."

"There is only one other way to travel," Elric said. "There might be skis somewhere in the castle. It is the sort of thing you might expect to find, for there is snow in these parts for at least half the year. Skis would speed our progress back towards Iosaz. As would a map and a lodestone if we could find one."

Moonglum agreed. "I'll search the upper levels." He finished his shaving, wiped his razor and replaced it in his pouch.

Elric got up. "I'll go with you."

Through the empty rooms they wandered, but they found nothing.

"No gear of any kind." Elric frowned. "And yet there is a strong sense that the castle is inhabited—and evidence, too, of course."

They searched two more floors and there was not even dust in the rooms.

"Well, perhaps we walk after all," Moonglum said in resignation. "Unless there was wood with which we could manufacture skis of some kind. I might have seen some in the stables. . . ."

They had reached a narrow stair which wound up the highest tower of the castle.

"We'll try this and then count our quest unsuccessful," Elric said.

And so they climbed the stair and came to a door at
the top which was half-open. Elric pushed it back and then he hesitated.
"What is it?" Moonglum, who was below him, asked.
"This room is furnished," Elric said quietly.
Moonglum ascended two more steps and peered round Elric's shoulder. He gasped.
"And occupied!"
It was a beautiful room. Through crystal windows came pale light which sparkled and fell on hangings of many-coloured silk, on embroidered carpets and tapestries of hues so fresh they might have been made only a moment before.
In the centre of this room was a bed, draped in ermine, with a canopy of white silk.
And on the bed lay a young woman.
Her hair was black and it shone. Her gown was of the deepest scarlet. Her limbs were like rose-tinted ivory and her face was very fair, the lips slightly parted as she breathed.
She was asleep.
Elric took two steps towards the woman on the bed and then he stopped suddenly. He was shuddering.
He turned away.
Moonglum was alarmed. He saw bright tears in Elric's crimson eyes.
"What is it, friend Elric?"
Elric moved his white lips but was incapable of speech. Something like a groan came from his throat.
"Elric...."
Moonglum placed a hand on his friend's arm. Elric shook it off.
Slowly the albino turned again towards the bed, as if forcing himself to behold an impossibly horrifying sight. He breathed deeply, straightening his back and resting his left hand on the pommel of his sorcerous blade.
"Moonglum...."
He was forcing himself to speak. Moonglum glanced at the woman on the bed, glanced at Elric. Did he recognise her?
"Moonglum-this is a sorcerous sleep...."
"How know you that?"
"It-it is a similar slumber to that in which my cousin Yyrkoon put my Cymoril. ..."
"Gods! Think you that...?"
"I think nothing!"
"But it is not-
"-it is not Cymoril. I know. I-she is like her-so like her. But unlike her, too. ... It is only that I could not have expected. ..."
Elric bowed his head.
He spoke in a low voice. "Come, let's be gone from here."
"But she must be the owner of this castle. If we awakened her we could-
"She cannot be awakened by such as we. I told you, Moonglum. . . ." Elric drew another deep breath. "It is an enchanted sleep she is in. I could not wake Cymoril from it, with all my powers of sorcery. Unless one has certain magical aids, some knowledge of the exact spell used, there is nothing that can be done. Quickly, Moonglum, let us depart."
There was an edge to Elric's voice which made Moon-glum shiver.
"But..."
"Then I will go!"
Elric almost ran from the room. Moonglum heard his footsteps echoing rapidly down the long staircase.
He went up to the sleeping woman and stared down at her beauty.
He touched the skin. It was unnaturally cold. He shrugged and made to leave the chamber, pausing for
a moment only to notice that a number of ancient battle-shields and weapons hung on one wall of the room, behind the bed. Strange trophies with which a beautiful woman should wish to decorate her bedroom, he thought. He saw the carved wooden table below the trophies. Something lay upon it. He stepped back into the room. A peculiar sensation filled him as he saw that it was a map. The castle was marked and so was the Zaphra-Trepek river. Holding the map down to the table was a lodestone, set in silver on a long silver chain. He grabbed the map in one hand and the lodestone in the other and ran from the room.
"Elric! Elric!"
He raced down the stairs and reached the hall. Elric had gone. The door of the hall was open. He followed the albino out of the mysterious castle and into the snow.
"Elric!"
Elric turned, his face set and his eyes tormented. Moonglum showed him the map and the lodestone.
"We are saved, after all, Elric!"
Elric looked down at the snow. "Aye. So we are."
CHAPTER FIVE
Doomed Lord Dreaming
And two days later they reached the upper reaches of the Zaphra-Trepek and the trading town of Alorasaz with its towers of finely carved wood and its beautifully made timber houses. To Alorasaz came the fur trappers and the miners, the merchants from Iosaz, downriver, or from afar as Trepesaz on the coast. A cheerful, bustling town with its streets lit and heated by great, red braziers at every corner. These were tended by citizens specially commissioned to keep them burning hot and bright. Wrapped in thick woollen clothing, they hailed Elric and Moon-glum as they entered the city. For all they had been sustained by the wine and meat Moonglum had thought to bring, they were weary from their walk across the steppe. They made their way through the rumbustious crowd -laughing, red-cheeked women and burly, fur-swathed men whose breath steamed in the air, mingling with the smoke from the braziers, as they took huge swallows from gourds of beer or skins of wine, conducting their business with the slightly less bucolic merchants of the more sophisticated townships.

Elric was looking for news and he knew that if he found it anywhere it would be in the taverns. He waited while Moonglum followed his nose to the best of Alorasaz's inns and came back with the news of where it could be found. They walked a short distance and entered a rowdy tavern crammed with big, wooden tables and benches on which were jammed more traders and more merchants all arguing cheerfully, holding up furs to display their quality or to mock their worthlessness, depending on which point of view was taken. Moonglum left Elric standing in the doorway and went to speak with the landlord, a hugely fat man with a glistening scarlet face.
Elric saw the landlord bend and listen to Moonglum. The man nodded and raised an arm to bellow at Elric to follow him and Moonglum. Elric inched his way through the press and was knocked half off his feet by a gesticulating trader who apologised cheerfully and profusely and offered to buy him a drink.
"It is nothing," Elric said faintly. The man got up. "Come on, sir, it was my fault. . ." His voice tailed off as he saw the albino's face. He
mumbled something and sat down again, making a wry remark to one of his companions. Elric followed Moonglum and the landlord up a flight of swaying wooden stairs, along a landing and into a private room which, the landlord told them, was all that was available. "Such rooms as these are expensive during the winter market," the landlord said apologetically. And Moonglum winced as, silently, Elric handed the man another precious ruby worth a small fortune. The landlord looked at it carefully and then laughed. "This inn will have fallen down before your credit's up, master. I thank thee. Trading must be good this sea-son! I'll have drink and viands sent up at once!" "The finest you have, landlord," said Moonglum, try-ing to make the best of things. "Aye-I wish I had better."

Elric sat down on one of the beds and removed his cloak and his sword-belt. The chill had not left his bones. "I wish you would give me charge of our wealth," Moonglum said as he removed his boots by the fire. "We might have need of it before this quest is ended."

But Elric seemed not to hear him.

After they had eaten and discovered from the land-lord that a ship was leaving the day after tomorrow for Iosaz, Elric and Moonglum went to their separate beds to sleep. Elric's dreams were troubled that night. More than usual did phantoms come to walk the dark corridors of his mind.

He saw Cymoril screaming as the Black Sword drank her soul. He saw Imrryr burning, her fine towers crum-bling. He saw his cackling cousin Yyrkoon sprawling on the Ruby Throne. He saw other things which could not possibly be part of his past. . . .

Never quite suited to be ruler of the cruel folk of Melnibone, Elric had wandered the lands of men only to discover that he had no place there, either. And in the meantime Yyrkoon had usurped the kingship, had tried to force Cymoril to be his and, when she refused, put her into a deep and sorcerous slumber from which only he could wake her.

Now Elric dreamed that he had found a Nanorion, the mystic gem which could awaken even the dead. He dreamed that Cymoril was still alive, but sleeping, and that he placed the Nanorion on her forehead and that she woke up and kissed him and left Imrryr with him, sailing through the skies on Flamefang, the great Melni-bonean battle dragon, away to a peaceful castle in the snow.

He awoke with a start.

It was the dead of night.

Even the noise from the tavern below had subsided.

He opened his eyes and saw Moonglum fast asleep in the next bed. He tried to return to sleep, but it was impossible. He was sure that he could sense another presence in the room. He reached out and gripped the hilt of Storm-bringer, prepared to defend himself should any attackers strike at him. Perhaps it was thieves who had heard of his generosity towards the innkeeper? He heard something move in the room and, again, he opened his eyes.

She was standing there, her black hair curling over her shoulders, her scarlet gown clinging to her body. Her lips curved in a smile of irony and her eyes re-garded him steadily.

She was the woman he had seen in the castle. The sleeping woman. Was this part of the dream? "Forgive me for thus intruding upon your slumber and your privacy, my lord, but my business is urgent and I have little time to spare."

Elric saw that Moonglum still slept as if in a drugged slumber. He sat upright in his bed. Stormbringer moaned softly and then was silent. "You seem to know me, my lady, but I do not-"

"I am called Myshella. . . ."

"Empress of the Dawn?"

She smiled again. "Some have named me that. And others have called me the Dark Lady of Kaneloon."

"Whom Aubec loved? Then you must have preserved your youth carefully, Lady Myshella."
"No doing of mine. It is possible that I am immortal. I do not know. I know only one thing and that is that Time is a deception. . . ."
"Why do you come?"
"I cannot stay for long. I come to seek your aid."
"In what way?"
"We have an enemy in common, I believe."
"Theleb K'aarna?"
"The same."
"Did he place that enchantment upon you that made you sleep?"
"Aye."
"And he sent his Oonai against me. That is how-."
She raised her hand.
"I sent the chimerae to find you and bring you to me. They meant you no harm. But it was the only thing I could do, for Theleb K'aarna's spell was already beginning to work. I battle his sorcery, but it is strong and I am unable to revive myself for more than very short periods. This is one such period. Theleb K'aarna has joined forces with Prince Umbda, Lord of the Kelmain Hosts. Their plan is to conquer Lormyr and, ultimately, the entire Southern world!"
"Who is this Umbda? I have heard neither of him nor of the Kelmain Hosts. Some noble of Iosaz, perhaps, who . . ."
"Prince Umbda serves Chaos. He comes from the lands beyond World's Edge and his Kelmain are not men at all, though they have the appearance of men."
"So Theleb K'aarna was in the far south, after all."
"That is why I came to you tonight."
"You wish me to help you?"
"We both need Theleb K'aarna destroyed. His sorcery is what enabled Prince Umbda to cross World's Edge. Now that sorcery is strengthened by what Umbda brings—the friendship of Chaos. I protect Lormyr and I serve Law. I know that you serve Chaos, yet I hope your hatred of Theleb K'aarna overcomes that loyalty for the moment."
"Chaos has not served me, of late, lady, so I'll for-get that loyalty. I would have my vengeance on Theleb K'aarna and if we can help each other in the matter, so much the better."
"Good."
She gasped then and her eyes glazed. When next she spoke it was with some difficulty.
"The enchantment is exerting its hold again. I have a steed for you near the town's north gate. It will bear you to an island in the Boiling Sea. On that island is a palace called Ashaneloon. It is there that I have dwelt of late, until I sensed Lormyr's danger . . ."
She pressed her hand to her brow and swayed.
". . . But Theleb K'aarna expected me to try to re-turn there and he placed a guardian at the palace's gate. That guardian must be destroyed. When you have de-stroyed it you must go to the . . ."
Elric rose to help her, but she waved him away.
". . . to the eastern tower. In the tower's lower room is a chest. In the chest is a large pouch of cloth-of-gold.
You must take that and bring it back to Kaneloon, for Umbda and his Kelmain now march against the castle. Theleb K'aarna will destroy the castle with their help and destroy me, also. With the pouch, I may destroy them. But pray that I am able to wake, or the South is doomed and even you will not be able to go against the power that Theleb K'aarna will wield."
"What of Moonglum?" Elric glanced at his sleeping friend. "Can he accompany me?"
"Best not. Besides, he has a light enchantment upon him. There is no time to wake him. . . ." She gasped again and flung her arms across her forehead. "No time. . . ."
Elric leaped from the bed and began to pull on his breeks. He took his cloak from where it was draped across a stool and he buckled on his runesword. He went forward to help her, but she signalled him away.
"No. . . Go, please. . . ."
And she vanished.
Still half asleep Elric flung open the door and dashed down the stairs, out into the night, racing for the north gate of Alorosaz, passing through it and running on through the snow, looking this way and that. The cold flooded over him like a sudden wave. He was soon knee-deep in snow. Peering about him he carried on until he stopped in his tracks.
He gasped in astonishment when he saw the steed which Myshella had provided for him.
"What's this? Another chimera?"
He approached it cautiously.

CHAPTER SIX
Jewelled Bird Speaking
It was a bird, but it was not a bird of flesh and blood.
It was a bird of silver and of gold and of brass. Its wings clashed as he approached it and it moved its huge clawed feet impatiently, turning cold, emerald eyes to regard him.
On its back was a saddle of carved onyx chased in gold and copper and the saddle was empty, awaiting him.
"Well, I began all this unquestioningly," Elric said to himself. "I might as well complete it in the same manner."
And he went up to the bird and he climbed up its side and he lowered himself somewhat cautiously into the saddle.
The wings of gold and silver flapped with the sound of a hundred cymbals meeting and with three movements had taken the bird of metal and its rider high up into the night sky above Alorosaz. It turned its bright head on its neck of brass and it opened its curved beak of gem-studded steel.
"Well, master, I am commanded to take thee to Ash-analoon."
Elric waved a pale hand. "Wherever you will. I am at the mercy of you and your mistress."
And then he was jerked backward in the saddle as the bird's wings beat the stronger and it gathered speed and he was rushing through the freezing night, over snowy plains, over mountains, over rivers, until the coast came in sight and he saw the sea in the west which was called the Boiling Sea.
Down through the pitch blackness dropped the bird of gold and silver and now Elric felt damp heat strike his face and hands, heard a peculiar bubbling sound, and he knew they were flying over that strange sea said to be fed by volcanoes lying deep below its surface, a sea where no ships sailed.
Steam surrounded them now. Its heat was almost unbearable, but through it Elric began to make out the silhouette of a landmass, a small rocky island on which stood a single building and slender towers and turrets and domes.
"The palace of Ashaneloon," said the bird of silver and gold. "I will alight among the battlements, master, but I fear that thing you must meet before our errand is accomplished, so I will await you elsewhere. Then, if you live, I will return to take you back to Kaneloon. And, if you die, I will go back to tell my mistress of your failure."
Over the battlements the bird now hovered, its wings beating, and Elric reflected that there would be no advantage of surprise over whatever it was the bird feared so much.
He swung one leg from the saddle, paused, and then leapt down to the flat roof.
Hastily the bird retreated into the black sky. Elric was alone. All was silent, save for the drumming of warm waves on a distant shore. He located the eastern tower and began to make his way towards the door. There was some chance, perhaps, that he could complete his quest without the necessity of facing the palace's guardian. But then a monstrous bellow sounded behind him and he wheeled, knowing that this must be the guardian. A creature stood there, its red-rimmed eyes full of insensate malice. "So you are Theleb K'aarna's slave," said Elric. He reached for Stormbringer and the sword seemed to spring into his hand at its own volition. "Must I kill you, or will you be gone now?"

The albino said: "I am Elric of Melnibone", last of a line of great sorcerer kings. This blade I wield will do more than kill you, friend demon. It will drink your soul and feed it to me. Perhaps you have heard of me by another name? By the name of the Soul Thief?"

The creature lashed its serrated tail and its bovine nostrils distended. The horned head swayed on the short neck and the long teeth gleamed in the darkness. It reached out scaly claws and began to lumber towards the Prince of Ruins. Elric took the sword in both hands and spread his feet wide apart on the flagstones and prepared to meet the monster's charge. Foul breath struck his face. Another bellow and then it was upon him.

Stormbringer howled and spilled black radiance over both. The runes carved in the blade glowed with a greedy glow as the thing of Hell slashed at Elric's body with its claws, ripping the shirt from him and baring his chest.

Elric fell back, losing his footing on the stones. He almost went down, but recovered his balance and defended himself as best he could. The claws slashed at him, but Stormbringer drove them to one side. Elric began to pant and the sweat poured down his face and he felt desperation well in him and then that desperation took a different quality and his eyes glowed and his lips snarled. "Know you that I am Elric!" he cried. "Elric!"

Still the creature attacked. "I am Elric-more demon than man! Begone, you ill-shaped thing!"

The creature bellowed and pounced and this time Elric did not fall back, but, his face writhing in terrible rage, reversed his grip on the runesword and plunged it point first into the demon's open jaws.

He plunged the Black Sword down the stinking throat, down into the torso. He wrenched the blade so that it split jaw, neck, chest and groin and the creature's life force began to course along the length of the runesword. The claws lashed out at him, but the creature was weakening. Then the life force pulsed up the blade and reached Elric who gasped and screamed in dark ecstasy as the demon's energy poured into him. He withdrew the blade and hacked and hacked at the body and still the life-force flowed into him and gave greater power to his blows. The demon groaned and dropped to the flagstones.

And it was done.

And a white-faced demon stood over the dead thing of Hell and its crimson eyes blazed and its pale mouth opened and it roared with wild laughter, flinging its arms upward, the runesword flaming with a black and horrid flame, and it howled a wordless, exultant song to the Lords of Chaos. There was silence suddenly.

And then it bowed its head and it wept.
Now Elric opened the door to the eastern tower and stumbled through absolute blackness until he came to the lowest room. The door to the room was locked and barred, but Stormbringer smashed through it and the Last Lord of Melnibone entered a lighted room in which squatted a chest of iron. His sword sundered the bands securing the chest and he flung open the lid and saw that there were many wonders in the chest, as well as the pouch made from cloth-of-gold, but he picked out only the pouch and tucked it into his belt as he raced from the room, back to the battlements where the bird of silver and gold stood pecking with its steel beak at the remnants of Theleb K'aarna's servant. It looked up as Elric returned. In its eyes was an expression almost of humour. "Well, master, we must make haste to Kaneloon."
"Aye."
Nausea had begun to fill Elric. His eyes were gloomy as he contemplated the corpse and that which he had stolen from it. Such life force, whatever else it was, must surely be tainted. Did not he drink something of the demon's evil when his sword drank its soul? He was about to climb back into the onyx saddle when he saw something gleaming amongst the black and yellow entrails he had spilled. It was the demon's heart—an irregularly shaped stone of deep blue and purple and green. It still pulsed, though its owner was dead. Elric stooped and picked it up. It was wet and so hot that it almost burned his hand, but he tucked it into his pouch, then mounted the bird of silver and gold. His bone-white face flickered with a dozen strange emotions as he let the bird bear him back over the Boiling Sea. His milk-white hair flew wildly behind him and he was oblivious of the wounds on his arm and chest.
He was thinking of other things. Some of his thoughts lay in the past and others were in the future. And he laughed bitterly twice and his eyes shed tears and he spoke once. "Ah, what agony is this Life!"
CHAPTER SEVEN
Black Wizard Laughing
To Kaneloon they came in the early dawn and in the distance Elric saw a massive army darkening the snow and he knew it must be the Kelmain Host, led by Theleb K'aarna and Prince Umbda, marching against the lonely castle. The bird of gold and silver flapped down in the snow outside the castle's entrance and Elric dismounted. Then the bird had risen into the air again and was gone. The great gate of Castle Kaneloon was closed this time and he gathered his tattered cloak about his naked torso and he hammered on the gate with his fists and he forced a cry from his dry lips. "Myshella! Myshella!"
There was no answer. "Myshella! I have returned with that which you need!"
He feared she must have fallen into her enchanted slumber again. He looked towards the south and the dark tide had rolled a little closer to the castle. "Myshella!"
Then he heard a bar being drawn and the gates groaned open and there stood Moonglum, his face strained and his eyes full of something of which he could not speak. "Moonglum! How came you here?"
"I know not how, Elric." Moonglum stepped aside so that Elric could enter. He replaced the bar. "I lay in my bed last night when a woman came to me—the same woman we saw, sleeping, here. She said I must go with her. And somehow go I did. But I know not how, Elric. I know not how."
"And where is that woman?"
"Where we first saw her. She sleeps and I cannot wake her."
Elric drew a deep breath and told, briefly, what he knew of Myshella and the host that came against her Castle Kaneloon.
"Do you know the contents of that pouch?" Moon-glum asked.
Elric shook his head and opened the pouch to peer inside. "It seems to be nothing but a pinkish dust. Yet it must be some powerful sorcery if Myshella believes it can defeat the entire Kelmain Host."
Moonglum frowned. "But surely Myshella must work the charm herself if only she knows what it is?"
"Aye."
"And Theleb K'aarna has enchanted her."
"Aye."
"And now it is too late, for Umbda-whoever he may be-nears the castle."
"Aye." Elric's hand trembled as he drew from his belt the thing he had taken from the demon just before he left the Palace of Ashaneloon. "Unless this is the stone I think it is."
"What is that?"
"I know a legend. Some demons possess these stones as hearts." He held it to the light so that the blues and purples and greens writhed. "I have never seen one, but I believe it to be the thing I once sought for Cymoril when I tried to lift my cousin's charm from her. What I sought but never found was a Nanorion. A stone of magical powers said to be able to waken the dead-or those in deathlike sleep."
"And that is a Nanorion. It will awaken Myshella?"
"If anything can, then this will, for I took it from Theleb K'aarna's own demon and that must improve the efficaciousness of the magic. Come." Elric strode through the hall and up the stairs until he came to Myshella's room where she lay, as he had seen her before, on the bed hung with draperies, her wall hung with shields and weapons.
"Now I understand why these arms decorate her chamber," Moonglum said. "According to legend, these are the shields and weapons of all those who loved Myshella and championed her cause."
Elric nodded and said, as if to himself, "Aye, she was ever an enemy of Melnibone was the Empress of the Dawn."
He held the pulsing stone delicately and reached out to place it on her forehead.
"It makes no difference," Moonglum said after a moment. "She does not stir."
"There is a rune, but I remember it not..." Elric pressed his fingers to his temples. "I remember it not..."
Moonglum went to the window. "We can ask Theleb K'aarna, perhaps," he said ironically. "He will be here soon enough."
Then Moonglum saw that there were tears again in Elric's eyes and that he had turned away, hoping Moonglum would not see. Moonglum cleared his throat. "I have some business below. Call me if you should require my help."
He left the room and closed the door and Elric was alone with the woman who seemed, increasingly, a dreadful phantom from his most frightful dreams.
He controlled his feverish mind and tried to disci-pline it, to remember the crucial runes in the High Speech of Old Melnibone.
"Gods!" he hissed. "Help me!"
But he knew that in this matter in particular the Lords of Chaos would not assist him-would hinder him if they could, for Myshella was one of the chief instruments of Law upon the Earth, had been respon-sible for driving Chaos from the world.
He fell to his knees beside her bed, his hands clenched, his face twisting with the effort. And then it came back to him. His head still bent,
he stretched out his right hand and touched the pulsating stone, stretched out his left hand and rested it upon Myshella's navel, and he began a chant in an ancient tongue that had been spoken before true men had ever walked the Earth. ...
"Elric!"
Moonglum burst into the room and Elric was wrenched from his trance.
"Elric! We are invaded! Their advance riders.
"What?"
"They have broken into the castle—a dozen of them. I fought them off and barred the way up to this tower, but they are hacking at the door now. I think they have been sent to destroy Myshella if they could. They were surprised to discover me here."
Elric rose and looked carefully down at Myshella. The rune was finished and had been repeated almost through again when Moonglum had come in. She did not stir yet.
"Theleb K'aarna worked his sorcery from a distance," Moonglum said. "Ensuring that Myshella would not resist him. But he did not reckon with us."
He and Elric hurried from the room, down the steps to where a door was bulging and splintering beneath the weapons of those beyond.
"Stand back, Moonglum."
Elric drew the crooning runesword, lifted it high and brought it against the door.
The door split and two oddly shaped skulls were split with it.
The remainder of the attackers fell back with cries of astonishment and horror as the white-faced reaver fell upon them, his huge sword drinking their souls and singing its strange, undulating song.
Down the stairs Elric pursued them. Into the hall where they bunched together and prepared to defend themselves from this demon with his hell-forged blade.
And Elric laughed.
And they shuddered.
And their weapons trembled in their hands.
"So you are the mighty Kelmain," Elric sneered. "No wonder you needed sorcery to aid you if you are so cowardly. Have you not heard, beyond World's Edge, of Elric Kinslayer?"
But the Kelmain plainly did not understand his speech, which was strange enough in itself, for he had spoken in the Common Tongue, known to all men.
These people had golden skins and eye-sockets that were almost square. Their faces, in all, seemed crudely carved from rock, all sharp angles and planes, and their armour was not rounded, but angular.
Elric bared his teeth in a smile and the Kelmain drew closer together.
Then he screamed with dreadful laughter and Moonglum stepped back and did not look at what took place.
The runesword swung. Heads and limbs were chopped away. Blood gouted. Souls were taken. The Kelmain's dead faces bore expressions showing that before the life was drawn from them they had known the truth of their appalling fate.
And Stormbringer drank again, for Stormbringer was a thirsty hellsword.
And Elric felt his deficient veins swell with even more energy than that which he had taken earlier from Theleb K'aarna's demon.
The hall shook with Elric's insane mirth and he strode over the piled corpses and he went through the open gateway to where the great host waited.
And he shouted a name:
"Theleb K'aarna, Theleb K'aarna!"
Moonglum ran after him, calling for him to stop, but Elric did not heed him. Elric strode on through the snow, his sword dripping a red trail behind him.
Under a cold sun, the Kelmain were riding for the castle called Kaneloon and Elric went to meet them.
At their head, on slender horses, rode the dark-faced
sorcerer of Pan Tang, dressed in flowing robes, and
beside him was the Prince of the Kelmain Host, Prince
Umbda, in proud armour, bizarre plumes nodding on
his helm, a triumphant smile on his strange, angular features.

Behind, the host dragged oddly-fashioned wargear which, for all its oddness, looked powerful-mightier
than anything Lormyr could rally when the huge army fell upon her.

As the lone figure appeared and began to walk away from the walls of Castle Kaneloon Theleb K'aarna
raised his hand and stopped the host's advance, reining in his own horse and laughing.

"Why, it is the jackal of Melnibone, by all the Gods of Chaos! He acknowledges his master at last and
comes to deliver himself up to me!"

Elric came closer and Theleb K'aarna laughed on.

"Here, Elric-kneel before me!"

Elric did not pause, seemed not to hear the Pan Tangian's words.

Prince Umbda's eyes were troubled and he said something in a strange tongue. Theleb K'aarna sniffed
and replied in the same language.

And still the albino marched through the snow towards the huge host.

"By Chardros, Elric, stop!" cried Theleb K'aarna, his horse shifting nervously beneath him. "If you have
come to bargain you are a fool. Kaneloon and her mistress must fall before Lormyr is ours-and Lormyr
shall be ours, there's no doubting that!"

Then Eric did stop and he brought up his eyes to burn into those of the sorcerer and there was a still, cold
smile upon his pale lips.

Theleb K'aarna tried to meet Elric's gaze but could not. His voice trembled when he next spoke.

"You cannot defeat the whole Kelmain Host!"

"I have no wish to, conjurer. Your life is all I de-sire."

The sorcerer's face twitched. "Well, you shall not have it! Hai, men of the Kelmain, take him!"

He wheeled his horse and rode into the protective ranks of his warriors, calling out his orders in their
own tongue.

From the castle another figure burst, rushing to join Elric.

It was Moonglum of Elwher, a sword in either hand.

Elric half-turned.

"Elric! We'll die together!"

"Stay back, Moonglum!"

Moonglum hesitated.

"Stay back, if you love me!"

Moonglum reluctantly retreated to the castle.

The Kelmain horsemen swept in, broad-bladed straight swords raised, instantly surrounding the albino.

They threatened him, hoping that he would lay down his sword and let himself be captured. But Elric
smiled.

Stormbringer began to sing. Elric grasped the sword in both hands, bent his elbows then suddenly held
the blade straight out before him.

He began to whirl like a Tarkeshite dancer, round and round, and it was as if the sword dragged him
faster and faster while it gouged and gashed and decapitated the Kelmain horsemen.

For a moment they fell back, leaving their dead com-rades heaped about the albino, but Prince Umbda,
after a hurried conference with Theleb K'aarna, urged them upon Elric again.

And Elric swung his blade once more, but not so many of the Kelmain perished this tune.

Armoured body fell against armoured body, blood mingled with brother's blood, horses dragged corpses
away with them across the snow and Elric did not fall, yet something was happening to him.

Then it dawned upon his berserker brain that, for some reason, his blade was sated. The energy still
pulsed in its metal, but it transferred nothing more to its mas-ter. And his own stolen energy was
beginning to wane.
"Damn you, Stormbringer! Give me your power!"
Swords rained down upon him as he fought and slew and parried and thrust.
"More power!"
He was still stronger than normal and much stronger
than any ordinary mortal, but some of the wild anger
was leaving him and he felt almost puzzled as more Kelmain came at him.
He was beginning to waken from the blood-dream.
He shook his head and drew deep breaths. His back was aching.
"Give me their strength, Black Sword!"
He struck at legs and arms and chests and faces and he was covered from head to foot in the blood of his attackers.
But the dead now hampered him worse than the liv-ing, for their corpses were everywhere and he almost lost his footing more than once.
"What ails you, runesword? Do you refuse to help me? Will you not fight these things because, like you, they are of Chaos?"
No, it could not be that. All that had happened was that the sword desired no more vitality and therefore gave Elric none.
He fought on for another hour before his grip on the sword weakened and a rider, half-mad with terror, struck a blow at his head, failed to split it but stunned him so that he fell upon the bodies of the slain, tried to rise, then was struck again and lost consciousness.

CHAPTER EIGHT
A Great Host Screaming
"It was more than I hoped," murmured Theleb K'aarna in satisfaction, "but we have taken him alive!"
Elric opened his eyes and looked with hatred on the sorcerer who was stroking his black forked beard as if to comfort himself.
Elric could barely remember the events which had brought him here and placed him in the sorcerer's power. He remembered much blood, much laughter, much dying, but it was all fading, like the memory of a dream.
"Well, renegade, your foolishness was unbelievable. I thought you must have an army behind you. But doubtless it was your fear which unbalanced your poor brain. Still, I'll not speculate upon the cause of my own good fortune. There's many a bargain I can strike with the denizens of other planes, were I to offer them your soul. And your body I will keep for myself-to show Queen Yishana what I did to her lover before he died. ..."
Elric laughed shortly and looked about him, ignoring Theleb K'aarna.
The Kelmain were awaiting orders. They had still not marched on Kaneloon. The sun was low in the sky. He saw the pile of corpses behind him. He saw the hatred and fear on the faces of the golden-skinned Host and he smiled again.
"I do not love Yishana," he said distantly, as if scarcely aware of Theleb K'aarna's presence. "It is your jealous heart that makes you think so. I left Yishana's side to find you. It is never love that moves Elric of Melnibone, sorcerer, but always hatred."
"I do not believe you," Theleb K'aarna tittered. "When the whole South falls to me and my comrades, then will I court Yishana and offer to make her Queen of all the West as well as all the South. Our forces united, we shall dominate the Earth!"
"You Pan Tangians were ever an insecure breed, for-ever planning conquest for its own sake, forever seeking to destroy the equilibrium of the Young Kingdoms."
"One day," sneered Theleb K'aarna, "Pan Tang will have an empire that will make the Bright Empire
"It is for Yishana? By the gods, sorcerer, then I am glad I'm motivated by hatred and not by love, for I do not half the damage, it seems, done by those in love...."
"I will lay the south at Yishana's feet and she may use it as she pleases!"
"I am bored by this. What do you intend to do with me?"
"First I will hurt your body. I will hurt it delicately to begin with, building up the pain, until I have you in the proper frame of mind. Then I will consort with the Lords of the Higher Planes to find which will give me most for your soul."
"And what of Kaneloon?"
"The Kelmain will deal with Kaneloon. One knife is all that's needed now to slit Myshella's throat as she sleeps."
"She is protected."
Theleb K'aarna's brow darkened. Then it cleared and he laughed again.
"Aye, but the gate will fall soon enough and your little redhaired friend will perish as Myshella perishes."
He ran his fingers through his oiled ringlets.
"I am allowing, at Prince Umbda's request, the Kel-main to rest a while before storming the castle. But Kaneloon will be burning by nightfall."
Elric looked towards the castle across the trampled snow. Plainly his nine had failed to counter Theleb K'aarna's spell.
"I would..." He began to speak when he paused.
He had seen a flash of gold and silver among the battlements and a thought without shape had entered his head and made him hesitate.
"What?" Theleb K'aarna asked him harshly.
"Nothing. I merely wondered where my sword was."
The sorcerer shrugged. "Nowhere you can reach it, reaver. We left it where you dropped it. The stinking hellblade is no use to us. And none to you, now..."
Elric wondered what would happen if he made a direct appeal to the sword. He could not get to it himself, for Theleb K'aarna had bound him tightly with ropes of silk, but he might call for it...
He lifted himself to his feet.
"Would you seek to run away, White Wolf?" The-leb K'aarna watched him nervously.
Elric smiled again. "I wished for a better view of the coming conquest of Kaneloon. Just that."
The sorcerer drew a curved knife.
Elric swayed, his eyes half-closed, and he began to murmur a name beneath his breath.
Theleb K'aarna leapt forward and his arm encircled Elric's head while the knife pricked into the albino's throat. "Be silent, jackal!"
But Elric knew that he had no other means of helping himself and, for all it was a desperate scheme, he murmured the words once more, praying that Theleb K'aarna's lust for a slow revenge would make the sorcerer hesitate before killing him.
Theleb K'aarna cursed, trying to prise Elric's mouth open.
"The first thing I'll do is cut out that damned tongue of yours!"
Elric bit the hand and tasted the sorcerer's blood.
He spat it out.
Theleb K'aarna screamed. "By Chardros, if I did not wish to see you die over the months, I would..."
And then a sound came from the Kelmain.
It was a moan of surprise and it issued from every throat.
Theleb K'aarna turned and the breath hissed from between his clenched teeth.
Through the murky dusk a black shape moved. It was the sword, Stormbringer.
Elric had called it.
Now he cried aloud:
"Stormbringer! Stormbringer! To me!

Theleb K'aarna flung Elric in the path of the sword and rushed into the security of the gathered ranks of Kelmain warriors.
"Stormbringer!"
The black sword hovered in the air near Elric.
Another shout went up from the Kelmain. A shape had left the battlements of Castle Kaneloon.
Theleb K'aarna shouted in hysteria. "Prince Umbda! Prepare your men for the attack! I sense danger to us!"

Umbda could not understand the sorcerer's words and Theleb K'aarna was forced to translate them.
"Do not let the sword reach him!" cried the sorcerer. Once more he shouted in the language of the Kelmain and several warriors ran forward to grasp the rune-sword before it could reach its albino master. But the sword struck rapidly and the Kelmain died and none dared approach it after that.

Slowly Stormbringer moved towards Elric.
"Ah, Elric," cried Theleb K'aarna, "if you escape me this day, I swear that I shall find you."
"And if you escape me," Elric shouted back, "I will find you, Theleb K'aarna. Be sure of that."
The shape that had left Castle Kaneloon had feathers of silver and gold. It flew high above the Host and hovered for a moment before moving to the outer edges of the gathering. Elric could not see it clearly, but he knew what it was. That was why he had summoned the sword, for he had an idea that Moonglum rode the giant bird of metal and that the Elwherian would try to rescue him.

"Do not let it land! It comes to save the albino!" screamed Theleb K'aarna.

But the Kelmain Host did not understand him. Under Prince Umbda's commands they were preparing themselves for the attack upon the castle.
Theleb K'aarna repeated his orders in their own tongue, but it was plain they were beginning not to trust him and could not see the need to bother themselves with one man and a strange bird of metal. It could not stop their engines of war. Neither could the man.

"Stormbringer," whispered Elric as the sword sliced through his bonds and gently settled in his hand. Elric was free, but the Kelmain, though not placing the same importance upon him as did Theleb K'aarna, showed that they were not prepared to let him escape now that the blade was in his grasp and not moving of its own volition.
Prince Umbda shouted something.
A huge mass of warriors rushed at Elric at once and he made no effort to take the attack to them this time for he was interested in fighting a defensive strategy until Moonglum could descend on the bird and help him.

But the bird was even further away. It appeared to be circling the outer perimeters of the host and showed no interest in his plight at all.

Had he been deceived?
He parried a dozen thrusts, letting the Kelmain warriors crowd in upon each other and thus hamper themselves. The bird of gold and silver was almost out of sight now.

And Theleb K'aarna-where was he?
Elric tried to find him, but the sorcerer was doubtless somewhere in the centre of the Kelmain ranks by now.

Elric killed a golden-skinned warrior, sliting his throat with the point of the runesword. More strength began to flow into him again. He killed another Kelmain with an overarm movement which split the man's shoulder. But nothing could be gained from this fight if Moonglum was not coming on the bird of silver and gold.
The bird seemed to change course and come back towards Kaneloon. Was it merely waiting for instructions from its sleeping mistress? Or was it refusing to obey Moonglum's commands?

Elric backed through the muddy, bloody snow so that the pile of corpses now lay behind him. He fought on, but with very little hope.

The bird went past, far to his right.

Elric thought ironically that he had completely mis-taken the significance of the bird's leaving the castle battlements and by mistiming his decision had merely brought his death closer—perhaps Myshella's and Moonglum's deaths closer, too.

Kaneloon was doomed. Myshella was doomed. Lormyr and perhaps the whole of the Young Kingdoms were doomed.

And he was doomed.

It was then that a shadow passed across the battling men and the Kelmain screamed and fell back as a great din rent the air.

Elric looked up in relief, hearing the sound of the metal bird's clashing wings. He looked for Moonglum in the saddle and saw instead the tense face of Myshella herself, her hair blowing around her face as it was disturbed by the beating wings.

"Quickly, Lord Elric, before they close in again."

Elric sheathed the runesword and leapt towards the saddle, swinging himself behind the Sorceress of Kaneloon. Then they rose into the air again, while arrows hurtled around their heads and bounced off the bird's metal feathers.

"One more circuit of the Host and then we return to the castle," she said. "Your rune and the Nanorion worked to defeat Theleb K'aarna's enchantment, but they took longer than either of us would have liked. See, already Prince Umbda is ordering his men to mount and ride to Castle Kaneloon. And Kaneloon has only Moonglum to defend her now."

"Why this circuit of Umbda's army?"

"You will see. At least, I hope you will see, my lord."

She began to sing a song. It was a strange, disturbing chant in a language not dissimilar to the Melnibonean High Speech, yet different enough for Elric to understand only a few words, for it was oddly accented.

Around the camp they flew. Elric saw the Kelmain form their ranks into battle order. Doubtless Umbda and Theleb K'aarna had by now decided on the best mode of attack.

Then back to the castle beat the great bird, settling on the battlements and allowing Elric and Myshella to dismount. Moonglum, his features taut, came running to meet them.

They went to look at the Kelmain.

And they saw that the Kelmain were on the move.

"What did you do to-" began Elric, but Myshella raised her hand.

"Perhaps I did nothing. Perhaps the sorcery will not work."

"What was it you . . . ?"

"I scattered the contents of the purse you brought. I scattered it around their whole army. Watch. . . ."

"And if the spell has not worked-" Moonglum murmured. He paused, straining his eyes through the gloom. "What is that?"

Myshella's satisfied tone was almost ghoulish as she said: "It is the Noose of Flesh."

Something was growing out of the snow. Something pink that quivered. Something huge. A great mass that arose on all sides of the Kelmain and made their horses rear up and snort.

And it made the Kelmain shriek.

The stuff was like flesh and it had grown so high that the whole Kelmain Host was obscured from sight.

There were noises as they tried to train their battle-engines upon the stuff and blast their way through. There were shouts. But not a single horseman broke out of the Noose of Flesh.
Then the substance began to fold in over the Kel-main and Elric heard a sound such as none he had heard before.

It was a voice.
A voice of a hundred thousand men all facing an identical terror, all dying an identical death. It was a moan of desperation, of hopelessness, of fear.
But it was a moan so loud that it shook the walls of Castle Kaneloon.
"It is no death for a warrior," murmured Moonglum, turning away.
"But it was the only weapon we had," said Myshella. "I have possessed it for a good many years but never before did I feel the need to use it."
"Of them all, only Theleb K'aarna deserved that death," said Elric.

Night fell and the Noose of Flesh tightened around the Kelmain Host, crushing all but a few horses which had run free as the sorcery began to work.

It crushed Prince Umbda, who spoke no language known in the Young Kingdoms, who spoke no language known to the ancients, who had come to conquer from beyond the World's Edge.
It crushed Theleb K'aarna, who had sought, for the sake of his love for a wanton Queen, to conquer the world with the aid of Chaos.
It crushed all the warriors of that near-human race, the Kelmain. And it crushed all who could have told the watchers what the Kelmain had been or from where they had originated.

Then it absorbed them. Then it flickered and dis-solved and was dust again.
No piece of flesh-man's nor beast's-remained. But over the snow was scattered clothing, arms, ar-mour, siege engines, riding accoutrements, coins, belt-buckles, for as far as the eye could see.

Myshella nodded to herself. "That was the Noose of Flesh," she said. "I thank you for bringing it to me, Elric. I thank you, also, for finding the stone which revived me. I thank you for saving Lormyr."
"Aye," said Elric. "Thank me." There was a weari-ness on him now. He turned away, shivering.

Myshella rubbed at her eyes. "That was the Noose of Flesh," she said. "I thank you for bringing it to me, Elric. I thank you, also, for finding the stone which revived me. I thank you for saving Lormyr."
"You have none?" said she.

He looked at her directly. He frowned. "Regret breeds weakness. Regret achieves nothing. Regret is like a disease which attacks the internal organs and at last destroys. . . ."
"And you have no desires?"
He hesitated. "I understand you. Your own appear-ance, I'll admit. . . ." He shrugged. "But are you-?"
She spread her hands. "Do not ask too many ques-tions of me." She made another gesture. "Now. See. This castle becomes what you most desire. And in it, the things you most desire!"
And Elric looked about him, his eyes widening, and he began to scream.

Moonglum helped his friend to his feet. "What was it? What did you see?"
Elric straightened his back and rested his hand on his sword and said grimly and quietly to Myshella: "Lady, I would kill you for that if I did not under-stand you sought only to please me."
He studied the ground for a moment before continuing:
"Know this. Elric cannot have what he desires most. What he desires does not exist. What he desires is
dead. All Elric has is sorrow, guilt, malice, hatred. This is all he deserves and all he will ever desire."
She put her hands to her own face and walked back to the room where he had first seen her. Elric
followed.
Moonglum started after them but then he stopped and remained where he stood.
He watched them enter the room and saw the door close.
He walked back on to the battlements and stared into the darkness. He saw wings of silver and gold
flashing in the moonlight and they became smaller and smaller until they had vanished.
He sighed. It was cold.
He went back into the castle and settled himself with his back against a pillar, preparing to sleep.
But a little while later he heard laughter come from the room in the highest tower.
And the laughter sent him running through the pass-sages, through the great hall where the fire had died,
out of the door, into the night to seek the stables where he could feel more secure.
But he could not sleep that night, for the distant laughter still pursued him.
And the laughter continued until morning.

BOOK TWO
To Snare the Pale Prince
"... but it was in Nadsokor, City of
Beggars, that Elric found an old
friend and learned something con-
cerning an old enemy ..."

-The Chronicle of the Black Sword

CHAPTER ONE
The Beggar Court
Nadsokor, city of Beggars, was infamous throughout the Young Kingdoms. Lying near the shores of that
ferocious river, the Varkalk, and not too far from the Kingdom of Org in which blossomed the frightful
Forest of Troos, and exuding a stink which seemed thick enough ten miles distant, Nadsokor was
plagued by few visitors.
From this unlovely place sallied out her citizens to beg their way about the world and steal what they
could and bring it back to Nadsokor where half of their profits were handed over to their king in return
for his protection.
Their king had ruled for many years. He was called Urish the Seven-fingered, for he had but four fingers
on his right hand and three upon his left. Veins had burst all over his once handsome face and filthy, in-
fested hair framed that seedy countenance upon which age and grime had traced a thousand lines. From
out of all this ruin peered two bright, pale eyes.
As the symbol of his power Urish had a great cleaver called Hackmeat which was forever at his side. His
throne was of crudely carved black oak, studded with bits of raw gold, bones and semi-precious gems.
Be-neath this throne was Urish's Hoard—a chest of trea-su-re which he let none but himself look upon.
For the best part of every day Urish would lounge on his throne, presiding over a gloomy, festering hall
throned with his Court: a rabble of rascals too foul in appearance and disposition to be tolerated
anywhere but here.
For heat and light there burned permanently braziers of garbage which gave out oily smoke and a stink
which dominated all the other stinks in the hall.
And now there was a visitor at Urish's Court.
He stood before the dais on which the throne was mounted and from time to time he raised a heavily
scented kerchief to his red, full lips.
His face, which was normally dark in complexion, was somewhat grey and his eyes had something of a haunted, tortured look in them as they glanced from begrimed beggar to pile of rubbish to guttering brazier. Dressed in the loose brocade robes of the folk of Pan Tang, the visitor had black eyes, a great hooked nose, blue-black ringlets and a curling beard. Kerchief to mouth, he bowed low when he reached Urish's throne.

As always, greed, weakness and malice mingled to form King Urish's expression as he regarded the stranger whom one of his courtiers had but lately announced.

Urish had recognised the name and he believed he could guess the Pan Tangian's business here. "I heard you were dead, Theleb K'aarna-killed beyond Lormyr, near World's Edge." Urish grinned to display the black crags which were the rotting remains of his teeth.

Theleb K'aarna removed the kerchief from his lips and his voice was strangled at first, gaining strength as he remembered the wrongs recently done him. "My magic is not so weak I cannot escape a spell such as was woven that day. I conjured myself below the ground while Myshella's Noose of Flesh engulfed the Kelmain Host."

Urish's disgusting grin widened. "You crept into a hole, is that it?"

The sorcerer's eyes burned fiercely. "I'll not dispute the strength of my powers with -"

He broke off and drew a deep breath which he at once regretted. He stared warily around him at the Beggar Court, all manged and maimed, which had deposited itself about the filthy hall, mocking him. The beggars of Nadsokor knew the power of poverty and disease-knew how it terrified those who were not used to it. And thus their very squalor was their safe-guard against intruders.

A repulsive cough which might have been a laugh now seized King Urish. "And was it your magic that brought you here?" As his whole body shook his blood-shot eyes continued, beadily, to regard the sorcerer.

"I have travelled across the seas and all across Vilmir to be here," Theleb K'aarna said, "because I had heard there was one you hated above all others . . ."

"And we hate all others-all who are not beggars," Urish reminded him. The king chuckled and the chuckle became, once more, a throaty, convulsive cough.

"But you hate Elric of Melnibone most."

"Aye. It would be fair to say that. Before he won fame as the Kinslayer, the traitor of Imrryr, he came to Nadsokor to deceive us, disguised as a leper who had begged his way from the Eastlands beyond Karlaak. He tricked me disgracefully and stole something from my Hoard. And my Hoard is sacred-I will not let another even glimpse it!"

"I heard he stole a scroll from you," Theleb K'aarna said. "A spell which had once belonged to his cousin Yyrkoon. Yyrkoon wished to be rid of Elric and let him believe that the spell would release the Princess Cymoril from her sorcerous slumber. . . ."

"Aye. Yyrkoon had given the scroll to one of our citizens when he went a-begging to the gates of Imrryr. He then told Elric what he had done. Elric disguised himself and came here. With the aid of sorcery he gained access to my Hoard-my sacred Hoard-and plucked the scroll from it. . . ."

Theleb K'aarna looked sideways at the Beggar King. "Some would say that it was not Elric's fault-that Yyrkoon was to blame. He deceived you both. The spell did not awaken Cymoril, did it?"

"No. But we have a Law in Nadsokor. . . ." Urish raised the great cleaver Hackmeat and displayed its ragged, rusty blade. For all its battered appearance, it was a fearsome weapon. "That Law says that any man who looks upon the sacred Hoard of King Urish must die and die most horribly-at the hands of the Burning God!"
"And none of your wandering citizens have yet man-aged to take this vengeance?"
"I must pass the sentence personally upon him be-fore he dies. He must come again to Nadsokor, for it is only here that he may be acquainted with his doom."
Theleb K'aarna said: "I have no love for Elric."
Urish once more voiced the sound that was half laugh, half wheezing cough. "Aye-I have heard he has chased you all across the Young Kingdoms, that you have brought more and more powerful sorceries against him, yet every time he has defeated you."
Theleb K'aarna frowned. "Have a care, King Urish. I have had bad luck, yet I am still one of Pan Tang's greatest sorcerers."
"But you spend your powers freely and claim much from the Lords of Chaos. One day they will be tired of helping you and find another to do their work." King Urish closed soiled lips over black teeth. His pale eyes did not blink as he studied Theleb K'aarna.
There were stirrings in the hall, the Beggar Court moved in closer: the click of a crutch, the scrape of a staff, the shuffle of misshapen feet. Even the oily smoke from the braziers seemed to menace him as it drifted reluctantly into the darkness of the roof.
King Urish put one hand upon Hackmeat and the other upon his chin. Broken nails caressed stubble. From somewhere behind Theleb K'aarna a beggar woman let forth an obscene noise and then giggled. Almost as if to comfort himself the sorcerer placed the scented kerchief firmly over his mouth and nostrils. He began to draw himself up, prepared to deal with an attack if it came.
"But you still have your powers now, I take it," said Urish suddenly, breaking the tension. "Or you would not be here."
"My powers increase. . . ."
"For the moment, perhaps."
"My powers . . ."
"I take it you come with a scheme which you hope will result in Elric's destruction," continued Urish easily. The beggars relaxed. Only Theleb K'aarna now showed any signs of discomfort. Urish's bright, blood-shot eyes were sardonic. "And you desire our help because you know we hate the white-faced reaver of Melnibone."
Theleb K'aarna nodded. "Would you hear the details of my plan?"
Urish shrugged. "Why not? At least they may be entertaining."
Unhappily, Theleb K'aarna looked about him at the corrupt and tittering crew. He wished he knew a spell which would disperse the stink.
He took a deep breath through his kerchief and then began to speak. ...
CHAPTER TWO
The Stolen Ring
On the other side of the tavern the young dandy pretended to order another skin of wine while actually taking a sly look towards the corner where Elric sat.
Then the dandy leaned towards his compatriots-merchants and young nobles of several nations-and continued his murmured discourse.
The subject of that discourse, Elric knew, was Elric. Normally he was disdainful of such behaviour, but he was weary and he was impatient for Moonglum to re-turn. He was almost tempted to order the young dandy to desist, if only to pass the time.
Elric was beginning to regret his decision to visit Old Hrolmar.
This rich city was a great meeting place for all the imaginative people of the Young Kingdoms. To it came explorers, adventurers, mercenaries, craftsmen, mer-chants, painters and poets for, under the rule of the famous Duke Avan Astran, this Vilmirian city state was undergoing a transformation in its character.
Duke Avan was himself a man who had explored most of the world and had brought back great wealth and knowledge to Old Hrolmar. Its riches and its in-tellectual life attracted more riches, more
intellectuals and so Old Hrolmar flourished. But where riches are and where intellectuals are, then gossip also flourishes, for if there is any breed of man who gossips more than the merchant or the sailor then it is the poet and the painter. And, naturally enough, there was much gossip concerning the doom-driven albino, Elric, already a hero of several ballads by poets not over-talented.

Elric had allowed himself to be brought to the city because Moonglum had said it was the best place to find an income. Elric's carelessness with their wealth had made near-paupers of them, not for the first time, and they were in need of provisions and fresh steeds.

Elric had been for skirting Old Hrolmar and riding on towards Tanelorn, where they had decided to go, but Moonglum had argued reasonably that they would need better horses and more food and equipment for the long ride across the Vilmirian and Ilmioran plains to the edge of the Sighing Desert, where mysterious Tane-lorn was situated. So Elric had at last agreed, though, after his encounter with Myshella and his witnessing of the destruction of the Noose of Flesh, he had become weary and craved for the peace which Tanelorn offered.

What made things worse was that this tavern was rather too well-lit and catering too much to the better end of the trade for Elric's taste. He would have preferred a lowlier sort of inn which would have been cheaper and where men were used to holding back their questions and their gossip. But Moonglum had thought it wise to spend the last of their wealth on a good inn, in case they should need to entertain someone.

Elric left the business of raising treasure to Moon-glum. Doubtless he intended to get it by thievery or trickery, but Elric did not care. He sighed and suffered the sidelong looks of the other guests and tried not to overhear the young dandy. He sipped his cup of wine and picked at the flesh of the cold fowl Moonglum had ordered before he went off.

He drew his head into the high collar of his black cloak, but succeeded only in emphasising the bone-white pallor of his face and the milky whiteness of his long hair. He looked around him at the silks and furs and tapestries swirling about the tavern as their owners moved from table to table and he longed with all his heart to be on his way to Tanelorn, where men spoke little because they had experienced so much.

"... killed mother and father, too-and the mother's lover, it is said. ..."
"... and they say he lies with corpses for preference. ..."
"... and because of that the Lords of the Higher Worlds cursed him with the face of a corpse. ..."
"Incest, was it not? I got it from one who sailed with him that ..."
"... and his mother had congress with Arioch him-self, thus producing ..."
"... shortly before he betrayed his own people to Smiorgan and the rest!"
"He looks a gloomy fellow, right enough. Not one to enjoy a jest. ..."

Laughter.

Elric made himself relax in his chair and swallow more wine. But the gossip went on.
"They say also that he is an imposter. That the real Elric died at Imrryr. ..."
"A true prince of Melnibone would dress in more lavish style. And he would ...
More laughter.

Elric stood up, pushing back his cloak so that the great black broadsword at his hip was fully displayed. Most people in Old Hrolmar had heard of the rune-sword Stormbringer and its terrible power. Elric crossed to the table where the young dandy sat.
"I pray you, gentlemen, to improve your sport! You can do much better now-for here is one who would
offer you proof of certain things of which you speak. What of his penchant for vampirism of a particular sort? I did not hear you touch upon that in your conversation."
The young dandy cleared his throat and made a nervous little flirt of his shoulder. 
"Well?" Elric feigned an innocent expression. "Can-not I be of assistance?"
The gossips had become dumb, pretending to be absorbed in their eating and drinking.
Elric smiled a smile which set their hands to shaking.
"I desire only to know what you wish to hear, gentlemen. Then I will demonstrate that I am truly the one you have called Elric Kinslayer."
The merchants and the nobles gathered their rich robes about them and, avoiding his eye, got up. The young dandy minced towards the exit—a parody of bravado.
But now Elric stood laughing in the doorway, his hand on the hilt of Stormbringer. "Will you not join me as my guests, gentlemen? Think how you could tell your friends of the meeting..."
"Gods, how boorish!" lisped the young dandy and then shivered. 
"Sir, we meant no harm..." thickly said a fat Shazarian herb trader.
"We spoke of another." A young noble with only the hint of a chin, but with an emphatic moustache, offered a feeble, placatory grin.
"We said how much we admired you..." stuttered a Vilmirian knight whose eyes appeared but recently to have crossed and whose face was now almost as pale as Elric's.
A merchant in the dark brocades of Tarkesh licked his red lips and attempted to conduct himself with more dignity than his friends. "Sir, Old Hrolmar is a civilised city. Gentlemen do not brawl amongst themselves here..."
"But like peasant women prefer to gossip," said Elric.
"Yes," said the youth with the abundance of moustache. "Ah-no..."
The dandy arranged his cloak about him and glowered at the floor.
Elric stepped aside. Uncertainly the Tarkeshite merchant moved forward and then ran for the darkness of the street, his companions tumbling behind him. Elric heard their footsteps running on the cobbles and he began to laugh. At the sound of his laugh the footfalls became a scamper and the party had soon reached the quayside where the water gleamed, turned a corner and disappeared.
Elric smiled and looked up beyond Old Hrolmar's baroque skyline at the stars. Now there were more footsteps coming from the other end of the street. He turned and saw the newcomers step into a pool of light thrown from the window of a nearby office.
It was Moonglum. The stocky Eastlander was returning in the company of two women who were scantily dressed and heavily painted and who were without doubt Vilmirian whores from the other side of the city. Moonglum had an arm about each waist and he was singing some obscure but evidently disgraceful ballad, pausing frequently to have one of the laughing girls pour wine down his throat. Both the whores had large stone flasks in their free hands and they were matching Moonglum drink for drink. As Moonglum stepped unsteadily nearer he recognized Elric and hailed him, winking. "You see I have not forgotten you, Prince of Melnibone. One of these beauties is for you!"
Elric made an exaggerated bow. "You are very good to me. But I thought you planned to find some gold for us. Was that not the reason for coming to Old Hrolmar?"
"Aye!" Moonglum kissed the cheeks of the girls. They snorted with laughter. "Indeed! Gold it is—or something as good as gold. I have rescued these young ladies from a cruel whoremaster on the other side of town. I have promised to sell them to a kinder master and they are grateful to me!"
"You stole these slaves?"
"If you wish to say so—I 'stole' them. Aye, then, 'steal' I did. I stole in with my steel and I released them from a life of degradation. A humanitarian deed. Their miserable life is no more! They may look forward to..."
"Their miserable lives will be no more-as, Indeed, will be ours when the whoremaster discovers the crime and alerts the watch. How found you these ladies?"

"They found me! I had made my swords available to an old merchant, a stranger to the city. I was to escort him about the murkier regions of Old Hrolmar in return for a good purse of gold (better, I think, than he expected to give me). While he whored above, as he could, I had a drink or two below in the public rooms. These two beauties look a liking to me and told me of their unhappiness. It was enough. I rescued them."

"A cunning plan," Elric said sardonically.

"'Twas theirs! They have brains as well as-

"I'll help you carry them back to their master before the city guards descend upon us."

"But Elric!"

"But first . . ." Elric seized his friend and threw him over his shoulder, staggering with him to the quay at the end of the street, taking a good hold on his collar and lowering him suddenly into the reeking water. Then he hauled him up and stood him down. Moonglum shivered and looked sadly at Elric.

"I am prone to colds, as you know."

"And prone to drunken plans, too! We are not liked here, Moonglum. The watch needs only one excuse to set upon us. At best we should have to flee the city before our business was done. At worst we shall be disarmed, imprisoned, perhaps slain."

They began to walk back to where the two girls still stood. One of the girls ran forward and knelt to take Elric's hand and press her lips against his thigh. "Mas-ter, I have a message. . . ."

Elric bent to raise her to her feet.

She screamed. Her painted eyes widened. He stared at her in astonishment and then, following her gaze, turned and saw the pack of bravos who had stolen round the corner and were now rushing at himself and Moonglum. Behind the bravos Elric thought he saw the young dandy he had earlier chased from the tavern. The dandy wished for revenge. Poignards glittered in the darkness and their owners wore the black hoods of professional assassins. There were at least a dozen of them. The young dandy must therefore be extremely rich, for assassins were expensive in Old Hrolmar.

Moonglum had already drawn both his swords and was engaging the leader. Elric pushed the frightened girl behind him and put his hand to Stormbringer's pommel. Almost at its own volition the huge runesword sprang from its scabbard and black light poured from its blade as it began to hum its own strange battle-cry.

He heard one of the assassins gasp "Elric!" and guessed that the dandy had not made it plain whom they were to slay. He blocked the thrust of the slim longsword, turned it and chopped with a kind of delicacy at the owner's wrist. Wrist and sword flew into the shadows and the owner staggered back screaming.

More swords now and more cold eyes glittering from the black hoods. Stormbringer sang its peculiar song-half-lament, half-victory shout. Elric's own face was alive with battle-lust and his crimson eyes blazed from his bone-white face as he swung this way and that.

Shouts, curses, the screams of women and the groans of men, steel striking steel, boots on cobbles, the sounds of swords in flesh, of blades scraping bone. A confusion through which Elric fought, his broadsword clapped in both pale hands. He had lost sight of Moonglum and prayed that the Eastlander still stood. From time to time he glimpsed one of the girls and wondered why she had not run for safety. Now the corpses of several hooded assassins lay upon the cobbles and the remainder were beginning to falter as Elric pressed them. They knew the power of his sword and what it did to those it struck. They had seen their comrades' faces as their souls were drawn from them by the hellblade. With every death
Elric seemed to grow stronger and the black radiance from the blade seemed to burn fiercer. And now the albino was laughing.

His laughter rang over the rooftops of Old Hrolmar and those who were abed covered their ears, believing themselves in the grip of nightmares. "Come, friends, my blade still hungers!"

An assassin made to stand his ground and Elric swept the Black Sword up. The man raised his blade to protect his head and Elric brought the Black Sword down. It sheared through the steel and cut down through the hood, through the neck, through the breast-bone. It clove the assassin completely in two and it stayed in the flesh, feasting, drawing out the last traces of the man's dark soul. And then the rest were running.

Elric drew a deep breath, avoided looking at the man his sword had slain last, sheathed the blade and turned to look for Moonglum.

It was then that the blow came on the back of his neck. He felt nausea rise in him and tried to shake it off. He felt a prick in his wrist and through the haze he saw a figure he thought at first was Moonglum. But it was another—perhaps a woman. She was tugging at his left hand. Where did she want him to go? His knees became weak and he fell to the cobbles. He tried to call out, but failed. The woman was still tugging at his hand as if she sought to take him to safety. But he could not follow her. He fell on his shoulder, then on his back, glimpsed a swimming sky . . .

... and then the dawn was rising over the crazy spires of Old Hrolmar and he realised that several hours had passed since he had fought the assassins.

Moonglum's face appeared. It was full of concern. "Moonglum?"

"Thank Elwher's gentle gods! I thought you slain by that poisoned blade."

Elric's head was clearing rapidly now. He rose to a sitting position. "The attacker came from behind. How . . . ?"

Moonglum looked embarrassed. "I fear those girls were not all they seemed."

Elric remembered the woman tugging at his left hand and he stretched out his fingers. "Moonglum! The Ring of Kings is gone from my hand! The Actorios has been stolen!"

The Ring of Kings had been worn by Elric's fore-fathers for centuries. It had been the symbol of their power, the source of much of their supernatural strength.

Moonglum's face clouded. "I thought I stole the girls. But they were thieves. They planned to rob us. An old trick."

"There's more to it, Moonglum. They stole nothing else. Just the Ring of Kings. There's still a little gold left in my purse." He jingled his belt pouch, climbing to his feet.

Moonglum jerked his thumb at the street's far wall. There lay one of the girls, her finery all smeared with mud and blood.

"She got in the way of one of the assassins as we fought. She's been dying all night—mumbling your name. I had not told it to her. Therefore I fear you're right. They were sent to steal that ring from you. I was duped by them."

Elric walked rapidly to where the girl lay and he kneeled down beside her. Gently he touched her cheek. She opened her lids and stared at him from glazed eyes.

Her lips formed Ms name.

"Why did you plan to rob me?" Elric asked. "Who is your master?"

"Urish . . ." she said in a voice that was a breeze passing through the grass. "Steal ring . . . take it to Nadsokor. . . ."

Moonglum now stood on the other side of the dying girl. He had found one of the wine flasks and he bent to give her a drink. She tried to sip the wine but failed. It ran down her little chin, down her slim neck and on to her wounded breast.
"You are one of the beggars of Nadsokor?" Moon-glum said.
Faintly, she nodded.
"Urish has always been my enemy," Elric told him.
"I once recovered some property from him and he has never forgiven me. Perhaps he sought the Actorios
ring in payment." He looked down at the girl. "Your companion-has she returned to Nadsokor?"
Again the girl seemed to nod. Then all intelligence left the eyes, the lids closed and she ceased to
breathe.
Elric got up. He was frowning, rubbing at the hand on which the Ring of Kings had been.
"Let him keep the ring, then," said Moonglum hope-fully. "He will be satisfied."
Elric shook his head.
Moonglum cleared his throat. "A caravan is leaving Jadmar in a week. It is commanded by Rackhir of
Tanelorn and has been purchasing provisions for the city. If we took a ship round the coast we could
soon be in Jadmar, join Rackhir's caravan and be on our way to Tanelorn in good company. As you
know, it's rare for anyone of Tanelorn to make such a journey. We are lucky, for . . ."
"No," said Elric in a low voice. "We must forget Tanelorn for the moment, Moonglum, The Ring of
Kings is my link with my fathers. More-it aids my conjurings and has saved our lives more than once.
We ride for Nadsokor now. I must try to reach the girl before she gets to the City of Beggars. Failing
that, I must enter the city and recover my ring."
Moonglum shuddered. "It would be more foolish than any plan of mine, Elric. Urish would destroy us."
"None the less, to Nadsokor I must go."
Moonglum bent and began systematically to strip the girl's corpse of its jewellery. "We'll need every
penny we can raise if we're to buy decent horses for our journey," he explained.
CHAPTER THREE
The Cold Ghouls
Framed against the scarlet sunset, Nadsokor looked from this distance more like a badly kept graveyard
than a city. Towers tottered, houses were half-collapsed, the walls were broken.
Elric and Moonglum came up the peak of the hill on their fast Shazarian horses (which had cost them all
they had) and saw it. Worse-they smelled it. A thou-sand stinks issued from the festering city and both
men gagged, turning their horses back down the hill to the valley.
"We'll camp here for a short while-until nightfall," Elric said. "Then we'll enter Nadsokor."
"Elric, I am not sure I could bear the stench. What-ever our disguise, our disgust would reveal us for
strangers."
Elric smiled and reached into his pouch. He took out two small tablets and handed one to Moonglum.
The Eastlander regarded the thing suspiciously.
"What's this?"
"A potion. I used it once before when I came to Nadsokor. It will kill your sense of smell completely-
unfortunately your sense of taste as well. . . ."
Moonglum laughed. "I did not plan to eat a gourmet meal while in the City of Beggars!" He swallowed
the pill and Elric did likewise. Almost instantly Moonglum remarked that the stink of the city was subsiding. Later, as they chewed the
stale bread which was all that was left of their pro-visions, he said:
"I can taste nothing. The potion works."
Elric nodded. He was frowning, looking up the hill in the direction of the city as the night fell.
Moonglum took out his swords and began to hone them with the small stone he carried for the purpose.
As he honed, he watched Elric's face, trying to see if he could guess Elric's thoughts.
At last the albino spoke. "We'll need to leave the horses here, of course, for most beggars disdain their
use."
"They are proud in their perversity," Moonglum murmured.
"Aye. We'll need those rags we brought."
"Our swords will be noticed: . . ."
"Not if we wear the loose robes over all. It will mean we'll walk stiff-legged, but that's not so strange in a beggar."
Reluctantly Moonglum got the bundles of rags from the saddle-panniers.
So it was that a filthy pair, one stooped and limping, one short but with a twisted arm, crept through the debris which was ankle deep around the whole city of Nadsokor. They made for one of the many gaps in the wall.
Nadsokor had been abandoned some centuries be-fore by a people fleeing from the ravages of a particularly virulent pox which had struck down most of their number. Not long afterwards the first of the beggars had occupied it. Nothing had been done to preserve the city's defences and now the muck around the pe-rimeters was as effective a protection as any wall.
No one saw the two figures as they climbed over the messy rubble and entered the dark, festering streets of the City of Beggars. Huge rats raised themselves on their hind legs and watched them as they made their way to what had once been Nadsokor's senate build-ing and which was now Urish's palace. Scrawny dogs with garbage dangling in their jaws warily slunk back into the shadows. Once a little column of blind men, each man with his right hand on the shoulder of the man in front, tapped their way through the night, pass-ing directly across the street Elric and Moonglum were in. From some of the tumble-down buildings came cacklings and titterings as the maimed caroused with the crippled and the degenerate and corrupted coupled with their crones. As the disguised pair neared what had been Nadsokor's forum there came a scream from one shattered doorway and a young girl, barely over puberty, dashed out pursued by a monstrously fat beg-gar who propelled himself with astounding speed on his crutches, the livid stumps of his legs, which termi-nated at the knee, making the motions of running. Moonglum tensed, but Elric held him back as the fat cripple bore down his prey, abandoned his crutches which rattled on the broken pavement, and flung him-self on the child.
Moonglum tried to free himself from Elric's grasp but the albino whispered: "Let it happen. Those who are whole either in mind, body or spirit cannot be tolerated in Nadsokor."
There were tears in Moonglum's eyes as he looked at his friend. "Your cynicism is as disgusting as any-thing they do!"
"I do not doubt it. But we are here for one purpose -to recover the stolen Ring of Kings. That, and nought else, is what we shall do."
"What matters that when . . . ?"
But Elric was continuing on his way to the forum and after hesitating for a moment Moonglum followed him.
Now they stood on the far side of the square looking at Urish's palace. Some of its columns had fallen, but on this building alone had there been some attempt at restoration and decoration. The archway of the main entrance was painted with crude representations of the Arts of Begging and Extortion. An example of the coinage of all the nations of the Young Kingdoms had been imbedded in the wooden door and above it had been nailed, perhaps ironically, a pair of wooden crutches, crossed as swords might be crossed, indicating that the weapons of the beggar were his power to
horrify and disgust those luckier or better endowed than himself.
Elric stared through the murk at the building and he had a calculating frown on his face.
"There are no guards," he said to Moonglum.
"Why should there be? What have they to guard?"
"There were guards last time I came to Nadsokor. Urish protects his hoard most assiduously. It is not
outsiders he fears but his own despicable rabble."
"Perhaps he no longer fears them."
Elric smiled. "A creature like King Urish fears every-thing. We had best be wary when we enter the hall.
Have your swords ready to draw at any hint that we have been lured into a trap."
"Surely Urish would not suspect we'd know where the girl came from?"
"Aye, it seemed good chance that one of them told us, but none the less we must make allowances for
Urish's cunning."
"He would not willingly bring you here-not with the Black Sword at your side."
"Perhaps. . . ."
They began to walk across the forum. It was very still, very dark. From far away came the occasional
shout, a laugh or an obscene, indefinable sound.
Now they were at the door, standing beneath the crossed crutches.
Elric felt beneath his ragged robes for the hilt of his sword and with his left hand pushed at the door. It
squeaked open a fraction. They looked about them to see if anyone had heard the sound, but the square
was as still as it had been.
More pressure. Another squeak. And now they could squeeze their bodies through the aperture.
They stood in Urish's hall. Braziers of garbage gave off faint light. Oily smoke curled towards the
rafters. They saw the dim outlines of the dais at the far end and on the dais stood Urish's huge, crude
throne. The hall seemed deserted, but Elric's hand did not leave the hilt of the Black Sword.
He stopped as he heard a sound, but it was a great, black rat scuttling across the floor.
Silence again.
Elric moved forward, step by cautious step, along the length of the slimy hall, Moonglum behind him.
Elric's spirits began to rise, as they neared the throne. Perhaps Urish had, after all, grown complacent of
his strength. He would open the trunk beneath the throne, remove his ring and then they would leave the
city and be away before dawn, riding across country to join the caravan of Rackhir the Red Archer on its
way to Tanelorn.
He began to relax but his step was just as cautious. Moonglum had paused, cocking his head to one side
as if hearing something.
Elric turned. "What is it you hear?"
"Possibly nothing. Or maybe one of those great rats
we saw earlier. It is just that-"
A silver-blue radiance burst out from behind the grotesque throne and Elric flung up his left hand to
protect his eyes, trying to disentangle his sword from his rags.
Moonglum yelled and began to run for the door, but even when Elric put his back to the light he could
not see. Stormbringer moaned in its scabbard as if in rage. Elric tugged at it, but felt his limbs grow
weaker and weaker. From behind him came a laugh which he rec-ognised. A second laugh-almost a
throaty cough-joined it.
His sight came back but now he was held by clammy hands and when he saw his captors he shuddered.
Shadowy creatures of limbo held him-ghouls sum-moned by sorcery. Their dead faces smiled but their
dead eyes remained dead. Elric felt the heat and the strength leaving his body and it was as if the ghouls
sucked it from him. He could almost feel his vitality travelling from his own body to theirs.
Again the laugh. He looked up at the throne and
saw emerging from behind it the tall, saturnine figure of
Theleb K'aarna, whom he had left for dead near the castle of Kaneloon a few months since.
Theleb K'aarna smiled in his curling beard as Elric struggled in the grasp of the ghouls. Now from the other side of the throne came the filthy carcass of Urish the Seven-fingered, the cleaver Hackmeat cradled in his left arm.

Elric could barely hold his head up as the ghouls' cold flesh absorbed his strength, but he smiled at his own foolishness. He had been right in suspecting a trap, but wrong in entering it so poorly prepared. And where was Moonglum? Had he deserted him?

The little Eastlander was nowhere to be seen.

Urish swaggered round the throne and sprawled his begrimed person in it, placing Hackmeat so that it lay across the arms. His pale, beady eyes stared hard at Elric.

Theleb K'aarna remained standing by the side of the throne, but triumph flamed in his eyes like Imrryr's own funeral fires.

"Welcome back to Nadsokor," wheezed Urish, scratching himself between the legs. "You have returned to make amends, I take it."

Elric shivered as the cold in his bones increased. Stormbringer stirred at his side but it could only help him if he drew it with his own hands. He knew he was dying.

"I have come to regain my property," he said through chattering teeth. "My ring."

"Ah! The Ring of Kings. It was yours, was it? My girl mentioned something of that."

"You sent her to steal it!"

Urish sniggered. "I'll not deny it. But I did not ex-pect the White Wolf of Imrryr to step so easily into my trap."

"He would have stepped out again if you had not that amateur magic-maker's spells to help you!"

Theleb K'aarna glowered but then his face relaxed.

"Are you not discomforted, then, by my ghouls?"

Elric was gasping as the last of the heat fled his bones.

He now could not stand, but hung in the hands of the dead creatures. Theleb K'aarna must have planned this for weeks, for it took many spells and pacts with the guardians of Limbo to bring such ghouls to Earth.

"And so I die," Elric murmured. "Well, I suppose I do not care. . . ."

Urish raised his ruined features in what was a parody of pride. "You do not die yet, Elric of Melni-bone. The sentence has yet to be passed! The formalities must be suffered! By my cleaver Hackmeat I must sentence you for your crimes against Nadsokor and against the Sacred Hoard of King Urish!"

Elric hardly heard him as his legs collapsed alto-gether and the ghouls tightened their grip on him.

Dimly he was aware of the beggar rabble shuffling into the hall. Doubtless they had all been waiting for this. Had Moonglum died at their hands when he fled the hall?

"Put his head up!" Theleb K'aarna instructed his dead servants. "Let him see Urish, King of All Beggars, make his just decree!"

Elric felt a cold hand beneath his chin and his head was raised so he could watch, through misting eyes, as Urish stood up and grasped the cleaver Hackmeat in his four-fingered hand, stretching it towards the smoky ceiling.

"Erl of Melnibone thou art convicted of many crimes against the Ignoblest of the Ignoble-myself, King Urish of Nadsokor. Thou has offended King Urish's friend, that most pleasingly degenerate villain Theleb K'aarna-"

At this Theleb K'aarna pursed his lips, but did not interrupt.

"-and, moreover, did come a second time to the City of Beggars to repeat your crimes. By my great cleaver Hackmeat, the symbol of my dignity and power, I condemnnest thou to the Punishment of the Burning God!"

From all sides of the hall came the foul applause of
the Beggar Court. Elric remembered a legend of Nadsokor—that when the original population were first struck by the disease they summoned aid from Chaos—begging Chaos to cleanse the disease from the city—with fire if necessary. Chaos had played a joke upon these folk—sent the Burning God who had burned what was left of their possessions. A further summons to Law to help them had resulted in the Burning God's being imprisoned by Lord Donblas in the city. Having had enough of the Lords of the Higher Worlds the remnants of the citizens had abandoned their city. But was the Burning God still here in Nadsokor?

Faintly he still heard Urish's voice. "Take him to the labyrinth and give him to the Burning God!"

Theleb K'aarna spoke but Elric did not hear what he said, though he heard Urish's reply. "His sword? How will that avail him against a Lord of Chaos? Besides, if the sword is released from the scabbard, who knows what will happen?"

Theleb K'aarna was evidently reluctant, by his tone, but at last agreed with Urish.

Now Theleb K'aarna's voice boomed commandingly.

"Things of Limbo-release him! His vitality has been your reward! Now—begone!"

Elric fell to the muck on the flagstones but was now too weak to move as beggars came forward and lifted him up.

His eyes closed and his senses deserted him as he felt himself borne from the hall and heard the united voices of the wizard of Pan Tang and the King of the Beggars giving vent to their mocking triumph.

CHAPTER FOUR
Punishment of the Burning God
"By Narjhan's droppings he's cold!"

Elric heard the rasping voice of one of the beggars who carried him. He was still weak but some of the beggars' body heat had transferred itself to him and the chill of his bones was now by no means as intense.

"Here's the portal."

Elric forced his eyes open.

He was upside down but could see ahead of him through the gloom.

Something shimmered there.
It looked like the iridescent skin of some unearthly animal stretched across the arch of the tunnel.
He was jerked backwards as the beggars swung his body and hurled it towards the shimmering skin.
He struck it.
It was viscous.
It clung to him and he felt it was absorbing him. He tried to struggle but was still far too weak. He was sure that he was being killed.
But after long minutes he was through it and had struck stone and lay gasping in the blackness of the tunnel.

This must be the labyrinth of which Urish had spoken.
Trembling, he tried to rise, using his scabbarded sword as a support. It took him some time to get up but at last he could lean against the curving wall.
He was surprised. The stones seemed to be hot. Per-haps it was because he was so cold and in reality the stones were of normal heat?
Even this speculation seemed to weary him. What-ever the nature of the heat it was welcome. He pressed his back harder against the stones.
As their heat passed into his body he felt a sensation almost of ecstasy and he drew a deep breath.
Strength was returning slowly.
"Gods," he murmured, "even the snows of the Lormyrian steppe could not compare with such a great cold."

He drew another deep breath and coughed.
Then he realised that the drug he had swallowed was beginning to wear off.
He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and spat out saliva. Something of the stink of Nadsokor had entered his nostrils.

He stumbled back towards the portal. The peculiar stuff still shimmered there. He pressed his hand against it and it gave reluctantly but then held firm. He leant his whole weight on it but it would still not give any further. It was like a particularly tough membrane but it was not flesh. Was this the stuff with which the Lords of Law had sealed off the tunnel, entrapping their enemy, the Lord of Chaos? The only light in the tunnel came from the membrane itself.

"By Arioch, I'll turn the tables on the Beggar King," Elric murmured. He threw back his rags and put his hand on Stormbringer's pommel. The blade purred as a cat might purr. He drew the sword from its scabbard and it began to sing a low, satisfied song. Now Elric hissed as its power flowed up his arm and into his body. Stormbringer was giving him the strength he needed-but he knew that Stormbringer must be paid soon, must taste blood and souls and thus replenish its energy. He aimed a great blow at the shimmering wall. "I'll hack down this portal and release the Burning God upon Nadsokor! Strike true, Stormbringer! Let flame come to devour the filth that is this city!"

But Stormbringer howled as it bit into the membrane and it was held fast. No rent appeared in the stuff. Instead Elric had to tug with all his might to get the sword free. He withdrew, panting.

"The portal was made to withstand the efforts of Chaos," Elric murmured. "My sword's useless against it. And so, unable to go back I must, perforce, go forward." Stormbringer in hand he turned and began to make his way along the passage. He took one turn and then another and then a third and the light had disappeared completely. He reached for his pouch where his flint and tinder were kept, but the beggars had cut that from his belt as they carried him. He decided to retrace his steps. But by now he was deeply within the labyrinth and he could not find the portal.

"No portal-but no God, it seems. Mayhap there's another exit from this place. If it's blocked by a door of wood, then Stormbringer will soon carve me a path to freedom."

And so he pressed further into the labyrinth, taking a hundred twists and turns in the darkness before he paused again.

He had noticed that he was growing warmer. Now, instead of feeling horribly cold, he felt uncomfortably hot. He was sweating. He removed some of the upper layers of his rags and stood in his own shirt and breeks. He had begun to thirst.

Another turning and he saw light ahead.

"Well, Stormbringer, perhaps we are free after all!"

He began to run towards the source of the light. But it was not daylight, neither was it the light from the portal. This was firelight-of brands, perhaps.

He could see the sides of the tunnel quite clearly in the firelight. Unlike the masonry in the rest of Nadsokor, this was free of filth-a plain, grey stone stained by the red light.

The source of the light was around the next bend. But the heat had grown greater and his flesh stung as the sweat sprang from his pores.

"AAH!"

A great voice suddenly filled the tunnel as Elric rounded the bend and saw the fire leaping not thirty yards distant.

"AAH! AT LAST!"

The voice came from the fire.

And Elric knew he had found the Burning God.

"I have no quarrel with you, my lord of Chaos!" he called. "I, too, serve Chaos!"

"But I must eat," came the voice. "CHECKALAKH MUST EAT!"

"I am poor food for one such as you," Elric said reasonably, putting both his hands around Stormbringer's hilt and taking a step backward.

"Aye, beggar, that thou art-but thou art the only food they send!"
"I'm no beggar!"
"Beggar or not, Checkalakh will devour thee!"
The flames shook and a shape began to be made of them. It was a human shape but comprised entirely of flame. Flickering hands of fire stretched out towards Elric.
And Elric turned.
And Elric ran.
And Checkalakh, the Burning God, came fast as a flash fire behind him.
Elric felt pain in his shoulder and he smelled burning cloth. He increased his speed, having no notion of where he ran.
And still the Burning God pursued him.
"Stop, mortal! It is futile! Thou canst not escape Checkalakh of Chaos!"
Elric shouted back in desperate humour. "I'll be no one's roast pork!" His step began to falter. "Not-not even a god's!"
Like the roar of flames up a chimney, Checkalakh replied, "Do not defy me, mortal! It is an honour to feed a god!"
Both the heat and the effort of running were exhausting Elric. A plan of sorts had formed in his brain when he had first encountered the Burning God. That was why he had started to run.
But now, as Checkalakh came on, he was forced to turn.
"Thou art somewhat feeble for so mighty a Lord of Chaos," he panted, readying his sword.
"My long sojourn here has weakened me," Checkalakh replied, "else I would have caught thee ere now! But catch thee I will! And devour thee I must!"
Stormbringer whined its defiance at the enfeebled Chaos God and blade struck out at flaming head and gashed the god's right cheek so that paler fire flickered there and something ran up the black blade and into Elric's heart so that he trembled in a mixture of terror and joy as some of the Burning God's lifeforce entered him.
Eyes of flame stared at the Black Sword and then at Elric. Brows of flame furrowed and Checkalakh halted.
"Thou art no ordinary beggar, 'tis true!"
"I am Elric of Melnibone and I bear the Black Sword. Lord Arioch is my master—a more powerful entity than you, Lord Checkalakh."
Something akin to misery passed across the god's fiery countenance. "Aye—there are many more powerful than me, Elric of Melnibone."
Elric wiped sweat from his face. He drew in great gulps of burning air. "Then why—why not combine your strength with mine. Together we can tear down the portal and take vengeance on those who have conspired to bring us together."
Checkalakh shook his head and little tongues of fire fell from it. "The portal will only open when I am dead. So it was decreed when Lord Donblas of Law imprisoned me here. Even if we were successful in destroying the portal—it would result in my death. Therefore, most powerful of mortals, I must fight thee and eat thee."
And again Elric began to run, desperately seeking the portal, knowing that the only light he could hope to find in the labyrinth came from the Burning God himself. Even if he were to defeat the god, he would still be trapped in the complex maze.
And then he saw it. He was back at the place where he had been thrown through the membrane.
"It is only possible to enter my prison through the portal, not leave it!" called Checkalakh.
"I'm aware of that!" Elric took a firmer grip on Stormbringer and turned to face the thing of flame.
Even as his sword swung back and forth, parrying every attempt of the Burning God's to seize him, Elric felt sympathy for the creature. He had come in answer to the summonings of mortals and he had been imprisoned for his pains.
But Elric's clothes had begun to smoulder now and even though Stormbringer supplied him with energy every time it struck Checkalakh the heat itself was beginning to overwhelm him. He sweated no more. Instead his skin felt dry and about to split. Blisters were forming on his white hands. Soon he would be able to hold the blade no longer.

"Arioch!" he breathed. "Though this creature be a fellow Lord of Chaos, aid me to defeat him!"

But Arioch lent him no extra strength. He had already learned from his patron demon that greater things were being planned on and above the Earth and that Arioch had little time for even the most favourite of his mortal charges.

Yet, from habit, still Elric murmured Arioch's name as he swept the sword so that it struck first Checkalakh's burning hands and then his burning shoulder and more of the god's energy entered him. It seemed to Elric that even Stormbringer was beginning to burn and the pain in his blistered hands grew so great that it was at last the only sensation of which he was aware. He staggered back against the iridescent membrane and felt its fleshlike texture on his back. The ends of his long hair were beginning to smoke and large areas of his clothes had completely charred.

Was Checkalakh failing, though? The flames burned less brightly and there was an expression of resignation beginning to form on the face of fire. Elric drew on his pain as his only source of strength and he made the pain take the sword and bring it back over his head and he made the pain bring Stormbringer down in a massive blow aimed at the god's head.

And even as the blow descended the fire began to die. Then Stormbringer had struck and Elric yelled as an enormous wave of energy poured into his body and knocked him backwards so that the sword fell from his hand and he felt that his flesh could not contain what it now held. He rolled, moaning, on the floor and he kicked at the air, raising his twisted, blistered hands to the roof as if in supplication to some being who had the power to stop what was happening to him. There were no tears in his eyes, for it seemed that even his blood had begun to boil out of him.

"Arioch! Save me!" He was shuddering, screaming.

"Arioch! Stop this thing happening to me!"

He was full of the energy of a god and the mortal frame was not meant to contain so much force.

"Aaaah! Take it from me!"

He became aware of a calm, beautiful face looking down upon him as he writhed. He saw a tall man—much taller than himself—and he knew that this was no mortal at all, but a god.

"It is over!" said a pure, sweet voice. And, though the creature did not move, soft hands seemed to caress him and the pain began to diminish and the voice continued to speak.

"Long centuries ago, I, Lord Donblas the Justice Maker, came to Nadsokor to free it from the grip of Chaos. But I came too late. Evil brought more evil, as evil will, and I could not interfere too much with the affairs of mortals, for we of Law have sworn to let mankind make its own destiny if that is possible. Yet the Cosmic Balance swings now like the pendulum of a clock with a broken spring and terrible forces are at work on the Earth. Thou, Elric, art a servant of Chaos—yet thou hast served Law more than once. It has been said that the destiny of mankind rests within thee and that may be true. Thus, I aid thee—though I do so against mine own oath..."

And Elric closed his eyes and felt at peace for the first time that he remembered. The pain had gone, but great energy still filled him. When he opened his eyes again there was no beautiful face looking down on him and the scintillating membrane which had covered the archway had disappeared. Nearby Stormbringer lay and he sprang up and seized the sword, returning it to his
scabbard. He noticed that the blisters had left his hands and that even his clothes were no longer charred.

Had he dreamed it all—or most of it?

He shook his head. He was free. He was strong. He had his sword with him. Now he would return to the hall of King Urish and take his vengeance both on Nadsokor's ruler and Theleb K'aarna.

He heard a footfall and withdrew into the shadows. Light filtered into the tunnel from gaps in the roof and it was plain that at this point it was close to the surface. A figure appeared and he recognised it at once.

"Moonglum!"

The little Eastlander grinned in relief and sheathed his swords. "I came here to aid you if I could, but I see you need no aid from me!"

"Not here. The Burning God is no more. I'll tell you of that later. What became of you?"

"When I realised we were in a trap I ran for the door, deciding it would be best if one of us were free and I knew it was you they wanted. But then I saw the door opening and realised they had been waiting there all along." Moonglum wrinkled his nose and dusted at the rags he still wore. "Thus I came to find myself lying at the bottom of one of those heaps of garbage littered about Urish's hall. I dived into it and stayed there, listening to what passed. As soon as I could, I found this tunnel; planning to help you however I could."

"And where are Urish and Theleb K'aarna now?"

"It appears that they go to make good Theleb K'aarna's bargain with Urish. Urish was not altogether happy with the plan to lure you here for he fears your power—"

"He has reason to! Now!"

"Aye. Well, it seems that Urish had heard what we had heard, that the caravan for Tanelorn was on its way back to that city. Urish has knowledge of Tanelorn—though not much, I gather—and fosters an unreasoning hatred for the place, perhaps because it is the opposite of what Nadsokor is."

"They plan to attack Rackhir's caravan?"

"Aye—and Theleb K'aarna is to summon creatures from Hell to ensure that their attack is successful. Rackhir has no sorcery to speak of, I believe."

"He served Chaos once, but no more—they who dwell in Tanelorn can have no supernatural masters."

"I gathered as much from the conversation."

"When do they make this attack?"

"They have gone already—almost as soon as they had dealt with you. Urish is impatient."

"It is unlike the beggars to make a direct attack on a caravan."

"They do not always have a powerful wizard for an ally."

"True." Elric frowned. "My own powers of sorcery are limited without the Ring of Kings upon my hand. Its supernatural qualities identify me as a true member of the Royal Line of Melnibone—the line which made so many bargains with the elementals. First I must recover my ring and then we go at once to aid Rackhir."

Moonglum glanced at the floor. "They said some-thing of protecting Urish's Hoard in his absence. There may be a few armed men in the hall."

Elric smiled. "Now that we are prepared and now I have the strength of the Burning God in me, I think we shall be able to deal with a whole army, Moonglum."

Moonglum brightened. "Then I'll lead the way back to the hall. Come. This passage will take us to a door which is let into the side of the hall, near the throne."

They began to run along the passage until they came at length to the door Moonglum had mentioned. Elric did not pause but drew his sword and flung the door open. It was only when he was in the hall that he stopped. Daylight now lit the gloomy place, but it was again deserted. No sword-bearing beggars awaited them.
Instead, there sat in Urish's throne a fat, scaly thing of yellow and green and black. Brown bile dripped from its grinning snout and it raised one of its many paws in a mockery of a salute. "Greetings," it hissed, "and beware-for I am the guardian of Urish's treasure."

"A thing of Hell," Elric said. "A demon raised by Theleb K'aarna. He has been brewing his spells for a long time, methinks, if he can command so many foul servants." He frowned and weighed Stormbringer in his hand but, oddly, the blade did not seem to hunger for battle.

"I warn thee," hissed the demon, "I cannot be slain by a sword-not even that sword. It is my wardpact...

"What is that?" whispered Moonglum, eying the demon warily.

"He is of a race of demons used by all with sorcerous power. He is a guardian. He will not attack unless himself attacked. He is virtually invulnerable to mortal weapons and, in his case, he has a ward against swords -be they supernatural or no. If we attempted to slay him with our swords, we should be struck down by all the powers of Hell. We could not possibly survive."

"But you have just destroyed a god! A demon is nothing compared with that!"

"A weak god," Elric reminded him. "And this is a strong demon-for he is a representative of all demons who would mass with him to preserve his wardpact."

"Is there no chance of defeating him?"

"If we are to help Rackhir, there is no reason for trying. We must get to our horses and try to warn the caravan. Later, perhaps, we can return and think of some sorcery which will aid us against the demon." Elric bowed sardonically to the demon and returned his salute. "Farewell unlovely one. May your master not return to release you and thus ensure you squat in this filth forever!"

The demon slobbered in rage. "My master is Theleb K'aarna—one of the most powerful sorcerers amongst your kind."

Elric shook his head. "Not my kind. I shall be slaying him soon and you will be left there until I discover the means of destroying you."

Somewhat pettishly, the demon folded its multitude of arms and closed its eyes.

Elric and Moonglum strode through the muck-strewn hall towards the door.

They were close to vomiting by the time they reached the steps leading into the forum. The rest of Elric's potions had been taken when his purse was taken and they had no protection now against the stink.

Moonglum spat on the steps as they descended into the square and then he looked up and drew his two swords in a cross-arm motion.

"Elric!"

Some dozen beggars were rushing at them, bearing an array of clubs, axes and knives.

Elric laughed. "Here's a titbit for you, Stormbringer!" He drew his sword and began to swing the howling blade around his head, moving implacably towards the beggars. Almost immediately two of their number broke and ran, but the rest came in a rush at the pair.

Elric brought the sword lower and took a head from its shoulders and had bitten deep into the next man's shoulder before the first's blood had begun to spout.

Moonglum darted in with his two slim swords and engaged two of the beggars at the same time. Elric stabbed at another and the man screamed and danced, clutching at the blade which remorselessly drew out his soul and his life.

Stormbringer was singing a sardonic song now and three of the surviving beggars dropped their weapons and were off across the square as Moonglum neatly took both his opponents simultaneously in their hearts and Elric hacked down the rest of the rabble as they shouted and groaned for mercy.

Elric sheathed Stormbringer, looked down at the crimson ruin he had caused, wiped his lips as a man
might who had just enjoyed a fine meal, caused Moon-glum to shudder, and clapped his friend on the shoulder.
"Come-let's to Rackhir's aid!"
As Moonglum followed the albino, he reflected that Elric had absorbed more than just the Burning God's life force in the encounter in the labyrinth. Much of the callousness of the Lords of Chaos was in him today.
Today Elric seemed a true warrior of ancient Melnibone.

CHAPTER FIVE
Things Which Are Not Women
The beggars had been too absorbed in their triumph over the albino and their plans for their attack on the caravan of Tanelorn to think to seek the mounts on which Elric and Moonglum had come to Nadsokor. They found the horses where they had left them the previous night. The superb Shazarian steeds were cropping the grass as if they had been waiting only a few minutes.
They climbed into their saddles and soon were riding as fast as the fleet horses could carry them-North-north-east to the point the caravan was logically due to reach.
Shortly after noon they had found it-a long sprawl of waggons and horses, awnings of gay, rich silks, brightly decorated harness, it stretched across the floor of a shallow valley. And surrounding it on all sides was the squalid and motley beggar army of King Urish of Nadsokor.
Elric and Moonglum reined in their horses when they reached the brow of the hill and they watched. Theleb K'aarna and King Urish were not immediately visible and at last Elric saw them on the opposite hill. By the way in which the sorcerer was stretching out his arms to the deep blue sky Elric guessed he was already summoning the aid he had promised Urish.
Below Elric saw a flash of red and knew that it must be the scarlet garb of the Red Archer. Peering closer he saw one or two other shapes he recognised-Brut of Lashmar with his blond hair and his huge, burly body almost dwarfing his warhorse; Carkan, once of Pan Tang himself, but now dressed in the chequered cloak and fur cap of the barbarians of Southern Ilmiora. Rackhir himself had been a Warrior Priest from Moonglum's country beyond the Weeping Waste, but all these men had foresworn their gods to go to live in peaceful Tanelorn where, it was said, even the greatest Lords of the Higher Worlds could not enter-
Eternal Tanelorn, which had stood for uncountable cycles and would outlive the Earth herself.
Knowing nothing of Theleb K'aarna's plan Rackhir was plainly not too worried by the appearance of the beggar rabble which was as poorly armed as those Elric and Moonglum had fought in Nadsokor.
"We must ride through their army to reach Rackhir now," Moonglum said.
Elric nodded but he made no move. He was watching the distant hill where Theleb K'aarna continued his incantation, hoping that he might guess what kind of aid the sorcerer was summoning.
A moment later Elric yelled and spurred his horse down the hill at a gallop. Moonglum was almost as startled as the beggars as he followed his friend into the thick of the ragged horde, slashing this way and that with the longest of his swords.
Elric's Stormbringer emitted black radiance as it carved a bloody path through the beggar army, leaving in its wake a mess of dismembered bodies, entrails and dead, horrified eyes.
Moonglum's horse was splashed with blood to the shoulder and it snorted and balked at following the white-skinned demon with the howling black blade, but Moonglum, afraid that the beggar ranks would close, forced it on until at last they were both riding towards the caravan and someone was yelling Elric's name.
It was Rackhir the Red Archer, clothed in scarlet from head to foot, with a red bone bow in his hand and a red quiver of crimson-fletched arrows on his
back. On his head was a scarlet skull cap decorated with a single scarlet feather. His face was weather-beaten and all but fleshless. He had fought with Elric before the Fall of Imrryr and together they had discovered the Black Swords. Rackhir had gone on to seek Tanelorn and find it at last.

Elric had not seen Rackhir since then. Now he noted an enviable look of peace in the archer's eyes. Rackhir had once been a Warrior Priest in the Eastlands, serving Chaos, but now he served nothing but his tranquil Tanelorn.

"Elric! Have you come to help us send Urish and his beggars back to where they came from?" Rackhir was laughing, evidently pleased to see his old friend. "And Moonglum! When did you two meet? I have not seen thee since I left the Eastlands!"

Moonglum grinned. "Much has come to pass since those days, Rackhir."

Rackhir rubbed at his aquiline nose. "Aye-so I've heard."

Elric dismounted swiftly. "No time for reminiscence now, Rackhir. You're in greater danger than you know."

"What? When did the beggar rabble of Nadsokor offer anything to fear? Look how poorly armed they are!"

"They have a sorcerer with them-Theleb K'aarna of Pan Tang. See-that's him on yonder hill."

Rackhir frowned. "Sorcery. These days I've little guard against that. How good is the sorcerer, do you know?"

"If you cut loose your horses so that all your folk could be mounted we might be able to escape before theleb K'aarna invokes whatever supernatural aid it is he seeks." Elric nodded as the giant, Brut of Lashmar, rode up grinning at him. Brut had been a hero in Lashmar before he had disgraced himself.

Rackhir shook his head. "Tanelorn needs the provisions we carry."

"Look," said Moonglum quietly.

On the hill where Theleb K'aarna had been standing there had now appeared a billowing cloud of redness, like blood in clear water.

"He is successful." Rackhir murmured. "Brut! Let all be mounted. We've no time to prepare further defences, but we'll have the advantage of being on horse-back when they attack."

Brut thundered off, yelling at the men of Tanelorn. They began to unharness the wagon horses and ready their weapons.

The cloud of redness above was beginning to disperse and out of it shapes were emerging. Elric tried to distinguish the shapes but could not at that distance. He climbed back into his saddle as the horsemen of Tanelorn now formed themselves into groups which would, when the attack came, race through the unmounted beggars striking swiftly and passing on. Rackhir waved to Elric and went to join one of these divisions. Elric and Moonglum found themselves at the head of a dozen warriors armed with axes, pikes and lances.

Then Urish's voice cawed out over the waiting silence.

"Attack, my beggars! They are doomed!"

The beggar rabble began to move down the sides of the valley. Rackhir raised his sword as the signal to his men. Then the first groups of cavalry rode out from the caravan, straight at the advancing beggars. Rackhir replaced his blade and took up his bow. From where he sat on his horse he began to send arrow after arrow into the beggar ranks.

There was shouting everywhere now as the warriors of Tanelorn met their foes, driving wedges...
everywhere in their mass.
Elric saw Carkan's chequered cape in the midst of a sea of rags, filthy limbs, clubs and knives. He saw Brut's great blond head towering over a cluster of human filth.
And Moonglum said: "Such creatures as these are unfit opponents for the warriors of Tanelorn."
Elric pointed grimly up the hill. "Perhaps they'll prefer their new foes."
Moonglum gasped. "They are women!"
Elric drew Stormbringer from its scabbard. "They are not women. They are Elenoin. They come from the Eighth Plane-and neither are they human. You will see."
"You recognize them?"
"My ancestors fought them once."
A strange, shrill ululation reached their ears now. It came from the hillside where Theleb K'aarna's figure could again be seen. It came from the shapes which Moonglum was sure were women. Red-haired women whose tresses fell almost to their knees and covered their otherwise completely naked bodies. They danced down the hill towards the besieged caravan and they whirled swords about their heads which must have been over five feet long.
"Theleb K'aarna is clever," Elric muttered. "The warriors of Tanelorn will hesitate before striking at women. And while they hesitate the Elenoin will rip and slash and slay them."
Rackhir had already seen the Elenoin and he, too, recognised them for what they were. "Do not be deceived, men!" he called. "These creatures are demons!" He glanced across at Elric and there was a look of resignation on his face. He knew the power of the Elenoin. He spurred his horse towards the albino.
"What can we do, Elric?"
Elric sighed. "What can mortals do against the Elenoin?"
"Have you no sorcery?"
"With the Ring of Kings I could summon the Grahluk, perhaps. They are the ancient enemies of the Elenoin. Theleb K'aarna has already made a gateway from the Eighth Plane."
"Could you not try to call the Grahluk?" Rackhir begged.
"While I tried my sword would not be aiding you. I think Stormbringer is more use today than spells."
Rackhir shuddered and turned his horse away to order his men to re-form their ranks. He knew now that they were all to die.
And now the beggars fell back, as horrified by the Elenoin as were the men of Tanelorn.
Still singing their shrill, chill song, the Elenoin low-ered their swords and spread out along the hill, each one smiling at them.
"How can they . . . ?" Then Moonglum saw their eyes. They were huge, orange, animal eyes. "Oh, by the Gods!" And then he saw their teeth-long, pointed teeth which glinted like metal.
The horsemen of Tanelorn fell back to the waggons in a long, ragged line. Horror, despair, uncertainty was on every face save Elric's-and on his face was a look of grim anger. His crimson eyes smouldered as he held Stormbringer across his saddle pommel and regarded the demon women, the Elenoin. The singing grew louder until it made their ears fill with sharp pain and made their stomachs turn. The Elenoin raised their slender arms and began to whirl their long swords about their heads again, staring at them all the while through beastlike, insensate eyes-malicious, unblinking eyes.
Then Carkan of Pan Tang, his fur cap askew, his chequered cloak billowing, gave a strangled yell and urged his heavy horse at them, his own sword waving.
"Back, demons! Back, spawn of hell!"
"Aaaaaaaah!" gasped the Elenoin in anticipation.
"Eeeeeeh!" they sang.
And Carkan was suddenly in the midst of a dozen slender, slashing swords and he and his horse were cut all to tiny morsels of flesh which lay in a heap at the
feet of the Elenoin. And their laughter filled the valley
as some of them bent to pop the flesh into their fanged mouths.
A groan of horror and hatred went up from the ranks of Tanelorn then and screaming men, hysterical
with fear and disgust, began to fling themselves at the Elenoin who laughed the more and whirled their
sharp swords.
Stormbringer murmured as it seemed to hear the sounds of battle, but Elric did not move as he stared at
the scene. He knew that the Elenoin would kill all as they had killed Carkan.
Moonglum moaned. "Elric—there must be some sorcery against them!"
"There is! But I cannot summon the Grahluk!"
Elric's chest was heaving and his brain was in turmoil.
"I cannot, Moonglum!"
"For the sake of Tanelorn, you must try!"
Then Elric was riding forward, Stormbringer howling, riding at the Elenoin and screaming Arioch's
name as his ancestors had screamed it since the founding of Imrryr!
"Arioch! Arioch! Blood and souls for my Lord Arioch!"
He parried the whirling blade of an Elenoin and glared into the bestial eyes as Stormbringer sent a shudder
down his arm. He struck and his own blow was parried by the demon that was not a woman. Red hair
swung and curled around his throat. He hacked at it and it loosened its grip. He thrust at the naked body
and the Elenoin danced aside. Another whistling blow from the slim sword and he flung himself
backwards to avoid it, toppling from his saddle and springing instantly to his feet to parry a second
attack, gripped Stormbringer in both hands and stepped forward under the blade to plunge the Black
Sword into the smooth belly. The Elenoin shouted with anger and green foul-ness billowed from the
wound. The Elenoin fell, still glaring and snarling, still living. Elric chopped at the neck and the head
sprang off, its hair thrashing at him.
He dashed forward, picked up the head and began to
run up the hill to where the beggars were gathered, watching the destruction of Tanelorn's warriors. As
he approached the beggars broke and began to run, but he caught one in the back with his blade. The
man fell, tried to crawl on, but his twisted knees would not support him and he collapsed into the
stained grass. Elric picked the wretch up and flung him over his shoulder. Then he turned and began to
run down the hill back to the camp. The warriors of Tanelorn were fighting well, but half their number
had already been slain by the Elenoin. Almost unbelievably there were also sev-eral Elenoin corpses on
the field.
Elric saw Moonglum defending himself with both swords. He saw Rackhir, still mounted, shouting
orders to his men. He saw Brut of Lashmar in the thick of the fight. But he ran on until he stood behind
one of the waggons and had dropped both his bloody bundles to the ground. With his sword he split open
the twitching body of the beggar and he gathered up the hair of the Elenoin and soaked it in the man's
blood.
Again he stood upright, looking towards the west, with the bloody hair in one hand and Stormbringer in
the other. He raised both sword and head and began to speak in the ancient High Speech of Melnibone.
Held to the West and soaked in the blood of an enemy, the hair of an Elenoin must be used to summon
the enemies of the Elenoin—the Grahluk. He remem-bered the words he had read in his father's ancient
grimoire.
And now the invocation:
Grahluk come and Grahluk slay!
Come kill thine ancient enemy!
Make this thy victory day.

All the strength of the Burning God was leaving him as he used the energy to perform the invocation.
And perhaps without the Ring of Kings he was wasting that strength for nothing.
Grahluk speed without delay!
Come kill thine ancient enemy!
Make this thy vengeance day.

The spell was far less complex than many he had used in the past. Yet it took as much from him as any spell ever had.
"Grahluk, I summon thee! Grahluk, here you may take vengeance on your foes!"

Many cycles since, the Elenoin were said to have driven the Grahluk from their lands in the Eighth Plane and the Grahluk sought revenge now at every opportunity.

All around Elric the air shivered and turned brown, then green, then black.
"Grahluk! Come destroy the Elenoin!" Elric's voice was weakening. "Grahluk-the gateway is made!"

And now the ground trembled and strange winds blew at the blood-soaked hair of the Elenoin and the air became thick and purple and Elric fell to his knees, still croaking the invocation.

"Grahluk ..."

A shuffling sound. A grunting noise. The stink of something unnameable.
The Grahluk had come. They were apelike creatures as bestial as the Elenoin. They carried nets and ropes and shields. Once, it was said, both Grahluk and Elenoin had had intelligence-had been part of the same species which had devolved and divided.

They moved out of the purple mist in their scores and they stood looking at Elric who was still on his knees. Elric pointed at where the remaining warriors of Tanelorn were still fighting the Elenoin.
"There ..."

The Grahluk snorted with battle-greed and shambled towards the Elenoin.
The Elenoin saw them and their shrill wailing voices changed in quality as they retreated a short distance up the hill.

Elric forced himself to his feet and gasped: "Rack-Mr! Withdraw your warriors. The Grahluk will do their work now. . . ."

"You helped us after all!" Rackhir yelled, turning his horse. His clothes were all in tatters and there were a dozen wounds on his body.

They watched as the Grahluk’s nets and nooses flashed towards the screaming Elenoin whose sword blows were stopped by the Grahluk shields. They watched as the Elenoin were crushed and throttled and parts of their entrails devoured by the grunting, apelike demons.

And when the last of the Elenoin was dead, the Grahluk picked up the fallen swords and reversed them and fell upon them.

Rackhir said: "They are killing themselves. Why?"

"They live only to destroy the Elenoin. Once that is done, they have nothing left for which to exist." Elric swayed and Rackhir and Moonglum caught him.

"See!" Moonglum laughed. "The beggars are running!"

"Theleb K’aarna," Elric muttered. "We must get Theleb K’aarna. . . ."

"Doubtless he has gone back with Urish to Nadso-kor," Moonglum said.

"I must-I must retrieve the Ring of Kings."

"Plainly you can work your sorcery without it," Rackhir said.

"Can I?" Elric looked up and showed his face to Rackhir who lowered his eyes and nodded.

"We will help you get back your ring," Rackhir said quietly. "There'll be no more trouble from the beggars. We'll ride with you to Nadsokor."

"I had hoped you would." Elric climbed with difficulty into the saddle of a surviving horse and jerked at its reins, turning it towards the City of Beggars. "Per-haps your arrows will slay what my sword can-not. . . ."

"I do not understand you," Rackhir said.

Moonglum was mounting now. "We'll tell you on the way."
CHAPTER SIX
The Jesting Demon
Through the filth of Nadsokor now rode the warriors of Tanelorn.
Elric, Moonglum and Rackhir were at the head of the company but there was no ostentatious triumph in
their demeanour. The riders looked neither to left nor to right and the beggars offered no threat now, not
daring to attack but instead cowering into the shadows.
A potion of Rackhir's had helped Elric recover some of his strength and he no longer leaned over his
horse's neck but sat upright as they crossed the forum, came to the palace of the Beggar King.
Elric did not pause. He rode his horse up the steps and into the gloomy hall.
"Theleb K'aarna!" Elric shouted.
His voice boomed through the hall, but Theleb K'aarna did not reply.
The braziers of garbage guttered in the wind from the opened door and threw a little more light on the
dais at the end.
"Theleb K'aarna!"
But it was not Theleb K'aarna who knelt there. It was a wretched, ragged figure and it sprawled before
the throne and it was sobbing, imploring, whining at something on the throne.
Elric walked his horse a little further into the hall and now he could see what occupied the throne.
Squatting in the great chair of black oak was the
demon which had been there earlier. Its arms were
folded and its eyes were shut and it seemed, somewhat
theatrically, to be ignoring the pleadings of the creature kneeling at its feet.
The others, also mounted, entered the hall now and together they rode up to the dais and stopped.
The kneeling figure turned its head and it was Urish. It gasped when it saw Elric and stretched out a
maimed hand for its cleaver, abandoned some dis-tance away.
Elric sighed.
"Do not fear me, Urish. I'm weary of blood-letting.
I do not want your life."
The demon opened its eyes.
"Prince Elric, you have returned," it said. There seemed to be an indefinable difference in its tone.
"Aye. Where is your master?"
"I fear he has fled Nadsokor forever."
"And left you to sit here for eternity."
The demon inclined its head.
Urish put a grimy hand on Elric's leg. "Elric-help me! I must have my Hoard. It is everything! Destroy
the demon and I will give you back the Ring of Kings."
Elric smiled. "You are generous, King Urish."
Tears streamed down the filth on Urish's ruined face.
"Please, Elric, I beg thee. . . ."
"It is my intention to destroy the demon."
Urish looked nervously about him. "And aught else?"
"That decision lies with the men of Tanelorn whom you sought to rob and whose friends you caused to
be slain in a most foul manner."
"It was Theleb K'aarna, not I!"
"And where is Theleb K'aarna now?"
"When you unleashed those ape things on our Ele-noin he fled the field. He went towards the Varkalk
River-towards Troos."
Without looking behind him Elric said, "Rackhir?
Will you try the arrows now?"
There was the hum of a bowstring and an arrow
struck the demon in the breast. It quivered there and
the demon looked at it with mild interest, then breathed
in deeply. As he breathed the arrow was drawn further into him and was eventually absorbed altogether.
"Aaah!" Urish scuttled for his cleaver. "It will not work!"
A second arrow sped from Rackhir's scarlet bow and it, too, was absorbed, as was the third.
Urish was gibbering now, waving his cleaver.
Elric warned him: "He has a wardpact against swords, King Urish!"
The demon rattled its scales. "Is that thing a sword, I wonder?"
Urish hesitated. Spittle ran down his chin and his red
eyes rolled. "Demon-begone! I must have my Hoard
-it is mine!"

The demon watched him sardonically.
With a yell of terror and anguish Urish flung himself at the demon, the cleaver Hackmeat swinging
wildly. Its blade came down on the hell-thing's head, there was a sound like lightning striking metal and
the cleaver shivered to pieces. Urish stood staring at the demon in quaking anticipation. Casually the
demon reached out four of its hands and seized him. Its jaws opened wider than should have been
possible, the bulk of the demon expanded until it was suddenly twice its original size. It brought the
kicking Beggar King to its maw and suddenly there were only two legs waving from the mouth and then
the demon gave a mighty swallow and there was nothing at all left of Urish of Nadsokor.
Elric shrugged. "Your wardpact is effective."
The demon smiled. "Aye, sweet Elric."
Now the tone of voice was very familiar. Elric looked narrowly at the demon. "You're no ordi-nary ..."
"I hope not, most beloved of mortals."
Elric's horse reared and snorted as the demon's
shape began to alter. There was a humming sound and
black smoke coiled over the throne and then another
figure was sitting there, its legs crossed. It had the
shape of a man but it was more beautiful than any
mortal. It was a being of intense and majestic beauty-une earthly beauty.
"Arioch!" Elric bowed his head before the Lord of Chaos.
"Aye, Elric. I took the demon's place while you were gone."
"But you have refused to aid me. . . ."
"There are larger affairs afoot, as I've told you. Soon Chaos must engage with Law and such as Don-bias
will be dismissed to Limbo for eternity."
"You knew Donblas spoke to me in the labyrinth of the Burning God?"
"Indeed I did. That was why I afforded myself the time to visit your plane. I cannot have you patronised
by Donblas the Justice Maker and his humourless kind. I was offended. Now I have shown you that my
power is greater than Law's." Arioch stared beyond Elric at Rackhir, Brut, Moonglum and the rest who
were pro- tecting their eyes from his beauty. "Perhaps you fools of Tanelorn now realise that it is better to
serve Chaos!"
Rackhir said grimly: "I serve neither Chaos nor Law!"
"One day you will be taught that neutrality is more dangerous than side-taking, renegade!" The harmoni-
ous voice was now almost vicious.
"You cannot harm me," Rackhir said. "And if Elric returns with us to Tanelorn, then he, too, may rid him-
self of your evil yoke!"
"Elric is of Melnibone". The folk of Melnibone all serve Chaos-and are greatly rewarded: How else
would you have rid this throne of Theleb K'aarna's demon?"
"Perhaps in Tanelorn Elric would have no need of his Ring of Kings," Rackhir replied levelly.
There was a sound like rushing water, the boom of thunder and Arioch's form began to grow larger. But as it grew it also began to fade until there was nothing left in the hall but the stench of its garbage. Elric dismounted and ran to the throne. Reaching under it he drew out dead Urish's chest and hacked it open with Stormbringer. The sword murmured as if resenting the menial work. Gems, gold, artifacts scattered through the muck as Elric sought his ring. And then at last he held it up in triumph, replacing it on his finger. His step was lighter as he returned to his horse. Moonglum had in the meantime dismounted and was scooping the best of the jewels into his pouch. He winked at Rackhir, who smiled.

"And now," Elric said, "I go to Troos to seek Theleb K'aarna there. I have still to take my vengeance upon him."

"Let him rot in Troos's sickly forest," Moonglum said.

Rackhir placed a hand on Elric's shoulder. "If Theleb K'aarna hates you so, he will find you again. Why waste your own time in the pursuit?"

Elric smiled slightly at his old friend. "You were ever clever in your arguments, Rackhir. And it is true that I am weary—both gods and demons have fallen to my blade in the little while since I came to Nadsokor."

"Come, rest in Tanelorn-peaceful Tanelorn, where even the greatest Lords of the Higher Worlds cannot come without permission."

Elric looked down at the ring on his finger. "Yet I have sworn Theleb K'aarna shall perish. . . ."

"There will be time yet to fulfil your oath."

Elric ran his hand through his milk-white hair and it seemed to his friends that there were tears in his crimson eyes.


And they rode away from Nadsokor, leaving the beggars to brood in the stink and the foulness and regret that they had aught to do with sorcery or with Elric of Melnibone.

They rode for Eternal Tanelorn. Tanelorn, which had welcomed and held all troubled wanderers who came upon it. All save one. Doom-haunted, full of guilt, of sorrow, of despair, Elric of Melnibone prayed that this time Tanelorn might hold even him. . . .

BOOK THREE
Three Heroes with a Single Aim

"... Elric, of all the manifestations of the Champion Eternal, was to find Tanelorn without effort. And of all those manifestations he was the only one to choose to leave that city of myriad incarnations . . ."

-The Chronicle of the Black Sword

CHAPTER ONE
Tanelorn Eternal

Tanelorn had taken many forms in her endless existence, but all those forms, save one, had been beautiful.

She was beautiful now, with the soft sunlight on her pastel towers and her curved turrets and domes. And banners flew from her spires, but they were not battle banners, for the warriors who had found Tanelorn and had stayed there were weary of war.

She had been here always. None knew when Tanelorn had been built, but some knew that she had
existed before Tune and would exist after the end of Time and that was why she was known as Eternal Tanelorn.
She had played a significant role in the struggles of many heroes and many gods and because she existed beyond Tune she was hated by the Lords of Chaos who had more than once sought to destroy her. To the north of her lay the rolling plains of Ilmiora, a land where justice was known to prevail, and to the south of her lay desolation which was the Sighing Desert, endless wasteland over which hissed a constant wind. If Ilmiora represented Law, then the Sighing Desert certainly mirrored something of the barrenness of Ultimate Chaos. Those who dwelled in her had loyalty neither to Law nor to Chaos and they had chosen to have no part in the Cosmic Struggle which was waged continuously by the Lords of the Higher Worlds. There were no leaders and there were no followers in Tanelorn and her citizens lived in harmony with each other, even though many had been warriors of great reputation before they chose to stay there. But one of the most admired citizens of Tanelorn, one who was often consulted by the others, was Rackhir of the ascetic features who had once been a fierce warrior-priest in P'hum where he had gained the name of the Red Archer because his skill with a bow was great and he dressed all in scarlet. His skill and his dress remained the same, but his urge to fight had left him since he had come to live in Tanelorn. Close to the low west wall of the city lay a house of two storeys surrounded by a lawn in which grew all manner of wild flowers. The house was of pink and yellow marble and, unlike most of the other dwellings in Tanelorn, it had a tall, pointed roof. This was Rackhir's house and Rackhir sat outside it now, sprawled on a bench of plain wood while he watched his guest pace the lawn. The guest was his old friend the tormented albino Prince of Melnibone.
Elric wore a simple white shirt and britches of heavy black silk. He had a band of the same black silk tied around his head to keep back the mane of milk-white hair which grew to his shoulders. His crimson eyes were downcast as he paced and he did not look at Rackhir at all.
Rackhir was unwilling to intrude upon his friend's reverie and yet he hated to see Elric as he was now. He had hoped that Tanelorn would comfort the albino, drive away the ghosts and the doubts inhabiting his skull, but it seemed that even Tanelorn could not bring Elric tranquillity.
At last Rackhir broke his silence. "It has been a month since you came to Tanelorn, my friend, yet still you pace, still you brood."
"Aye-still I brood. Forgive me, Rackhir. I am a poor guest."
"What occupies your thoughts?"
"No particular subject. It seems that I cannot lose myself in all this peace. Only violent action helps me drive away my melancholy. I was not meant for Tanelorn, Rackhir."
"But violent action—or the results of it-produces further melancholy does it not?"
"It is true. It is the dilemma with which I live constantly. It is a dilemma I have been in since the burning of Imrryr-perhaps before."
"It is a dilemma known to all men, perhaps," Rackhir said. "At least to some degree."
"Aye—to wonder what purpose there is to one's existence and what point there is to purpose, even if it should be discovered."
"Tanelorn makes such problems seem meaningless to me," Rackhir told him. "I had hoped that you, too, would be able to dismiss them from your thoughts. Will you stay on in Tanelorn?"
"I have no other plans. I still thirst for vengeance upon Theleb K'aarna, but I now have no idea of his whereabouts. And, as you or Moonglum told me, Theleb K'aarna is sure to seek me out sooner or later. I remember once, when you first found Tanelorn, you suggested that I bring Cymoril here and forget Melnibone. I wish I had listened to you then, Rackhir, for now, I think, I would know peace and Cymoril's dead face would not be infesting my nights."

"You mentioned this sorceress who, you said, resembled Cymoril . . .?"

"Myshella? She who is called Empress of the Dawn? I first saw her in a dream and when I left her side it was I who was in a dream. We served each other to achieve a common purpose. I shall not see her again."

"But if she-"

"I shall not see her again, Rackhir."

"As you say."

Once more the two friends fell silent and there was only birdsong and the splash of fountains in the air as Elric continued his pacing of the garden.

Some while later Elric suddenly turned on his heel and went into the house followed by Rackhir's troubled gaze.

When Elric came out again he was wearing the great wide belt around his waist—the belt which supported the black scabbard containing his runesword Stormbringer. Over his shoulders was flung a cloak of white silk and he wore high boots.

"I go riding," he said. "I will go by myself into the Sighing Desert and I will ride until I am exhausted. Perhaps exercise is all I need."

"Be careful of the desert, my friend," Rackhir cautioned him. "It is a sinister and treacherous wilderness."

"I will be careful."

"Take the big golden mare. She is used to the desert and her stamina is legendary."

"Thank you. I will see you in the morning if I do not return earlier."

"Take care, Elric. I trust your remedy is successful and your melancholy disappears."

Rackhir's expression had little of relief in it as he watched his friend stride towards the near-by stables, his white cloak billowing behind him like a sea fog suddenly risen.

Then he heard the sound of Elric's horse as its hooves struck the cobbles of the street and Rackhir got to his feet to watch as the albino urged the golden mare into a canter and headed for the northern wall beyond which the great yellow waste of the Sighing Desert could be seen.

Moonglum came out of the house, a large apple in his hand, a scroll under his arm.

"Where goes Elric, Rackhir?"

"He looks for peace in the desert."

Moonglum frowned and bit thoughtfully into his apple. "He has sought peace in all other places and I fear he'll not find it there, either."

Rackhir nodded his agreement. "But it is my premonition he'll discover something else, for Elric is not always motivated by his own wishes. There are times when other forces work within him to make him take some fateful action."

"You think this is such a time?"

"It could be."

CHAPTER TWO

Return of a Sorceress

The sand rippled as the wind blew it so that the dunes seemed like waves in an almost petrified sea. Stark fangs of rock jutted here and there—the remains of mountain ranges which had been eroded by the wind. And a mournful sighing could just be heard, as if the sand remembered when it had been rock and the stones of cities and the bones of men and beasts and longed for its resurrection, sighed at the memory.
of its death.
Elric drew the cloak’s cowl over Ms head to protect it from the fierce sun which hung in the steel-blue sky.

One day, he thought, I too shall know this peace of death and perhaps then I shall also regret it. He let the golden mare slow to a trot and took a sip of water from one of his canteens.

Now the desert surrounded him and it seemed in-finite. Nothing grew. No animals lived there. There were no birds in the sky.

For some reason he shuddered and he had a pre-sentiment of a moment in the future when he would be alone, as he was now, in a world even more barren than this desert, without even a horse for company. He shook off the thought, but it had left him so stunned that for a little while he achieved his ambi-tion and did not brood upon his fate and his situation. The wind dropped slightly and the sighing became little more than a whisper.

Dazed, Elric fingered the pommel of his blade-Stormbringer, the Black Sword-for he associated his presentiment with the weapon but could not tell why. And it seemed to him that he heard an ironic note in the murmuring of the wind. Or did the sound ema-nate from his sword itself? He cocked his head, listen-ing, but the sound became even less audible, as if aware that he listened.

The golden mare began to climb the gentle slope of a dune, stumbling once as her foot sank into deeper sand. Elric concentrated on guiding her to firmer ground.

Reaching the top of the dune he reined his horse in. The desert dunes rolled on, broken only by the occasional rock. He had it in mind then to ride on and on until it would be impossible to return to Tanelorn, until both he and his mount collapsed from exhaustion and were eventually swallowed by the sands. He pushed back his cowl and wiped sweat from his brow.

Why not? he thought. Life was not bearable. He would try death.

And yet would death deny him? Was he doomed to live? It sometimes seemed so.

Then he considered the horse. It would not be fair to sacrifice it to his desire. Slowly he dismounted.

The wind grew stronger and the sound of its sigh-ing increased. Sand blew around Elric's booted feet. It was a hot wind and it tugged at his voluminous white cloak. The horse snorted nervously.

Elric looked towards the north east, towards the edge of the world.

And he began to walk.

The horse whinnied enquiringly at him when he did not call it, but he ignored the sound and had soon left his mount behind him. He had not even bothered to bring water with him. He flung back his cowl so that the sun beat directly upon his head. His pace was even, purposeful and he marched as if at the head of an army.

Perhaps he did sense an army behind him-the army of the dead, of all those friends and enemies whom he had slain in the course of his pointless search for a meaning to his existence.

And still one enemy remained alive. An enemy even stronger, even more malevolent than Theleb K'aarna-the enemy of his darker self, of that side of his nature which was symbolised by the sentient blade still resting at his hip. And when he died, then that enemy would also die. A force for evil would be re-moved from the world.

For several hours Elric of Melnibone" tramped on through the Sighing Desert and gradually, as he had hoped, his sense of identity began to leave him so that it was almost as if he became one with the wind and the sand and, in so doing, was united at last with the world which had rejected him and which he had re-jected.

Evening came, but he hardly noticed the sun's set-ting. Night fell, but he continued to march, unaware of the cold. Already he was weakening. He rejoiced in the weakness where previously he had fought to retain the strength he enjoyed only through the power of the Black Sword.

And sometime around midnight, beneath a pale moon, his legs buckled and he fell sprawling in the sand
and lay there while the remains of his sensibilities left him.
"Prince Elric. My Lord?"
The voice was rich, vibrant, almost amused. It was a woman's voice and Elric recognised it. He did not move.
"Elric of Melnibone."
He felt a hand on his arm. She was trying to pull him upright. Rather than be dragged he raised himself with some difficulty to a sitting position. He tried to speak, but at first no words would come from his mouth which was dry and full of sand. She stood there as the dawn rose behind her and brightened her long black hair framing her beautiful features. She was dressed in a flowing gown of blue, green and gold and she was smiling.
As he cleared the sand from his mouth he shook his head, saying at last: "If I am dead, then I am still plagued by phantoms and illusions."
"I am no more illusion than anything else in this world. You are not dead, my lord."
"You are, in that case, many leagues from Castle Kaneloon, my lady. You have come from the other side of the world—from edge to edge."
"I have been seeking you, Elric."
"Then you have broken your word, Myshella, for when we parted you said that you would not see me again, that our fates had ceased to be twined."
"I thought then that Theleb K'aarna was dead—that our mutual enemy had perished in the Noose of Flesh." The sorceress spread her arms wide and it was almost as if the gesture summoned the sun, for it appeared over the horizon, suddenly. "Why did you walk thus in the desert, my lord?"
"I sought death."
"Yet you know it is not your destiny to die in such a way."
"I have been told as much but I do not know it, Lady Myshella. However," he stumbled upright and stood swaying before her, "I am beginning to suspect that it is so."
She came forward, bringing a goblet from beneath her robes. It was full to the brim with a cool, silvery liquid. "Drink," she said.
He did not lift his hands towards the cup. "I am not pleased to see you, Lady Myshella."
"Why? Because you are afraid to love me?"
"If it flatters you to think that—aye."
"It does not flatter me. I know you are reminded of Cymoril and that I made the mistake of letting Kaneloon become that which you most desire—before I understood that it is also what you most fear."
He lowered his head. "Be silent!"
"I am sorry. I apologised then. We drove away the desire and terror together for a little while, did we not?"
He looked up and she was staring intently into his eyes. "Did we not?"
"We did." He took a deep breath and stretched out his hands for the goblet. "Is this some potion to sap my will and make me work for your interests?"
"No potion could do that. It will revive you, that is all."
He sipped the liquid and immediately his mouth was clean and his head clear. He drained the goblet and he felt a glow of strength in all his limbs and vitals.
"Do you still wish to die?" she asked as she re-ceived back the cup, replacing it beneath her robes.
"If death will bring me peace."
"It will not—not if you die now. That I know."
"How did you find me here?"
"Oh, by a variety of means, some of them sorcerer-ous. But my bird brought me to you." She extended her
right arm to point behind him. He turned and there was the bird of gold and silver and brass which he himself had once ridden while in Myshella's service. Its great metallic wings were folded but there was intelligence in its emerald eyes as it waited for its mistress.

"Have you come, then, to return me to Tanelorn?"
She shook her head. "Not yet. I have come to tell you where you may discover our enemy Theleb K'aarna."
He smiled. "He threatens you again?"
"Not directly."
Elric shook sand from his cloak. "I know you well, Myshella. You would not interfere in my destiny unless it had again become in some way linked with your own. You have said that I am afraid to love you. That may be true, for I think I am afraid to love any woman. But you make use of love—the men to whom you give your love are men who will serve your purpose."
"I do not deny that. I love only heroes—and only heroes who work to ensure the presence of the Power of Law upon this plane of our Earth. ..."
"I care not whether Law or Chaos gains predominance. Even my hatred of Theleb K'aarna has waned—and that was a personal hatred, nothing to do with any cause."

"What if you knew Theleb K'aarna once again threatens the folk of Tanelorn?"
"Impossible. Tanelorn is eternal."
"Tanelorn is eternal—but its citizens are not. I know. More than once has some catastrophe fallen upon those who dwell in Tanelorn. And the Lords of Chaos hate Tanelorn, though they cannot attack it directly. They would aid any mortal who thought he could destroy those whom the Chaos Lords regard as traitors."

Elric frowned. He knew of the enmity of the Lords of Chaos to Tanelorn. He had heard that on more than one occasion they had made use of mortals to attack the city.
"And you say Theleb K'aarna plans to destroy Tanelorn's citizens? With Chaos' aid?"
"Aye. Your thwarting of his schemes concerning Nadsokor and Rackhir's caravan made him extend his hatred to all dwelling in Tanelorn. In Troos he discovered some ancient grimoires—things which survived from the Age of the Doomed Folk."
"How can that be? They existed a whole time cycle before Melnibone!"
"True—but Troos itself has lasted since the Age of the Doomed Folk and these were people who had many great inventions, a means of preserving their wisdom. . . ."
"Very well. I will accept that Theleb K'aarna found their grimoires. What did those grimoires tell him?"
"They showed him the means of causing a rupture in the division which separates one plane of Earth from another. This knowledge of the other planes is largely mysterious to us—even your ancestors only guessed at the variety of existences obtaining in what the ancients termed the 'multiverse'-and I know only a little more than do you. The Lords of the Higher Worlds can, at times, move freely between these temporal and spatial layers, but mortals can-not—at least not in this period of our being."
"And what has Theleb K'aarna done? Surely great power would be needed to cause this 'rupture' you describe? He does not have that power."
"True. But he has powerful allies in the Chaos Lords. The Lords of Entropy have leagued themselves with him as they would league themselves with anyone who was willing to be the means of destruction of those who dwell in Tanelorn. He found more than manuscripts in the Forest of Troos. He dis-covered those buried devices which were the inventions of the Doomed Folk and which ultimately brought about their destruction. These devices, of course, were meaningless to him until the Lords of Chaos showed
him how they could be activated using the very forces of creation for their energy."
"And he has activated them? Where?"
"He brought the device he wanted to these parts, for he needed space to work where he thought he could
not be observed by such as myself."
"He is in the Sighing Desert?"
"Aye. If you had continued on your horse you would have found him by now-or he you. I believe that is
what drove you into the desert-a compulsion to seek him out."
"I had no compulsion save a need to die!" Elric tried to control his anger. She smiled again. "Have it thus if you will. . . ."
"You mean I am so manipulated by Fate that I cannot choose to die if I wish?"
"Ask yourself for that answer."
Elric's face was clouded with puzzlement and despair. "What is it, then, which guides me? And to what end?"
"You must discover that for yourself."
"You want me to go against Chaos? Yet Chaos aids me and I am sworn to Arioch."
"But you are mortal-and Arioch is slow to aid you these days, perhaps because he guesses what lies in
the future."
"What do you know of the future?"
"Little-and what I know I cannot speak of to you. A mortal may choose whom he serves, Elric."
"I have chosen. I chose Chaos."
"Yet much of your melancholy is because you are divided in your loyalties."
"That, too, is true."
"Besides you would not fight for Law if you fought against Theleb K'aarna-you would merely be
fighting against one aided by Chaos-and those of Chaos often fight among themselves do they not?"
"They do. It is also well known that I hate Theleb K'aarna and would destroy him whether he served Law
or Chaos."
"Therefore you will not unduly anger those to whom you are loyal-though they may be reluctant to help
you."
"Tell me more of Theleb K'aarna's plans."
"You must see for yourself. There is your horse." She pointed again and this time he saw the golden
mare emerge from the other side of a dune. "Head North-east as you were heading, but move cautiously
lest Theleb K'aarna becomes aware of your presence and traps you."
"Suppose I merely return to Tanelorn-or choose to try to die again?"
"But you will not, will you, Elric? You have loyalties to your friends, you wish in your heart to serve
what I represent-and you hate Theleb K'aarna. I do not think you would wish to die for the moment."
He scowled. "Once more I am burdened with un-
wanted responsibilities, hedged by considerations other
than my own desires, trapped by emotions which we of
Melnibone have been taught to despise. Aye-I will go, Myshella. I will do what you wish."
"Be careful, Elric. Theleb K'aarna now has powers which are unfamiliar to you, which you will find diffi-
cult to combat." She gave him a lingering look and sudenly he had stepped forward and had seized her,
kissed her while tears flowed down his white face and mingled with hers. Later he watched as she climbed into the onyx sad-dle of the bird of silver and gold and called out a com-
mand. The metal wings beat with a great clashing, the emerald eyes turned and the gem-studded beak
Soon the metal bird was a speck of light in the blue
sky and Elric had turned his horse towards the North-
Elric reined in behind the cover of a crag. He had found the camp of Theleb K’aarna. A large tent of yellow silk had been erected beneath the protection of an overhang of rock which was part of a formation making a natural amphitheatre among the dunes of the desert. A wagon and two horses were close to the tent, but all this was dominated by the thing of metal which reared in the centre of the clearing. It was contained in an enormous bowl of clear crystal. The bowl was almost globular with a narrow opening at the top. The device itself was asymmetrical and strange, composed of many curved and angular surfaces which seemed to contain myriad half-formed faces, shapes of beasts and buildings, illusive designs coming and going even as Elric looked upon it. An imagination even more grotesque than that of Elric's ancestors had fashioned the thing, amalgamating metals and other substances which logic denied could ever be fused into one thing. A creation of Chaos which offered a clue as to how the Doomed Folk had come to destroy themselves. And it was alive. Deep within it something pulsed, as delicate and tentative as the heartbeat of a dying wren. Elric had witnessed many obscenities in his life and was moved by few of them, but this device, though superficially more innocuous than much he had seen, brought bile into his mouth. Yet for all his disgust he remained where he was, fascinated by the machine in the bowl, until the flap of the yellow tent was drawn back and Theleb K’aarna emerged. The Sorcerer of Pan Tang was paler and thinner than when Elric had last seen him, shortly before the battle between the beggars of Nadsokor and the warriors of Tanelorn. Yet unhealthy energy flushed the cheeks and burned in the dark eyes, gave a nervous swiftness to the movements. Theleb K’aarna approached the bowl.

As he came closer Elric could hear him muttering to himself. "Now, now, now," murmured the sorcerer. "Soon, soon will die Elric and all who league with him. Ah, the albino will rue the day when he earned my vengeance and turned me from a scholar into what I am today. And when he is dead, then Queen Yishana will realise her mistake and give herself to me. How could she love that pale-faced anachronism more than a man of my great talents? How?"

Elric had almost forgotten Theleb K’aarna's obsession with Queen Yishana of Jharkor, the woman who had wielded a greater power over the sorcerer than could any magic. It had been Theleb K’aarna's jealousy of Elric which had turned him from a relatively peaceful student of the dark arts into a vengeful practitioner of the most frightful sorceries.

He watched as Theleb K’aarna began with his finger to trace complicated patterns upon the glass of the bowl. And with every completed rune the pulse within the machine grew stronger. Oddly coloured light began to flow through certain sections, bringing them to life. A steady thump issued from the neck of the bowl. A peculiar stink began to reach Elric's nostrils. The core of light became brighter and larger and the machine seemed to alter its shape, sometimes becoming apparently liquid and streaming around the inside of the bowl.

The golden mare snorted and began to shift uneasily.

Elric automatically patted her neck and steadied her.

Theleb K’aarna was now merely a silhouette against the swiftly changing light within the bowl. He continued to murmur to himself but his words were drowned by the heartbeats which now echoed among the surrounding rocks. His right hand drew still more invisible diagrams upon the glass.

The sky seemed to be darkening, though it was some hours to sunset. Elric looked up. Above his head the sky was still blue, the golden sun still strong, but the air around him had grown dark, as if a solitary cloud had come to cover the scene he witnessed.

Now Theleb K’aarna was stumbling back, his face stained by the strange light from the bowl, his eyes huge and mad.
"Come!" he screamed. "Come! The barrier is down!"
Elric saw a shadow then, behind the bowl. It was a shadow which dwarfed even the great machine. Someth-thing bellowed. It was scaly. It lumbered. It raised a huge and sinuous head. It reminded Elric of a dragon from one of his own caves, but it was bulkier and upon its enormous back were two rows of flapping ridges of bone. It opened its mouth to reveal row upon row of teeth and the ground shook as it walked from the other side of the bowl and stood staring down at the tiny figure of the sorcerer, its eyes stupid and angry. An-other came pounding from behind the bowl, and an-other-great reptilian monsters from another Age of Earth. And following them came those who controlled them. The horse was snorting and prancing and des- perately trying to escape, but Elric managed to calm her down again as he looked at the figures which now rested their hands on the obedient heads of the mon-sters. The figures were even more terrifying than the reptiles-for although they walked upon two legs and had hands of sorts they, too, were reptilian. They bore a peculiar resemblance to the dragon creatures and their size, also, was many times greater than a man's. In their hands they had ornate instruments which could only be weapons-instruments attached to their arms by spirals of golden metal. A hood of skin covered their black and green heads and red eyes glared from the shadows of their faces.

Theleb K'aarna laughed. "I have achieved it. I have destroyed the barrier between the planes and, thanks to the Lords of Chaos, have found allies which Elric's sorcery cannot destroy because they do not obey the sorcerous rules of this plane! They are invincible, in-vulnerable-and they obey only Theleb K'aarna!"

A huge snorting and screaming came from beasts and warriors alike.

"Now we shall go against Tanelorn!" Theleb K'aarna shouted. "And with this power I shall return to Jharkor, to make fickle Yishana my own!"

Elric felt a certain sympathy for Theleb K'aarna at that moment. Without the aid of the Lords of Chaos, his sorcery could not have achieved this. He had given himself up to them, had become one of their tools all because of his weak-minded love for Jharkor's ageing queen. Elric knew he could not go against the monsters and their monstrous riders. He must return to Tanelorn to warn his friends to leave the city, to hope that he might find a means of returning these frightful inter-lopers back to their own plane. But then the mare screamed suddenly and reared, madden by the sights, the sounds and the smells she had been forced to wit-ness. And the scream sounded in a sudden silence. The rearing horse revealed itself to Theleb K'aarna as he turned his mad eyes in Elric's direction.

Elric knew he could not outride the monsters. He knew those weapons could easily destroy him from a distance. He drew the black hellsword Stormbringer from its scabbard and it shouted as it came free. He drove his spurs into the horse and he rode directly down the rocks towards the bowl while Theleb K'aarna was still too startled to give orders to his new allies. His one hope was that he could destroy the device-or at least break some important part of it-and in so doing return the monsters to their own plane. His white face ghastly in the sorcerous darkness, his sword raised high, he galloped past Theleb K'aarna and struck a mighty blow at the glass protecting the machine.

The Black Sword collided with the glass and sank into it. Carried on by the momentum, Elric was flung from his saddle and he, too, passed through the glass without apparently breaking it. He glimpsed the dread-ful planes and curves of the Doomed Folk's device. His body struck them. He felt as if the fabric of his being was disintegrating. . . . . . and then he lay sprawled upon sweet grass and there was nothing of the desert, of Theleb K'aarna, of the pulsing machine, of the horrible beasts and their dreadful masters, only waving foliage and warm sunshine. He heard birdsong and he heard a voice.

"The storm. It has gone. And you? Are you called Elric of Melnibone?"

He picked himself up and turned. A tall man stood before him. The man was clad in a conical silver helm and was encased to the knee in a byrnie also of silver. A scarlet, longsleeved coat partly covered the byrnie. The man bore a scabbarded longsword at his side. His legs were encased in breeks of soft leather and there were boots of green-tinted doeskin on his feet. But Elric's attention was caught primarily by the...
man's features (which resembled those of a Melni-bonean much more than those of a true man) and the fact that he wore upon his left hand a six-fingered gauntlet encrusted with dark jewels, while over his right eye was a large patch which was also jewelled and matched the hand. The eye not covered by the patch was large and slanting and had a yellow centre and purple surrounds. "I am Elric of Melnibone," the albino agreed. "Are you to thank for rescuing me from those creatures Theleb K'aarna summoned?"

The tall man shook his head. " 'Twas I that sum-moned you, but I know of no Theleb K'aarna. I was told that I had only one opportunity to receive your aid and that I must take it in this particular place at this particular time. I am called Corum Jhaelen Irsei-the Prince in the Scarlet Robe-and I ride upon a Quest of grave import."

Elric frowned. The name had a half-familiar ring, but he could not place it. He half-recalled an old dream . . .

"Where is this forest?" he asked, sheathing his sword. "It is nowhere on your plane or in your time, Prince Elric. I summoned you to aid me in my battle against the Lords of Chaos. Already I have been instrumental in destroying two of the Sword rulers-Arioch and Xiombarg-but the third, the most powerful, re-mains. . . ."

"Arioch of Chaos-and Xiombarg? You have de-stroyed two of the most powerful members of the Company of Chaos? Yet but a month since I spoke with Arioch. He is my patron. He . . ."

"There are many planes of existence," Prince Corum told him gently. "In some the Lords of Chaos are strong. In some they are weak. In some, I have heard, they do not exist at all. You must accept that here Arioch and Xiombarg have been banished so that effectively they no longer exist in my world. It is the third of the Sword Rulers who threatens us now-the strongest, King Mabelode."

Elric frowned. "In my-plane-Mabelode is no stronger than Arioch and Xiombarg. This makes a travesty of all my understanding. . . ."

"I will explain as much as I can," said Prince Corum. "For some reason Fate has selected me to be the hero who must banish the domination of Chaos from the Fifteen Planes of Earth. I am at present travelling on my way to seek a city which we call Tanelorn, where I hope to find aid. But my guide is a prisoner in a castle close to here and before I can continue I must rescue him. I was told how I might summon aid to help me effect this rescue and I used the spell to bring you to me. I was to tell you that if you aided me, then you would aid yourself-that if I was successful then you would receive something which would make your task easier."

"Who told you this?"

"A wise man."

Elric sat down on a fallen tree-trunk, his head in his hands. "I have been drawn away at an importunate time," he said. "I pray that you speak the truth to me, Prince Corum." He looked up suddenly. "It is a marvel that you speak at all-or at least that I understand you. How can this be?"

"I was informed that we should be able to com-municate easily because 'we are part of the same thing'. Do not ask me to explain more, Prince Elric, for I know no more."

Elric shrugged. "Well this may be an illusion. I may have killed myself or become digested by that machine of Theleb K'aarna's, but plainly I have no choice but to agree to aid you in the hope that I am, in turn, aided."

Prince Corum left the clearing and returned with two horses, one white and one black. He offered the reins of the black horse to Elric. Elric settled himself in the unfamiliar saddle. "You spoke of Tanelorn. It is for the sake of Tanelorn that I find myself in this dreamworld of yours."

Prince Corum's face was eager. "You know where Tanelorn lies?"

"In my own world, aye-but why should it lie in this one?"

"Tanelorn lies in all planes, though in different guises. There is one Tanelorn and it is eternal with many forms."
They were riding through the gentle forest along a narrow track.

Elric accepted what Corum said. There was a dreamlike quality about his presence here and he decided that he must regard all events here as he would regard the events in a dream. "Where go we now?" he asked casually. "To the castle?"

Corum shook his head. "First we must have the Third Hero-the Many-named Hero."

"And will you summon him with sorcery, too?"

"I was told not. I was told that he would meet us-drawn from whichever Age he exists in by the necessity to complete the Three Who Are One."

"And what mean these phrases? What is the Three Who Are One?"

"I know little more than you, friend Elric, save that it will need all three of us to defeat him who holds my guide prisoner."

"Aye," murmured Elric feelingly, "and it will need more than that to save my Tanelorn from Theleb Kàarna's reptiles. Even now they must march against the city."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Vanishing Tower.

The road widened and left the forest to wander among the heather of high and hilly moorland country. Far away to the west they could see cliffs, and beyond the cliffs was the deeper blue of the ocean. A few birds circled in the wide sky. It seemed a particularly peaceful world and Elric could hardly believe that it was under attack from the forces of Chaos. As they rode Corum explained that his gauntlet was not a gauntlet at all, but the hand of an alien being, grafted on to his arm, just as his eye was an alien eye which could see into a terrifying nether-world from which Corum could bring aid if he chose to do so.

"All you tell me makes the complicated sorceries and cosmologies of my world seem simple in comparison," Elric smiled as they crossed the peaceful landscape.

"It only seems complicated because it is strange," Corum said. "Your world would doubtless seem incomprehensible to me if I were suddenly flung into it. Besides," he laughed, "this particular plane is not my world, either, though it resembles it more than do many. We have one thing in common, Elric, and that is that we are both doomed to play a role in the constant struggle between the Lords of the Higher Worlds-and we shall never understand why that struggle takes place, why it is eternal. We fight, we suffer agonies of mind and soul, but we are never sure that our suffering is worthwhile."

"You are right," Elric said feelingly. "We have much in common, you and I, Corum."

Corum was about to reply when he saw something on the road ahead. It was a mounted warrior. He sat perfectly still as if he awaited them. "Perhaps this is the Third of whom Bolorhiag spoke."

Cautiously, they rode forward.

The man they approached stared at them from a brooding face. He was as tall as them, but bulkier. His skin was jet black and he wore upon his head and shoulders the stuffed head and pelt of a snarling bear. His plate armour was also black, without insignia, and at his side was a great black-hilted sword in a black scabbard. He rode a massive roan stallion and there was a heavy round shield attached to the back of his saddle. As Elric and Corum came closer the man's handsome negroid features assumed an astonished expression and he gasped.

"I know you! I know you both!"

Elric, too, felt he recognised the man, just as he had noticed something familiar in Corum's features.

"How came you here to Balwyn Moor, friend?"

Corum asked him.

The man looked about him as if in a daze. "Balwyn Moor? This is Balwyn Moor? I have been here but a few moments. Before that I was-I was . . . Ah! The memory starts to fade again." He pressed a large hand to his forehead. "A name-another name! No more! Elric! Corum! But I-I am now . . ."

"How do you know our names?" Elric asked him. A mood of dread had seized the albino. He felt that he should not ask these questions, that he should not know the answers.

"Because-don't you see?-I am Elric-I am
Corum—oh, this is the worst agony. . . . Or, at least, I have been or am to be Elric or Corum. . . ."
"Your name, sir?" Corum said again.
"A thousand names are mine. A thousand heroes I have been. Ah! I am—I am—John Daker-Erekose
-Urlik—many, many, many, more. . . . The memories, the dreams, the existences." He stared at them suddenly through his pain-filled eyes. "Do you not understand? Am I the only one to be doomed to understand? I am he who has been called the Champion Eternal—I am the hero who has existed forever —and, yes, I am Elric of Melnibone—Prince Corum Jhaelen Irsei—I am you, also. We three are the same creature and a myriad other creatures besides. We three are one thing—doomed to struggle forever and never understand why. Oh! My head pounds. Who tortures me so? Who?
Elric's throat was dry. "You say you are another incarnations of myself!"
"If you would phrase it so! You are both other incarnations of myself!"
"So," said Corum, "that is what Bolorhiag meant by the Three Who Are One. We are all aspects of the same man, yet we have tripled our strength because we have been drawn from three different ages. It is the only power which might successfully go against Voilodion Ghagnasdiak of the Vanishing Tower."
"Is that the castle wherein your guide is imprisoned?" Elric asked, casting a glance of sympathy at the groaning black man.
"Aye. The Vanishing Tower flickers from one plane to another, from one age to another, and exists in a single location only for a few moments at a tune. But because we are three separate incarnations of a single hero it is possible that we form a sorcery of some kind which will enable us to follow the tower and attack it. Then, if we free my guide, we can con-tinue on to Tanelorn. . . ."
"Tanelorn?" The black man looked at Corum with hope suddenly flooding into his eyes. "I, too, seek Tanelorn. Only there may I discover some remedy to my dreadful fate—which is to know all previous incarnations and be hurled at random from one existence to another! Tanelorn—I must find her!"
"I, too, must discover Tanelorn," Elric told him,
"for on my own plane her inhabitants are in great danger."
"So we have a common purpose as well as a com-mon identity," Corum said. "Therefore we shall fight in concert, I pray. First we must free my guide, then go on to Tanelorn."
Til aid you willingly," said the black giant.
"And what shall we call you—you who are our-selves?" Corum asked him.
"Call me Erekose—though another name suggests itself to me—for it was as Erekose that I came closest to knowing forgetfulness and the fulfilment of love."
"Then you are to be envied, Erekose," Elric said meaningly, "for at least you have come close to forgetfulness. . . ."
"You have no inkling of what it is I must forget," the black giant told him. He shook his reins. "Now Corum—which way to the Vanishing Tower?"
"This road leads to it We ride down now to Darkvale, I believe."
Elric's mind could hardly contain the significance of what he had heard. It suggested that the universe—or the multiverse, as Myshella had named it—was divided into infinite layers of existence, that time was virtually a meaningless concept save where it related to one man's life or one short period of history. And there were planes of existence where the Cosmic Balance was not known at all—or so Corum had suggested—and other planes where the Lords of the Higher Worlds had far greater powers than they had
on his own world. He was tempted to consider the
idea of forgetting Theleb K’aarna, Myshella, Tane-
lorn and the rest and devote himself to the explora-
tion of all these infinite worlds. But then he knew
that this could not be for, if Erekose spoke the truth,
then he-or something which was essentially himself
-existed in all these planes already. Whatever force
it was which he named "Fate" had admitted him to
this plane to fulfil one purpose. An important pur-
pose affecting the destinies of a thousand planes it must surely be if it brought him together in three
separate incarnations. He glanced curiously at the black giant on his left, at the maimed man with the
jewelled hand and eye on his right. Were they really himself?
Now he fancied he felt some of the desperation Erekose must feel-to remember all those other in-
carnations, all those other mistakes, all that other pointless conflict-and never to know the purpose for it
all, if purpose indeed there were.
"Darkvale," said Corum pointing down the hill.
The road ran steeply until it passed between two looming cliffs, disappearing in shadow. There was
something particularly gloomy about the place.
"I am told there was a village here once," Corum said to them. "An uninviting spot, eh, brothers?"
"I have seen worse," murmured Erekose. "Come, let's get all this done with. . . ." He spurred his roan
ahead of the others and galloped at great speed down the steep path. They followed his example and
soon they had passed between the lowering cliffs and could barely see ahead of them as they continued
to follow the road through the shadows.
And now Elric saw ruins huddled close to the foot of the cliffs on either side. Oddly twisted rums which
had not been the result of age or warfare-these ruins were warped, fused, as if Chaos had touched them
while passing through the vale.
Corum had been studying the ruins carefully and at length he reined in. "There," he said. "That pit Here
is where we must wait."
Elric looked at the pit. It was ragged and deep and the earth in it seemed freshly turned as if it had been
but lately dug. "What must we wait for, Friend Corum?"
"For the Tower," said Prince Corum. "I would guess that this is where it appears when it is in this plane."
"And when will it appear?"
"At no particular time. We must wait. And then, as soon as we see it, we must rush it and attempt to
enter before it vanishes again, moving on to the next plane."
Erekose's face was impassive. He dismounted and sat on the hard ground with his back against a slab of
rock which had once belonged to a house.
"You seem more patient than I, Erekose," said Elric.
"I have learned patience, for I have lived since time began and will live on at the end of time."
Elric got down from his own black horse and loos-ened its girth strap while Corum prowled about the
edge of the pit. "Who told you that the Tower would appear here?" Elric asked him.
"A sorcerer who doubtless serves Law as I do, for I am a mortal doomed to battle Chaos."
"As am I," said Erekose the Champion Eternal.
"As am I," said Elric of Melnibone, "though I am sworn to serve it."
Elric looked at his two companions and it was possible to believe that these were two incarnations of
himself. Certainly their lives, their struggles, their personalities, to some extent, were very similar.
"And why do you seek Tanelorn, Erekose?" he asked.
"I have been told that I may find peace there-and wisdom-a means of returning to the world of the Eldren
where dwells the woman I love, for it has been said that since Tanelorn exists in all planes at all times it
is easier for a man who dwells there to pass between the planes, discover the particular one he seeks.
What interest have you in Tanelorn, Lord Elric?"

"I know Tanelorn and I know that you are right to
seek it. My mission seems to be the defence of that
city upon my own plane—but even now my friends
may be destroyed by that which has been brought
against them. I pray Corum is right and that in the
Vanishing Tower I shall find a means to defeat Theleb
K'aarna's beasts and their masters."

Corum raised his jewelled hand to his jewelled eye. "I seek Tanelorn for I have heard the city can aid
me in my struggle against Chaos."

"But Tanelorn will fight neither Law nor Chaos—that is why she exists for eternity," Elric said.

"Aye. Like Erekose I do not seek swords but wis-dom."

Night fell and Darkvale grew gloomier. While the others watched the pit Elric tried to sleep, but his fears
for Tanelorn were too great. Would Myshella try to defend the city? Would Moonglum and Rackhir die?
And what could he possibly find in the Vanishing Tower which would aid him? He heard the mur-
muring of conversation as his other selves discussed how Darkvale had come to exist.

"I heard that Chaos once attacked the town which at that time lay in a quiet valley," Corum told Erekose.

"The tower was then the property of a knight who gave shelter to one whom Chaos hated. They brought
a huge force of creatures against Darkvale, raising and compressing the walls of the valley, but the
knight sought the aid of Law who enabled him to shift his tower into another dimen-sion. Then Chaos
decreed that the tower should shift forever, never being on one plane longer than a few hours, usually for
never more than a few moments. The knight and the fugitive went mad at last and killed each other.
Then Voilodion Ghagnasdiak found the tower and became resident therein. Too late he realised his
mistake as he was shifted from his own plane to an alien one. Since then he has been too fearful to leave
the tower but desperate for company. He has taken to the habit of capturing whomever he can and
forcing them to be his companions in the Vanishing Tower until they bore him. When they bore him, he
slays them."

"And your guide may soon be slain? What manner of creature is this Voilodion Ghagnasdiak?"

"He is a monstrous evil creature commanding great powers of destruction, that is all I know."

"Which is why the gods have seen fit to call up three aspects of myself to attack the Vanishing Tower," said Erekose. "It must be important to them."

"It is to me," said Corum, "for the guide is also my friend and the very existence of the Fifteen Planes is
threatened if I cannot find Tanelorn soon."

Elric heard Erekose laugh bitterly. "Why cannot I-we-ever be faced with a small problem, a do-mestic
problem. Why are we forever involved with the destiny of the universe?"

Corum replied just as Elric began to nod into a half-doze. "Perhaps domestic problems are worse. Who
knows?"

CHAPTER FIVE
Jhary-a-Conel

"It is here! Hasten Elric!"

Elric sprang up.

It was dawn. He had already stood watch once during the night.

He drew his Black Sword from its scabbard noticing with some astonishment that Erekose had already
drawn his own blade and that it was almost identical to his own.

There was the Vanishing Tower.

Corum was running towards it even now.

The tower was in fact a small castle of grey and solid stone, but about its battlements played lights and
its outline was not altogether clear at certain sections of its walls.

Elric ran beside Erekose.

"He keeps the door open to lure his 'guests' in," panted the black giant. "It is our only advantage, I think."
The tower flickered.
"Hasten!" Corum cried again and the Prince in the Scarlet Robe dashed into the darkness of the doorway.
"Hasten!"
They ran into a small antechamber which was lit by a great oil lamp hanging from the ceiling by chains. The door closed suddenly behind them.
Elric glanced at Erekose's tense black features, at Corum's blemished face. All had swords ready, but now a profound silence filled the hall. Without speaking, Corum pointed through a window-slit. The view beyond it had changed. They seemed now to be looking out over blue sea.
"Jhary!" Corum called. "Jhary-a-Conel!"
A faint sound came back. It might have been a reply or it might have been the squeak of a rat in the castle walls. "Jhary!" Corum cried again. "Voilodion Ghagnasdiak? Am I to be thwarted? Have you left this place?"
"I have not left it. What do you want with me?" The voice came from the next room. Warily the three heroes who were one hero went forward.

Something like lightning flickered in the room and in its ghastly glare Elric saw Voilodion Ghagnasdiak. He was a dwarf clad all in puffed multicoloured silks, furs and satins, a tiny sword in his hand. His head was too large for his body, but it was a handsome head with thick black eyebrows which met in the middle. He smiled at them. "At last someone new to relieve my ennui. But lay down your swords, gentlemen, I beg you, for you are to be my guests."
"I know what fate your guests may expect," Corum said. "Know this, Voilodion Ghagnasdiak, we have come to release Jhary-a-Conel whom you hold prisoner. Give him up to us and we will not harm you."

The dwarf's handsome features grinned cheerfully at these words. "But I am very powerful. You cannot defeat me. Watch."
He waved his sword and more lightning lashed about the room. Elric half-raised his sword to ward it off, but it never quite touched him. He stepped angrily towards the dwarf. "Know this, Voilodion Ghagnasdiak, I am Elric of Melnibone" and I have much power. I bear the Black Sword and it thirsts to drink your soul unless you release Prince Corum's friend!"

Again the dwarf laughed. "Swords? What power have they?"
"Our swords are not ordinary blades," Erekose said.
"And we have been brought here by forces you could not comprehend-wrenched from our own ages by the power of the gods themselves-specifically to demand that this Jhary-a-Conel be given up to us."
"You are deceived," said Voilodion Ghagnasdiak, "or you seek to deceive me. This Jhary is a witty fellow, I'd agree, but what interest could gods have in him?"

Elric raised Stormbringer. The Black Sword moaned in anticipation of a quenching.
Then the dwarf produced a tiny yellow ball from nowhere and flung it at Elric. It bounced on his forehead and he was flung backward across the room, Stormbringer clattering from his hand. Dizzily Elric tried to rise, reached out to take his sword, but he was too weak. On impulse he began to cry for the aid of Arioch, but then he remembered that Arioch had been banished from this world. There were no supernatural allies to call upon here-none but the sword and he could not reach the sword.
Erekose leapt backward and kicked the Black Sword in Elric's direction. As the albino's hand encircled the hilt he felt strength come back to him, but it was no more than ordinary mortal strength. He climbed to his feet.
Corum remained where he was. The dwarf was still laughing. Another ball appeared in his hand. Again he flung it at Elric, but this time he brought up the Black Sword in time and deflected it. It bounced across the room and exploded against the far wall. Something black writhed from the fire.
"It is dangerous to destroy the globes," said Voilodion Ghagnasdiak equably, "for now what is in them
The black thing grew. The flames died.
"I am free," said a voice.
"Aye." Voilodion Ghagnasdiak was gleeful. 'Free to kill these fools who reject my hospitality!"
"Free to be slain," Elric replied as he watched the thing take shape.
At first it seemed all made of flowing hair which gradually compressed until it formed the outline of a creature with the heavily muscled body of a gorilla, though the hide was thick and warded like that of a rhinoceros. From behind the shoulders curved great black wings and on the neck was the snarling head of a tiger. It clutched a long, scythe-like weapon in its hairy hands. The tiger head roared and the scythe swept out suddenly, barely missing Elric.
Erekose and Corum began to move forward to Elric's aid. Elric heard Corum cry: "My eye-it will not see into the netherworld. I cannot summon help!" It seemed that Corum's sorcerous powers were also limited on this plane. Then Voilodion Ghagnasdiak threw a yellow ball at the black giant and the pale man with the jewelled hand. Both barely managed to deflect the missiles and, in so doing, caused them to burst. Immediately shapes emerged and became two more of the winged tiger-men and Elric's allies were forced to defend themselves.
As he dodged another swing of the scythe Elric tried to think of some rune which would summon supernatural aid to him, but he could think of none which would work here. He thrust at the tiger-man but his blow was blocked by the scythe. His opponent was enormously strong and swift. The black wings began to beat and the snarling thing flapped upwards to the ceiling, hovered for a moment and then rushed down on Elric with its scythe whirling, a chilling scream coming from its fanged mouth, its yellow eyes glaring.
Elric felt something close to panic. Stormbringer was not supplying him with the strength he expected. Its powers were diminished on this plane. He barely managed to dodge the scythe again and lash at the creature's exposed thigh. The blade bit but no blood came. The tiger-man did not seem to notice the wound.
Again it began to flap towards the ceiling.
Elric saw that his companions were experiencing a similar plight. Corum's face was full of consternation as if he had expected an easy victory and now foresaw defeat.
Meanwhile Voilodion Ghagnasdiak continued to scream his glee and flung more of the yellow balls about the room. As each one burst there emerged another snarling winged tiger creature. The room was full of them. Elric, Erekose and Corum backed to the far wall as the monsters bore down on them, their ears full of the fearful beating of the giant wings, the harsh screams of hatred.
"I fear I have summoned you two to your destruction," Corum panted. "I had no warning that our powers would be so limited here. The tower must shift so fast that even the ordinary laws of sorcery do not apply within its walls."
"They seem to work well enough for the dwarf," Elric said as he brought up his blade to block first one scythe and then another. "If I could slay but a single . . ."
His back was hard against the wall, a scythe nicked his cheek and drew blood, another tore his cloak, another slashed his arm. The tiger faces were grinning now as they closed in.
Elric aimed a blow at the head of the nearest creature, struck off its ear so that it howled. Stormbringer howled back and stabbed at the thing's throat.
But the sword hardly penetrated and served only to put the tiger-man slightly off balance.
As the thing staggered Elric wrenched the scythe from its hands and reversed the weapon, drawing the blade across the chest. The tiger-man screamed as blood spurted from the wound.
"I was right!" Elric shouted at the others. "Only their own weapons can harm them!" He moved forward with the scythe in one hand and Stormbringer in the other. The tiger-men backed off and then began to
flap upwards to hover near the ceiling.
Elric ran towards Voilodion Ghagnasdiak. The dwarf gave a yell of terror and disappeared through a doorway too small easily to admit Elric.
Then, with thundering wings, the tiger creatures descended again.
This tune the other two strove to capture scythes from their enemies. Driving back those who attacked
him, the albino prince took Corum's main assailant from behind and the thing fell with its head sliced off. Corum sheathed his longsword and plucked up the scythe, killing a third tiger-man almost immediately and kicking the fallen scythe towards Erekose. Black feath-ers drifted in the stinking air. The flagstones of the floor were slippery with blood. The three heroes drove a path through their enemies into the smaller room they had lately left. Still the tiger creatures came on, but now they had to pass through the door and this was more easily defended.
Glancing back Elric saw the window slit of the tower. Outside the scenery altered constantly as the Vanishing Tower continued its erratic progress through the planes of existence. But the three were wearying and all had lost some blood from minor wounds. Scythes clashed on scythes as the fight continued, wings beat loudly and the snarling faces spat at them and spoke words which could barely be understood. Without the strength supplied him by his hell-forged sword Elric was weakening rapidly. Twice he staggered and was borne up by the others. Was he to die in some alien world with his friends never knowing how he had perished? But then he remembered that his friends were even now under attack from the reptilian beasts Theleb K'aarna had sent against Tanelorn, that they, too, would soon be dead. This knowledge gave him a little more strength and enabled him to sweep his scythe deep into the belly of another tiger creature.
This gap in the ranks of the sorcerous things enabled him to see the small doorway on the far side of the other room. Voilodion Ghagnasdiak was crouched there, hurling still more of the yellow globes. New winged tiger-men grew up to replace those who had fallen.
But then Elric heard Voilodion Ghagnasdiak give a yell and saw that something was covering his face. It was a black and white animal with small black wings which beat in the air. Some offspring of the beasts who attacked him? Elric could not tell. But Voilodion Ghagnasdiak was plainly terrified of it, trying to drag it from his face.
Another figure appeared behind the dwarf. Bright eyes peered from an intelligent face framed by long black hair. He was dressed as ostentatiously as the dwarf, but he was unarmed. He was calling to Elric and the albino strained to catch the words even as another tiger-creature came at him.
Corum saw the newcomer now. "Jhary!" he shouted.
"The one you came to save?" Elric asked.
"Aye."
Elric made to press forward into the room, but Jhary-a-Conel waved him back. "No! No! Stay there!"
Elric frowned, was about to ask why when he was attacked from two sides by the tiger creatures and had to retreat, slashing his scythe this way and that.
"Link arms!" Jhary-a-Conel cried. "Corum in the centre-and you two draw your swords!"
Elric was panting. He slew another tiger-man and felt a new pain shoot through his leg. Blood gushed from his calf.
Voilodion Ghagnasdiak was still struggling with the thing which clung to his face.
"Hurry!" cried Jhary-a-Conel. "It is your only chance-and mine!"
Elric looked at Corum.
"He is wise, my friend," Corum said. "He knows many things which we do not. Here, I will stand in the centre."
Erekose linked his brawny arm with Corum's and Elric did the same on the other side. Erekose drew his
sword in his left hand and Elric brought forth Storm-bringer in his right.
And something began to happen. A sense of energy came back, then a sense of great physical well-being.
Elric looked at his companions and laughed. It was al-most as if by combining their powers they had
made them four tunes stronger-as if they had become one entity.
A peculiar feeling of euphoria filled Elric and he
knew that Erekose had spoken the truth-that they were three aspects of the same being.
"Let us finish them!" he shouted-and he saw that they shouted the same. Laughing the linked three strode
into the chamber and now the two swords wounded whenever they struck, slaying swiftly and bringing
them more energy still.
The winged tiger-men became frantic, flapping about the room as the Three Who Were One pursued
them. All three were drenched in their own blood and that of their enemies, all three were laughing,
invulnerable, acting completely in unison.
And as they moved the room itself began to shake.
They heard Voilodion Ghagnasdiak screaming.
"The tower! The tower! This will destroy the tower!"
Elric looked up from the last corpse. It was true that the tower was swaying wildly from side to side like
a ship in a storm.
Jhary-a-Conel pushed past the dwarf and entered the room of death. The sight seemed obnoxious to him
but he controlled his feelings. "It is true. The sorcery we have worked today must have its effect.
Whiskers-to me!"
The thing on Voilodion Ghagnasdiak's face flew into the air and settled on Jhary's shoulder. Elric saw
that it was a small black and white cat, ordinary in every detail save for its neat pair of wings which it
was now folding.
Voilodion Ghagnasdiak sat crumpled in the doorway and he was weeping through sightless eyes. Tears
of blood flowed down his handsome face.
Elric ran back into the other room, breaking his link with Corum. He peered through the window slit. But
now there was nothing but a wild eruption of mauve and purple cloud.
He gasped. "We are in limbo!"
Silence fell. Still the tower swayed. The lights were
extinguished by a strange wind blowing through the
rooms and the only illumination came from outside where the mist still swirled.
Jhary-a-Conel was frowning to himself as he joined Elric at the window.
"How did you know what to do?" Elric asked him.
"I knew because I know you, Elric of Melnibone"-just as I know Erekose there-for I travel in many ages
and on many planes. That is why I am sometimes called Companion to Champions. I must find my
sword and my sack-also my hat. Doubtless all are in Voilodion's vault with his other loot."
"But the tower? If it is destroyed shall we, too, be destroyed?"
"A possibility. Come, friend Elric, help me seek my hat."
"At such a time, you look for a-hat?"
"Aye." Jhary-a-Conel returned to the larger room, stroking the black and white cat. Voilodion Ghagnas-
diak was still there and he was still weeping. "Prince Corum-Lord Erekose-will you come with me, too."
Corum and the black giant joined Elric and they squeezed into the narrow passage, inching their way
along until it widened to reveal a flight of stairs leading downward. The tower shuddered again. Jhary lit
a brand and removed it from its place in the wall. He began to descend the steps, the three heroes behind
him.
A slab of masonry fell from the roof and crashed just in front of Elric. "I would prefer to seek a means of
escape from the tower," he said to Jhary-a-Conel. "If it falls now, we shall be buried."
"Trust me, Prince Elric," was all that Jhary would say.
And because Jhary had already shown himself to possess great knowledge Elric allowed the dandy to
lead him further into the bowels of the tower.
At last they reached a circular chamber and in it was set a huge metal door.
"Voilodion's vault," Jhary told them. "Here you will
find all the things you seek. And I, I hope, will find my
bat. The hat was specially made and is the only one which properly matches my other clothes. . . ."
"How do we open a door like that?" Erekose asked. "It is made of steel, surely!" He hefted the black
blade he still bore in his left hand.
"If you link arms again, my friends," Jhary suggested with a kind of mocking deference, "I will show
you how the door may be opened."
Once again Elric, Corum and Erekose linked their arms together. Once again the supernatural strength
seemed to flow through them and they laughed at each other, knowing that they were all part of the same
creature.
Jhary's voice seemed to come faintly to Elric's ears. "And now, Prince Corum, if you would strike with
your foot once upon the door. . . ."
They moved until they were close to the door. That part of them which was Corum struck out with his
foot at the slab of steel-and the door fell inward as if made of the lightest wood.
This tune Elric was much more reluctant to break the link which held them. But he did so at last as Jhary
stepped into the vault chuckling to himself.
The tower lurched. All three were flung after Jhary into Voilodion's vault. Elric fell heavily against a
great golden chair of a kind he had once seen used as an elephant saddle. He looked around the vault. It
was full of valuables, of clothes, shoes, weapons. He felt nau-seated as he realised that these had been
the posses-sions of all those Voilodion had chosen to call his guests.
Jhary pulled a bundle from under a pile of furs. "Look, Prince Elric. These are what you will need where
Tanelorn is concerned." It seemed to be a bunch of long sticks rolled in thin sheets of metal.
Elric accepted the heavy bundle. "What is it?"
"They are the banners of bronze and the arrows of quartz. Useful weapons against the reptilian men of
Pio and their mounts."
"You know of those reptiles? You know of Theleb K'aarna, too?"
"The sorcerer of Pan Tang? Aye."
Elric stared almost suspiciously at Jhary-a-Conel.
"How can you know all this?"
"I have told you. I have lived many lives as a Friend of Heroes. Unwrap this bundle when you return to
Tanelorn. Use the arrows of quartz like spears. To use the banners of bronze, merely unfurl them. Aha!"
Jhary reached behind a sack of jewels and came up with a somewhat dusty hat. He smacked off the dust
and placed it on his head. "Ah!" He bent again and displayed a goblet. He offered this to Prince Corum.
"Take it. It will prove useful, I think."
From another corner Jhary took a small sack and put it on his shoulder. Almost as an afterthought he
hunted about in a chest of jewels and found a gleaming ring of unnamable stones and peculiar metal.
"This is your reward, Erekose, in helping to free me from my captor."
Erekose smiled. "I have the feeling you needed no help, young man."
"You are mistaken, friend Erekose. I doubt if I have ever been in greater peril." He looked vaguely about
the vault, staggering as the floor tilted alarmingly.
Elric said: "We should take steps to leave."
"Exactly." Jhary-a-Conel crossed swiftly to the fat side of the vault. "The last thing. In his pride
Voilodion showed me his possessions, but he did not know the value of all of them."
"What do you mean?" asked the Prince in the Scar-let Robe.
"He killed the traveller who brought this with him. The traveller was right in assuming he had the means
to stop the tower from vanishing, but he did not have time to use it before Voilodion had slain him." 
Jhary picked up a small staff coloured a dull ochre. "Here it is. The Runestaff. Hawkmoon had this with
him when I travelled with him to the Dark Empire. . . ."
Noticing their puzzlement, Jhary-a-Conel, Companion to Champions, apologised. "I am sorry. I some-times forget that not all of us have memories of other careers. . . ."
"What is the Runestaff?" Corum asked.
"I remember one description-but I am poor at naming and explaining things. . . ."
"That has not escaped my notice," Elric said, almost smiling.
"It is an object which can only exist under a certain set of spatial and temporal laws. In order to continue to exist, it must exert a field in which it can contain itself. That field must accord with those laws-the same laws under which we best survive."
More masonry fell.
"The tower is breaking up!" Erekose growled.
Jhary stroked the dull ochre staff. "Please gather near me, my friends."
The three heroes stood around him. And then the roof of the tower fell in. But it did not fall on them for they stood suddenly on firm ground breathing fresh air. But there was blackness all around them. "Do not step outside this small area," Jhary warned, "or you will be doomed. Let the Runestaff seek what we seek."
They saw the ground change colour, breathed warmer, then colder, air. It was as if they moved from plane to plane of the universe, never seeing more than the few feet of ground upon which they stood. And then there was harsh desert sand beneath their feet and Jhary shouted. "Now!" The four of them rushed out of the area and into the blackness to find themselves suddenly in sunlight beneath a sky like beaten metal.
Jhary smiled. "Do you not recognise it, friend Elric?"
"Is it the Sighing Desert?"
"Listen."
And sure enough Elric heard the familiar sound of the wind as it made its mournful passage across the sands. A little way away he saw the Runestaff where they had left it. Then it was gone.
"Are you all to come with me to the defence of Tanelorn?" he asked Jhary.
Jhary shook his head. "No. We go the other way. We go to seek the device Theleb K'aarna activated with the help of the Lords of Chaos. Where lies it?"
Elric tried to get his bearings. He lifted a hesitant finger. "That way, I think."
"Then let us go to it now."
"But I must try to help Tanelorn."
"You must destroy the device after we have used it, friend Elric, lest Theleb K'aarna or his like try to activate it again."
"But Tanelorn . . . ."
"I do not believe that Theleb K'aarna and his beasts have yet reached the city."
"Not reached it! So much time has passed!"
"Less than a day."
Elric rubbed at his face. He said reluctantly: "Very well. I will take you to the machine."
"But if Tanelorn lies so near," Corum said to Jhary, "why seek it elsewhere?"
"Because this is not the Tanelorn we wish to find," Jhary told him.
"It will suit me," Erekose said. "I will remain with Elric. Then, perhaps . . . ."
A look almost of terror spread over Jhary's features then. He said sadly: "My friend-already much of time and space is threatened with destruction. Eternal barriers could soon fall-the fabric of the multiverse could decay. You do not understand. Such a thing as has happened in the Vanishing Tower can only happen once or twice in an eternity and even then it is dangerous to all concerned. You must do as I say. I promise that you will have just as good a chance of finding Tanelorn where I take you. Your
opportunity lies in Elric's future."
Erekose bowed his head. "Very well."
"Come," Elric said impatiently, beginning to strike off to the North-east. "For all your talk of Tune, there is precious little left for me."
CHAPTER SIX
Pale Lord Shouting in Sunlight
The machine in the bowl was where Elric had last seen it, just before he had attacked it and found himself plunged into Corum's world.
Jhary seemed completely familiar with it and soon had its heart beating strongly. He shepherded the other two up to it and made them stand with their backs against the crystal. Then he handed something to Elric. It was a small vial.
"When we have departed," he said, "hurl this through the top of the bowl, then take your horse which I see is yonder and ride as fast as you can for Tanelorn. Follow these instructions perfectly and you will serve us all."
Elric accepted the vial. "Very well."
"And," Jhary said finally as he took his place with the others, "please give my compliments to my brother Moonglum."
"You know him? What-?"
"Farewell, Elric! We shall doubtless meet many times in the future, though we may not recognise each other."
Then the beating of the thing in the bowl grew louder and the ground shook and the strange darkness surrounded it-then the three figures had gone. Swiftly Elric hurled the vial upwards so that it fell through the opening of the bowl, then he ran to where his golden mare was tethered, leapt into the saddle with the bundle Jhary had given him under his arm, and galloped as fast as he could go towards Tanelorn.
Behind him the beating suddenly ceased. The darkness disappeared. A tense silence fell. Then Elric heard something like a giant's gasp and blinding blue light filled the desert. He looked back. Not only the bowl and the device had gone-so also had the rocks which had once surrounded it.
He came up behind them at last, just before they reached the walls of Tanelorn. Elric saw warriors on those walls.
The massive reptilian monsters bore their equally repulsive masters upon their backs, their feet leaving deep marks in the sand as they moved. And Theleb K'aarna rode at their head on a chestnut stallion-and there was something draped across his saddle.
Then a shadow passed over Elric's head and he looked up. It was the metal bird which had borne Myshella away. But it was riderless. It wheeled over the heads of the lumbering reptiles whose masters raised their strange weapons and sent hissing streams of fire in its direction, driving it higher into the sky. Why was the bird here and not Myshella? A peculiar cry came again and again from its metal throat and Elric realised what that cry resembled-the pathetic sound of a mother bird whose young is in danger. He stared hard at the bundle over Theleb K'aarna's saddle and suddenly he knew what it must be. Myshella herself! Doubtless she had given Elric up for dead and had tried to go against Theleb K'aarna only to be beaten.
Anger boiled in the albino. All his intense hatred for the sorcerer revived and his hand went to his sword. But then he looked again at the vulnerable walls of Tanelorn, at his brave companions on the battlements, and he knew that his first duty was to help them.
But how was he to reach the walls without Theleb K'aarna seeing him and destroying him before he could bring the banners of bronze to his friends? He prepared to spur his horse forward and hope that he would be lucky. Then a shadow passed over his head again and
he saw that it was the metal bird flying low, something

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The massive reptilian monsters bore their equally repulsive masters upon their backs, their feet leaving deep marks in the sand as they moved. And Theleb K'aarna rode at their head on a chestnut stallion-and there was something draped across his saddle.

Then a shadow passed over Elric's head and he looked up. It was the metal bird which had borne Myshella away. But it was riderless. It wheeled over the heads of the lumbering reptiles whose masters raised their strange weapons and sent hissing streams of fire in its direction, driving it higher into the sky. Why was the bird here and not Myshella? A peculiar cry came again and again from its metal throat and Elric realised what that cry resembled-the pathetic sound of a mother bird whose young is in danger.

He stared hard at the bundle over Theleb K'aarna's saddle and suddenly he knew what it must be. Myshella herself! Doubtless she had given Elric up for dead and had tried to go against Theleb K'aarna only to be beaten.

Anger boiled in the albino. All his intense hatred for the sorcerer revived and his hand went to his sword. But then he looked again at the vulnerable walls of Tanelorn, at his brave companions on the battlements, and he knew that his first duty was to help them.

But how was he to reach the walls without Theleb K'aarna seeing him and destroying him before he could bring the banners of bronze to his friends? He prepared to spur his horse forward and hope that he would be lucky. Then a shadow passed over his head again and he saw that it was the metal bird flying low, something
like agony in its emerald eyes. He heard its voice.
"Prince Elric! We must save her."
He shook his head as the bird settled in the sand.
"First I must save Tanelorn."
"I will help you," said the bird of gold and silver and brass. "Climb up into my saddle."
Elric cast a glance towards the distant monsters. Their attention was now wholly upon the city they intended to destroy. He jumped from his horse and crossed the sand to clamber into the onyx saddle of the bird. The wings began to clash and with a rush they swept into the sky, turning towards Tanelorn. More streaks of fire hissed around them as they neared the city, but the bird flew rapidly from side to side and avoided them. Down they drifted now to the gentle city, to land on the wall itself.
"Elric!" Moonglum came running along the defences.
"We were told you were dead!"
"By whom?"
"By Myshella and by Theleb K'aarna when he demanded our surrender."
"I suppose they could only believe that," Elric said, separating the staffs around which were furled the thin sheets of bronze. "Here, you must take these. I am told that they will be useful against the reptiles of Pio. Un-furl them along the walls. Greetings, Rackhir." He handed the astounded Red Archer one of the banners.
"You do not stay to fight with us?" Rackhir asked.
Elric looked down at the twelve slender arrows in his hand. Each one was perfectly carved from multi-coloured quartz so that even the fletchings seemed like real feathers. "No," he said. "I hope to rescue Myshella from Theleb K'aarna-and I can use these arrows better from the air, also."
"Myshella, thinking you dead, seemed to go mad," Rackhir told him. "She conjured up various sorceries against Theleb K'aarna-but he retaliated. At last she flung herself from the saddle of that bird you ride-flung herself upon him armed only with a knife. But he overpowered her and has threatened to slay her if we do not allow ourselves to be killed without retaliating. I know that he will kill Myshella anyway. I have been in something of a quandary of conscience. . . ."
"I will resolve that quandary, I hope." Elric stroked the metallic neck of the bird. "Come, my friend, into the air again. Remember, Rackhir-unfurl the banners along the walls as soon as I have gained a good height."
The Red Archer nodded, his face puzzled, and once again Elric was rising into the air, the arrows of quartz clutched in his left hand.
He heard Theleb K'aarna's laughter from below. He saw the monstrous beasts moving inexorably towards the walls. The gates opened suddenly and a group of horsemen rode out. Plainly they had hoped to sacrifice themselves in order to save Tanelorn and Rackhir had not had time to warn them of Elric's message.
The riders galloped wildly towards the reptilian monsters of Pio, their swords and lances waving, their yells rising to where Elric drifted high above. The mon-sters roared and opened their huge jaws, their masters pointed their ornate weapons at the horsemen of Tanelorn. Flames burst from the muzzles, the riders shrieked as they were devoured by the dazzling heat.
In horror Elric directed the metal bird downwards. And at last Theleb K'aarna saw him and reined in his horse, his eyes wide with fear and rage. "You are dead! You are dead!"
The great wings beat at the air as the bird hovered over Theleb K'aarna's head. "I am alive, Theleb K'aarna-and I come to destroy you at long last! Give Myshella up to me."
A cunning expression came over the sorcerer's face. "No. Destroy me and she is also destroyed. Beings of Pio-turn your full strength against Tanelorn. Raze it utterly and show this fool what we can do!"
Each of the reptilian riders directed their oddly shaped weapons at Tanelorn where Rackhir, Moon-glum and the rest waited on the battlements.

"No!" shouted Elric. "You cannot-"

There was something flashing on the battlements.

They were unfurling at last the banners of bronze. And as each banner was unfurled a pure golden light blazed out from it until there was a vast wall of light stretching the whole length of the defences, making it impossible to see the banners themselves or the men who held them. The beings of Pio aimed their weap-ons and released streams of fire at the barrier of light which immediately repelled them.

Theleb K'aarna's face was suffused with anger. "What is this? Our earthly sorcery cannot stand against the power of Pio!"

Elric smiled savagely. "This is not our sorcery—it is another sorcery which can resist that of Pio! Now, Theleb K'aarna, give up Myshella!"

"No! You are not protected as Tanelorn is pro-tected. Beings of Pio-destroy him!"

And, as the weapons began to be directed at him, Elric flung the first of the arrows of quartz. It flew true-directly into the face of the leading reptilian rider. A high whining escaped the rider's throat as it raised its webbed hands towards the arrow embedded in its eye. The beast the rider sat upon reared, for it was plain that it was only barely controlled. It turned away from the blinding light from Tanelorn and it galloped at earth-shaking speed away into the desert, the dead rider falling from its back. A streak of fire barely missed Elric and he was forced to take the bird up higher, flinging down another arrow and seeing it strike a rider's heart. Again the mount went out of control and followed its companion into the desert.

But there were ten more of the riders and each now turned his weapon against Elric, though finding it hard to aim as all the mounts grew restive and sought to accompany the two who had fled. Elric left it to the metal bird to duck and to dive through the criss-cross of beams and he hurled down another arrow and another. His clothes and his hair were singed and he remembered another tune when he had ridden the bird across the Boiling Sea. Part of the bird's right wing-tip had been melted and its flight was a little more erratic. But still it climbed and dived and still Elric threw the arrows of quartz into the ranks of the beings of Pio. Then, suddenly, there were only two left and they were turning to flee, for nearby a cloud of unpleasant blue smoke had begun to erupt where Theleb K'aarna had been. Elric flung the last arrows after the reptiles of Pio and took each rider in the back. Now there were only corpses upon the sand.

The blue smoke cleared and Theleb K'aarna's horse stood there. And there was another corpse revealed. It was that of Myshella, Empress of the Dawn, and her throat had been cut. Theleb K'aarna had vanished, doubtless with the aid of sorcery.

Sickened, Elric descended on the bird of metal. On the walls of Tanelorn the light faded. He dismounted and he saw that the bird was weeping dark tears from its emerald eyes. He knelt beside Myshella. An ordinary mortal could not have done it, but now she opened her lips and she spoke, though blood bubbled from her mouth and her words were hard to make out.

"Elric . . ."

"Can you live?" Elric asked her. "Have you some power to . . ."

"I cannot live. I am slain. Even now I am dead. But it will be some comfort to you to know that Theleb K'aarna has earned the disdain of the great Chaos Lords. They will never aid him again as they aided him this tune, for in their eyes he has proved himself incompetent."

"Where has he gone? I will pursue him. I will slay him the next time, that I swear."

"I think that you will. But I do not know where he went. Elric—I am dead and my work is threatened. I have fought against Chaos for centuries and now, I
think, Chaos will increase its power. Soon the great battle between the Lords of Law and the Lords of Entropy will take place. The threads of destiny become much tangled—the very structure of the universe seems about to transform itself. You have some part in this . . . some part . . . Farewell, Elric!

"Oh, Myshella!"

"Is she dead now?" It was the sombre voice of the bird of metal.
"Aye." The word was forced from Elric's tight throat.
"Then I must take her back to Kaneloon."
Gently Elric picked up Myshella's bloody corpse, supporting the half-severed head on his arm. He placed the body in the onyx saddle.
The bird said: "We shall not see each other again, Prince Elric, for my death shall follow closely upon Lady Myshella's."
Elric bowed his head.
The shining wings spread and, with the sound of cymbals clashing, beat at the air.
Elric watched the beautiful creature circle in the sky, and then turn and fly steadily towards the south and World's Edge.
He buried his face in his hands, but he was beyond weeping now. Was it the fate of all the women he loved to die? Would Myshella have lived if she had let him die when he had wanted to? There was no rage left in him, only a sense of impotent despair.
He felt a hand on his shoulder and he turned.
Moonglum stood there, with Rackhir beside him.
They had ridden out from Tanelorn to find him.
"The banners have vanished," Rackhir told him. "And the arrows, too. Only the corpses of those creatures remain and we shall bury them. Will you come back with us, now, to Tanelorn?"
"Tanelorn cannot give me peace, Rackhir."
"I believe that to be true. But I have a potion in my house which will deaden some of your memories, help you forget some of what has happened lately."
"I would be grateful for such a potion. Though I doubt . . ."
"It will work. I promise. Another would achieve complete forgetfulness from drinking this potion. But you may hope to forget a little."
Elric thought of Corum and Erekeose and Jhary-a-Conel and the implications of his experiences—that even if he were to die he would be reincarnated in some other form to fight again and to suffer again. An eternity of warfare and of pain. If he could forget that knowledge it would be enough. He had the impulse to ride far away from Tanelorn and concern himself as much as he could in the pettier affairs of men.
"I am so weary of gods and their struggles," he murmured as he mounted his golden mare.
Moonglum stared out into the desert.
"But when will the gods themselves weary of it, I wonder?" he said. "If they did, it would be a happy day for Man. Perhaps all our struggling, our suffering, our conflicts are merely to relieve the boredom of the Lords of the Higher Worlds. Perhaps that is why when they created us they made us imperfect."
They began to ride towards Tanelorn while the wind blew sadly across the desert. The sand was already beginning to cover up the corpses of those who had sought to wage war against eternity and had, inevitably, found that other eternity which was death.
For a while Elric walked his horse beside the others. His lips formed a name but did not speak it. And then, suddenly, he was galloping towards Tanelorn dragging the screaming runesword from its scabbard and brandishing it at the impassive sky, making the horse rear up and lash its hooves in the air, shouting over and over again in a voice full of roaring misery and bitter rage:
"Ah, damn you! Damn you! Damn you!"
But those who heard him—and some might have been the Gods he addressed—knew that it was Elric of Melnibone himself who was truly damned.
BOOK ONE
The Stealer of Souls
In which Elric once again makes the acquaintance of Queen Yishana of Jharkor and Theleb K'aarna of Pan Tang and receives satisfaction at last.

ONE
In a city called Bakshaan, which was rich enough to make all other cities of the North East seem poor, in a tall-towered tavern one night, Elric, Lord of the smoking ruins of Melnibone, smiled like a shark and dryly jested with four powerful merchant princes whom, in a day or so, he intended to pauperize. Moonglum the Outlander, Elric's companion, viewed the tall albino with admiration and concern. For Elric to laugh and joke was rare—but that he should share his good humour with men of the merchant stamp, that was unprecedented. Moonglum congratulated himself that he was Elric's friend and wondered upon the outcome of the meeting. Elric had, as usual, elaborated little of his plan to Moonglum.
"We need your particular qualities as swordsman and sorcerer, Lord Elric, and will, of course, pay well for them." Pilarmo, overdressed, intense and scrawny, was main spokesman for the four. "And how shall you pay, gentlemen?" inquired Elric politely, still smiling. Pilarmo's colleagues raised their eyebrows and even their spokesman was slightly taken aback. He waved his hand through the smoky air of the tavern-room which was occupied only by the six men. "In gold-in gems," answered Pilarmo. "In chains," said Elric. "We free travellers need no chains of that sort."
Moonglum bent forward out of the shadows where he sat, his expression showing that he strongly disapproved of Elric's statement. Pilarmo and the other merchants were plainly astonished, too. "Then how shall we pay you?"
"I will decide that later," Elric smiled. "But why talk of such things until the time-what do you wish me to do?"
Pilarmo coughed and exchanged glances with his peers. They nodded. Pilarmo dropped his tone and spoke slowly:
"You are aware that trade is highly competitive in this city, Lord Elric. Many merchants vie with one another to secure the custom of the people. Bakshaan is a rich city and its populace is comfortably off, in the main."
"This is well known," Elric agreed; he was privately likening the well-to-do citizens of Bakshaan to sheep and himself to the wolf who would rob the fold. Because of these thoughts, his scarlet eyes were full of a humour which Moonglum knew to be malevolent and ironic. "There is one merchant in this city who controls more warehouses and shops than any other," Pilarmo continued. "Because of the size and strength of his caravans, he can afford to import greater quantities of goods into Bakshaan and thus sell them for lower prices. He is virtually a thief—he will ruin us with his unfair methods." Pilarmo was genuinely hurt and aggrieved. "You refer to Nikorn of Ilmar?" Moonglum spoke from behind Elric. Pilarmo nodded mutely. Elric frowned. "This man heads his own caravans-braves the dangers of the desert, forest and mountain. He has earned his position."
"That is hardly the point," snapped fat Tormiel, be - ringed and powdered, his flesh a-quiver.
"No, of course not." Smooth-tongued Kelos patted his colleague's arm consolingly. "But we all admire bravery, I hope." His friends nodded. Silent Deinstaf, the last of the four, also coughed and wagged his hairy head. He put his unhealthy fingers on the jewelled hilt of an ornate but virtually useless poignard and squared his shoulders. "But," Kelos went on, glancing at Deinstaf with approval, "Nikorn takes no risks selling his goods cheaply-he's killing us with his low prices."

"Nikorn is a thorn in our flesh," Pilarmo elaborated unnecessarily.

"And you gentlemen require myself and my companion to remove this thorn," Elric stated.

"In a nutshell, yes." Pilarmo was sweating. He seemed more than a trifle wary of the smiling albino. Legends referring to Elric and his dreadful, doom-filled exploits were many and elaborately detailed. It was only because of their desperation that they had sought his help in this matter. They needed one who could deal in the nigromantic arts as well as wield a useful blade. Elric's arrival in Bakshaan was potential salvation for them.

"We wish to destroy Nikorn's power," Pilarmo continued. "And if this means destroying Nikorn, then-"

He shrugged and half-smiled, watching Elric's face.

"Common assassins are easily employed, particularly in Bakshaan," Elric pointed out softly.

"Uh-true," Pilarmo agreed. "But Nikorn employs a sorcerer-and a private army. The sorcerer protects him and his palace by means of magic. And a guard of desertmen serve to ensure that if magic fails, then natural methods can be used for the purpose. Assassins have attempted to eliminate the trader, but unfortunately, they were not lucky."

Elric laughed. "How disappointing, my friends. Still, assassins are the most dispensable members of the community-are they not? And their souls probably went to placate some demon who would otherwise have plagued more honest folk."

The merchants laughed half-heartedly and, at this, Moonglum grinned, enjoying himself from his seat in the shadows.

Elric poured wine for the other five. It was of a vintage which the law in Bakshaan forbade the populace from drinking. Too much drove the imbiber mad, yet Elric had already quaffed great quantities and showed no ill effects. He raised a cup of the yellow wine to his lips and drained it, breathing deeply and with satisfaction as the stuff entered his system. The others sipped theirs cautiously. The merchants were already regretting their haste in contacting the albino. They had a feeling that not only were the legends true-but they did not do justice to the strange-eyed man they wished to employ.

Elric poured more yellow wine into his goblet and his hand trembled slightly and his dry tongue moved over his lips quickly. His breathing increased as he allowed the beverage to trickle down his throat. He had taken more than enough to make other men into mewling idiots, but those few signs were the only indication that the wine had any effect upon him at all.

This was a wine for those who wished to dream of different and less tangible worlds. Elric drank it in the hope that he would, for a night or so, cease to dream.

Now he asked: "And who is this mighty sorcerer, Master Pilarmo?"

"His name is Theleb K'aarna," Pilarmo answered nervously.

Elric's scarlet eyes narrowed. "The sorcerer of Pan Tang?"

"Aye-he comes from that island."

Elric put his cup down upon the table and rose, fingering his blade of black iron, the runesword Stormbringer.
He said with conviction: "I will help you, gentlemen." He had made up his mind not to rob them, after all. A new and more important plan was forming in his brain.
"Theleb K'aarna," he thought. "So you have made Bakshaan your bolt-hole, eh?"
Theleb K'aarna tittered. It was an obscene sound, coming as it did from the throat of a sorcerer of no mean skill. It did not fit with his sombre, black-bearded countenance, his tall, scarlet-robed frame. It was not a sound suited to one of his extreme wisdom.
Theleb K'aarna tittered and stared with dreamy eyes at the woman who lolled on the couch beside him. He whispered clumsy words of endearment into her ear and she smiled indulgently, stroking his long, black hair as she would stroke the coat of a dog.
"You're a fool, for all your learning, Theleb K'aarna," she murmured, her hooded eyes staring bey ond him at the bright green and orange tapestries which decorated the stone walls of her bed-chamber. She reflected lazily that a woman could not but help take ad-vantage of any man who put himself so into her power.
"Yishana, you are a bitch," Theleb K'aarna breathed foolishly, "and all the learning in the world cannot com-bat love. I love you." He spoke simply, directly, not un-derstanding the woman who lay beside him. He had seen into the black bowels of hell and had returned sane, he knew secrets which would turn any ordinary man's mind into quivering, jumbled jelly. But in certain arts he was as unversed as his youngest acolyte. The art of love was one of those. "I love you," he repeated, and wondered why she ignored him.
Yishana, Queen of Jharkor, pushed the sorcerer away from her and rose abruptly, swinging bare, well-formed legs off the divan. She was a handsome woman, with hair as black as her soul; though her youth was fading, she had a strange quality about her which both repelled and attracted men. She wore her multi-coloured silks well and they swirled about her as, with light grace, she strode to the barred window of the chamber and stared out into the dark and turbulent night. The sorcerer watched her through narrow, puzzled eyes, disappointed at this halt to their love-making.
"What's wrong?"
The Queen continued to stare out at the night. Great banks of black cloud moved like predatory monsters, swiftly across the wind-torn sky. The night was raucous and angry about Bakshaan; full of ominous portent.
Theleb K'aarna repeated his question and again re-ceived no answer. He stood up angrily, then, and joined her at the window.
"Let us leave now, Yishana, before it is too late. If El-ric learns of our presence in Bakshaan, we shall both suffer." She did not reply, but her breasts heaved beneath the flimsy fabric and her mouth tightened. The sorcerer growled, gripping her arm. "Forget your renegade freebooter, Elric-you have me now, and I can do much more for you than any sword-swinging medi-cine-man from a broken and senile empire!"
Yishana laughed unpleasantly and turned on her lover. "You are a fool, Theleb K'aarna, and you're much less of a man than Elric. Three aching years have passed since he deserted me, skulking off into the night on your trail and leaving me to pine for him! But I still remember his savage kisses and his wild love-making. Gods! I wish he had an equal. Since he left, I've never found one to match him-until you came skulking back and your spells drove them off or destroyed them." She sneered, mocking and taunting him. "You've been too long among your parchments to be much good to me!"
The sorcerer's face muscles tautened beneath his tanned skin and he scowled. "Then why do you let me remain? I could make you my slave with a potion-you know that!"
"But you wouldn't-and are thus my slave, mighty wizard. When Elric threatened to displace you in my af-fections, you conjured that demon and Elric was forced to fight it. He won you'll remember-but in his pride re-fused to compromise. You fled into hiding and he went in search of you-leaving me! That is what you did. You're in love, Theleb K'aarna ..." she laughed in his face. "And your love won't let you use your arts against me-only my other lovers. I put up with you because you are often useful, but if Elric
Theleb K'aarna turned away, pettishly picking at his long black beard. Yishana said: "I half hate Elric, aye! But that is better than half loving you!"

"Then why did you join me in Bakshaan? Why did you leave your brother's son upon your throne as regent and come here? I sent word and you came-you must have some affection for me to do that!"

Yishana laughed again. "I heard that a pale-faced sorcerer with crimson eyes and a howling runesword was travelling in the North East. That is why I came, Theleb K'aarna."

The sorcerer snarled: "You'll remember that this same pale-faced sorcerer was responsible for your own brother's death," he spat. "You lay with a man who was a slayer of his kin and yours. He deserted the fleet, which he had led to pillage his own land, when the Dragon Masters retaliated. Dharmit, your brother, was aboard one of those ships and he now lies scorched and rotting on the ocean bed."

Yishana shook her head wearily. "You always mention this and hope to shame me. Yes, I entertained one who was virtually my brothers' murderer—but Elric had ghastlier crimes on his conscience and I still loved him, in spite or because of them. Your words do not have the effect you require, Theleb K'aarna. Now leave me, I wish to sleep alone."

The sorcerer's nails were still biting into Yishana's cool flesh. He relaxed his grip. "I am sorry," he said, his voice breaking. "Let me stay."

"Go," she said softly. And, tortured by his own weakness, Theleb K'aarna, sorcerer of Pan Tang, left. Elric of Melnibone was in Bakshaan—and Elric had sworn several oaths of vengeance upon Theleb K'aarna on several separate occasions in Lormyr, Nadsokor and Taelor, as well as in Jharkor. In his heart, the black-bearded sorcerer knew who would win any duel which might take place.

TWO

The four merchants had left swathed in dark cloaks. They had not deemed it wise for anyone to be aware of their association with Elric. Now, Elric brooded over a fresh cup of yellow wine. He knew that he would need help of a particular and powerful kind, if he were going to capture Nikorn's castle. It was virtually unstormable and, with Theleb K'aarna's nigromantic protection, a particularly potent sorcery would have to be used. He knew that he was Theleb K'aarna's match and more when it came to wizardry, but if all his energy were ex-pended on fighting the other magician, he would have none left to effect an entry past the crack guard of desert warriors employed by the merchant prince.

He needed help. In the forests which lay to the south of Bakshaan, he knew he would find men whose aid would be useful. But would they help him? He discussed the problem with Moonglum.

"I have heard that a band of my countrymen have re-cently come north from Vilmir where they have pillaged several large towns," he informed the Eastlander. "Since the great battle of Imrryr four years ago, the men of Melnibone have spread outwards from the Dragon Isle, becoming mercenaries and freebooters. It was because of me that Imrryr fell—and this they know, but if I offer them rich loot, they might aid me."

Moonglum smiled wryly. "I would not count on it, El-ric," he said. "Such an act as yours can hardly be forgot-ten, if you'll forgive my frankness. Your countrymen are now unwilling wanderers, citizens of a razed city—the oldest and greatest the world has known. When Imrryr the Beautiful fell, there must have been many who wished great suffering upon you."

Elric emitted a short laugh. "Possibly," he agreed, "but these are my people and I know them. We Melniboneans are an old and sophisticated race—we rarely al-low emotions to interfere with our general well-being."
Moonglum raised his eyebrows in an ironic grimace and Elric interpreted the expression rightly. "I was an exception for a short while," he said. "But now Cymoril and my cousin lie in the ruins of Imrryr and my own torment will avenge any ill I have done. I think my countrymen will realise this."

Moonglum sighed. "I hope you are right, Elric. Who leads this band?"

"An old friend," Elric answered. "He was Dragon Master and led the attack upon the reaver ships after they had looted Imrryr. His name is Dyvim Tvar, once Lord of the Dragon Caves."

"And what of his beasts, where are they?"

"Asleep in the caves again. They can be roused only rarely-they need years to recuperate while their venom is re-distilled and their energy revitalised. If it were not for this, the Dragon Masters would rule the world."

"Lucky for you that they don't," Moonglum commented.

Elric said slowly: "Who knows? With me to lead them, they might yet. At least, we could carve a new empire from this world, just as our forefathers did."

Moonglum said nothing. He thought, privately, that the Young Kingdoms would not be so easily vanquished. Melnibone and her people were ancient, cruel and wise-but even their cruelty was tempered with the soft disease which comes with age. They lacked the vitality of the barbarian race who had been the ancestors of the builders of Imrryr and her long-forgotten sister cities. Vitality was often replaced by tolerance-the tolerance of the aged, the ones who have known past glory but whose day is done.

"In the morning," said Elric, "we will make contact with Dyvim Tvar and hope that what he did to the reaver fleet, coupled with the conscience-pangs which I have personally suffered, will serve to give him a properly objective attitude to my scheme."

"And now, sleep, I think," Moonglum said. "I need it, anyway-and the wench who awaits me might be growing impatient."

Elric shrugged. "As you will. I'll drink a little more wine and seek my bed later."

The black clouds which had huddled over Bakshaan on the previous night, were still there in the morning. The sun rose behind them, but the inhabitants were unaware of it. It rose unheralded, but in the fresh, rain-splashed dawn, Elric and Moonglum rode the narrow streets of the city, heading for the south gate and the forests beyond.

Elric had discarded his usual garb for a simple jerkin of green-dyed leather which bore the insignia of the royal line of Melnibone: a scarlet dragon, rampant on a gold field. On his finger was the Ring of Kings, the single rare Actorious stone set in a ring of rune-carved silver. This was the ring that Elric's mighty forefathers had worn; it was many centuries old. A short cloak hung from his shoulders and his hose was also blue, tucked into high black riding boots. At his side hung Stormbringer.

A symbiosis existed between man and sword. The man without the sword could become a cripple, lacking sight and energy-the sword without the man could not drink the blood and the souls it needed for its existence. They rode together, sword and man, and none could tell which was master.

Moonglum, more conscious of the inclement weather than his friend, hugged a high-collared cloak around him and cursed the elements occasionally.

It took them an hour's hard riding to reach the outskirts of the forest. As yet, in Bakshaan, there were only rumours of the Imrryrian freebooters' coming. Once or twice, a tall stranger had been seen in obscure taverns near the southern wall, and this had been remarked upon but the citizens of Bakshaan felt secure in their wealth and power and had reasoned, with a certain truth in their conviction, that Bakshaan could withstand a raid far more ferocious than those raids which had taken weaker Vilmirian towns. Elric had no idea why his countrymen had driven northwards to Bakshaan. Possibly they had come only to rest and turn their loot into food supplies in the bazaars.

The smoke of several large campfires told Elric and Moonglum where the Melniboneans were entrenched. With a slackening of pace, they guided their horses in that direction while wet branches brushed their faces and the scents of the forest, released by the life-bringing rain, impinged sweetly upon
their nostrils. It was with a feeling akin to relaxation that Elric met the outguard who suddenly appeared from the undergrowth to bar their way along the forest trail.
The Imrryrian guard was swathed in furs and steel. Beneath the visor of an intricately worked helmet he peered at Elric with wary eyes. His vision was slightly impaired by the visor and the rain which dripped from it so that he did not immediately recognise Elric.
"Halt. What do you in these parts?"
Elric said impatiently, "Let me pass-it is Elric, your lord and your Emperor."
The guard gasped and lowered the long-bladed spear he carried. He pushed back his helmet and gazed at the man before him with a myriad of different emotions passing across his face. Among these were amazement, reverence and hate.
He bowed stiffly. "This is no place for you, my liege. You renounced and betrayed your people five years ago and while I acknowledge the blood of kings which flows in your veins, I cannot obey you or do you the homage which it would otherwise be your right to expect."
"Of course," said Elric proudly, sitting his horse straight-backed. "But let your leader-my boyhood friend Dyvim Tvar-be the judge of how to deal with me. Take me to him at once and remember that my companion has done you no ill, but treat him with respect as befits the chosen friend of an Emperor of Melni-bone."
The guard bowed again and took hold of the reins of Elric's mount. He led the pair down the trail and into a large clearing wherein were pitched the tents of the men of Imrryr. Cooking fires flared in the centre of the great circle of pavilions and the fine-featured warriors of Melnibone sat talking softly around them. Even in the light of the gloomy day, the fabrics of the tents were bright and gay. The soft tones were wholly Melnibonean in texture. Deep, smoky greens, azure, ochre, gold, dark blue. The colours did not clash-they blended. Elric felt sad nostalgia for the sundered, multi-coloured towers of Imrryr the Beautiful.
As the two companions and their guide drew nearer, men looked up in astonishment and a low muttering replaced the sounds of ordinary conversation.
"Please remain here," the guard said to Elric. "I will inform Lord Dyvim Tvar of your coming." Elric nodded his acquiescence and sat firmly in his saddle conscious of the gaze of the gathered warriors. None approached him and some, whom Elric had known personally in the old days, were openly embarrassed. They were the ones who did not stare but rather averted their eyes, tending to the cooking fires or taking a sudden interest in the pol-ish of their finely-wrought longswords and dirks. A few growled angrily, but they were in a definite minority. Most of the men were simply shocked-and also inquisitive. Why had this man, their king and their betrayer, come to their camp?
The largest pavilion, of gold and scarlet, had at its peak a banner upon which was emblazoned a dormant dragon, blue upon white. This was the tent of Dyvim Tvar and from it the Dragon Master hurried, buckling on his sword-belt, his intelligent eyes puzzled and wary.
Dyvim Tvar was a man a little older than Elric and he bore the stamp of Melnibonean nobility. His mother had been a princess, a cousin to Elric's own mother. His cheek-bones were high and delicate, his eyes slightly slanting while his skull was narrow, tapering at the jaw. Like Elric, his ears were thin, near lobeless and coming almost to a point. His hands, the left one now folded around the hilt of his sword, were long-fingered and, like the rest of his skin, pale, though not nearly so pale as the dead white of the albino's. He strode towards the mounted Emperor of Melnibone and now his emotions were controlled. When he was five feet away from Elric, Dyvim Tvar bowed slowly, his head bent and his face hidden. When he looked up again, his eyes met those of Elric and remained fixed.
"Dyvim Tvar, Lord of the Dragon Caves, greets Elric, Master of Melnibone, Exponent of her Secret Arts." The Dragon Master spoke gravely the age-old ritual greeting.
Elric was not as confident as he seemed as he replied:
"Elric, Master of Melnibone, greets his loyal subject and
demands that he give audience to Dyvim Tvar." It was not fitting, by ancient Melnibonean standards, that the king should request an audience with one of his subjects and the Dragon Master understood this. He now said:

"I would be honoured if my liege would allow me to accompany him to my pavilion."

Elric dismounted and led the way towards Dyvim Tvar's pavilion. Moonglum also dismounted and made to follow, but Elric waved him back. The two Imrryrian noblemen entered the tent.

Inside, a small oil-lamp augmented the gloomy day-light which filtered through the colourful fabric. The tent was simply furnished, possessing only a soldier's hard bed, a table and several carved wooden stools. Dyvim Tvar bowed and silently indicated one of these stools. Elric sat down.

For several moments, the two men said nothing. Neither allowed emotion to register on their controlled features. They simply sat and stared at one another. Eventually Elric said:

"You know me for a betrayer, a thief, a murderer of my own kin and a slayer of my countrymen, Dragon Master."

Dyvim Tvar nodded. "With my liege's permission, I will agree with him."

"We were never so formal in the old days, when alone," Elric said. "Let us forget ritual and tradition-Melnibone is broken and her sons are wanderers. We meet, as we used to, as equals-only, now, this is wholly true. We are equals. The Ruby Throne crashed in the ashes of Imrryr and now no emperor may sit in state.

Dyvim Tvar sighed. "This is true, Elric-but why have you come here? We were content to forget you. Even while thoughts of vengeance were fresh, we made no move to seek you out. Have you come to mock?"

"You know I would never do that, Dyvim Tvar. I rarely sleep, in these days, and when I do I have such dreams that I would rather be awake. You know that Yyrkoon forced me to do what I did when he usurped the throne for the second time, after I had trusted him as Regent, when, again for the second time, he put his sister, whom I loved, into a sorcerous slumber. To aid that reaver fleet was my only hope of forcing him to undo his work and release Cymoril from the spell. I was moved by vengeance but it was Stormbringer, my sword, which slew Cymoril, not I."

"Of this, I am aware." Dyvim Tvar sighed again and rubbed one jewelled hand across his face. "But it does not explain why you came here. There should be no contact between you and your people. We are wary of you Elric. Even if we allowed you to lead us again you would take your own doomed path and us with you. There is no future there for myself and my men."

"Agreed. But I need your help for this one time-then our ways can part again."

"We should kill you, Elric. But which would be the greater crime? Failure to do justice and slay our betrayer-or regicide? You have given me a problem at a time when there are too many problems already. Should I attempt to solve it?"

"I but played a part in history," Elric said earnestly. "Time would have done what I did, eventually. I but brought the day nearer-and brought it when you and our people were still resilient enough to combat it and turn to a new way of life."

Dyvim Tvar smiled ironically. "That is one point of view, Elric-and it has truth in it, I grant you. But tell it to the men who lost their kin and their homes because of you. Tell it to warriors who had to tend maimed com-rades, to brothers, fathers and husbands whose wives, daughters and sisters-proud Melnibonean women-were used to please the barbarian pillagers."

"Aye," Elric dropped his eyes. When he next spoke it was quietly. "I can do nothing to replace what our people have lost-would that I could. I yearn for Imrryr often, and her women, and her wines and
entertain-ments. But I can offer plunder. I can offer you the richest palace in Bakshaan. Forget the old wounds and follow me this once."

"Do you seek the riches of Bakshaan, Elric? You were never one for jewels and precious metal! Why, Elric?"

Elric ran his hands through his white hair. His red eyes were troubled. "For vengeance, once again, Dyvim Tvar. I owe a debt to a sorcerer from Pan Tang-Theleb K'aarna. You may have heard of him-he is fairly powerful for one of a comparatively young race."

"Then we're joined in this, Elric," Dyvim Tvar spoke grimly. "You are not the only Melnibonean who owes Theleb K'aarna a debt! Because of that bitch-queen Yishana of Jharkor, one of our men was done to death a year ago in a most foul and horrible manner. Killed by Theleb K'aarna because he gave his embraces to Yishana who sought a substitute for you. We can unite to avenge that blood, King Elric, and it will be a fitting excuse for those who would rather have your blood on their knives."

Elric was not glad. He had a sudden premonition that this fortunate coincidence was to have grave and unpredictable outcomings. But he smiled.

THREE

In a smoking pit, somewhere beyond the limitations of space and time, a creature stirred. All around it, shadows moved. They were the shadows of the souls of men and these shadows which moved through the bright darkness were the masters of the creature. It allowed them to master it-so long as they paid its price. In the speech of men, this creature had a name. It was called Quaolnargn and would answer to this name if called. Now it stirred. It heard its name carrying over the barriers which normally blocked its way to the Earth.

The calling of the name effected a temporary pathway through those intangible barriers. It stirred again, as its name was called for the second time. It was unaware of why it was called or to what it was called. It was only muzzily conscious of one fact. When the pathway was opened to it, it could feed. It did not eat flesh and it did not drink blood. It fed on the minds and the souls of adult men and women. Occasionally, as an appetizer, it enjoyed the morsels, the sweetmeats as it were, of the innocent life-force which it sucked from children. It ignored animals since there was not enough awareness in an animal to savour. The creature was, for all its alien stupidity, a gourmet and a connoisseur.

Now its name was called for the third time. It stirred again and flowed forward. The time was approaching when it could, once again, feed...

Theleb K'aarna shuddered. He was, basically, he felt, a man of peace. It was not his fault that his avaricious love for Yishana had turned him mad. It was not his fault that, because of her, he now controlled several powerful and malevolent demons who, in return for the slaves and enemies he fed them, protected the palace of Nikorn the merchant. He felt, very strongly, that none of it was his fault. It was circumstance which had damned him. He wished sadly that he had never met Yishana, never returned to her after that unfortunate episode outside the walls of Tanelorn. He shuddered again as he stood within the pentacle and summoned Quaolnargn. His embryonic talent for precognition had shown him a little of the near-future and he knew that Elric was preparing to do battle with him. Theleb K'aarna was taking the opportunity of summoning all the aid he could control. Quaolnargn must be sent to destroy Elric, if it could, before the albino reached the castle. Theleb K'aarna congratulated himself that he still retained the lock of white hair which had enabled him, in the past, to send another, now deceased, demon against Elric. Quaolnargn knew that it was reaching its master. It propelled itself sluggishly forward and felt a stinging pain as it entered the alien continuum. It knew that its master's soul hovered before it but, for some
reason, was disappointingly unattainable. Something was dropped in front of it. Quaolnargn scented at it and knew what it must do. This was part of its new feed. It flowed gratefully away, intent on finding its prey before the pain which was endemic of a prolonged stay in the strange place grew too much.

Elric rode at the head of his countrymen. On his right was Dyvim Tvar, the Dragon Master, on his left, Moon-glum of Elwher. Behind him rode two hundred fighting men and behind them the wagons containing their loot, their war-machines and their slaves.

The caravan was resplendent with proud banners and the gleaming, long-bladed lances of Imrryr. They were clad in steel, with tapering greaves, helmets and shoul-der-pieces. Their breastplates were polished and glinted where their long fur jerkins were open. Over the jerkins were flung bright cloaks of Imrryrian fabrics, scintillat-ing in the watery sunshine. The archers were immedi-ately close to Elric and his companions. They carried unstrung bone bows of tremendous power, which only they could use. On their backs were quivers crammed with black-fletched arrows. Then came the lancers, with their shining lances at a tilt to avoid the low branches of the trees. Behind these rode the main strength-the Imrryrian swordsmen carrying long-swords and shorter stabbing weapons which were too short to be real swords and too long to be named as knives. They rode, skirting Bakshaan, for the palace of Nikorn which lay to the north of Bakshaan. They rode, these men, in silence. They could think of nothing to say while Elric, their liege, led them to battle for the first time in five years.

Stormbringer, the black hellblade, tingled under El-ric's hand, anticipating a new sword-quenching. Moon-glum fidgeted in his saddle, nervous of the forthcoming fight which he knew would involve dark sorcery. Moon-glum had no liking for the sorcerous arts or for the crea-tures they spawned. To his mind, men should fight their own battles without help. They rode on, nervous and tense.

Stormbringer shook against Elric's side. A faint moan emanated from the metal and the tone was one of warn-ing. Elric raised a hand and the cavalcade reined to a halt.

"There is something coming near which only I can deal with," he informed the men. "I will ride on ahead."

He spurred his horse into a wary canter, keeping his eyes before him. Stormbringer's voice was louder, sharp-er-a muted shriek. The horse trembled and Elric's own nerves were tense. He had not expected trouble so soon and he prayed that whatever evil was lurking in the forest was not directed against him.

"Arioch, be with me," he breathed. "Aid me now, and I'll dedicate a score of warriors to you. Aid me, Arioch."

A foul odour forced itself into Elric's nostrils. He coughed and covered his mouth with his hands, his eyes seeking the source of the stink. The horse whinnied. El-ric jumped from the saddle and slapped his mount on the rump, sending it back along the trail. He crouched warily, Stormbringer now in his grasp, the black metal quivering from point to pommel.

He sensed it with the witch-sight of his forefathers be-fore he saw it with his eyes. And he recognised its shape. He, himself, was one of its masters. But this time he had no control over Quaolnargn-he was standing in no pen-tacle and his only protection was his blade and his wits. He knew, also, of the power of Quaolnargn and shud-dered. Could he overcome such a horror single-handedly?

"Arioch! Arioch! Aid me!" It was a scream, high and desperate.

"Arioch!"

There was no time to conjure a spell. Quaolnargn was before him, a great green toad-thing which hopped along the trail obscenely, moaning to itself in its Earth-fostered pain. It towered over Elric so that the albino was in its shadow before it was ten feet away from him. Elric breathed quickly and screamed once more: "Arioch! Blood and souls, if you aid me, now!"

Suddenly, the toad-demon leapt.

Elric sprang to one side, but was caught by a long-nailed foot which sent him flying into the undergrowth. Quaolnargn turned clumsily and its filthy mouth opened hungrily, displaying a deep toothless cavity from which a foul odour poured.

"Arioch!"
In its evil and alien insensitivity, the toad-thing did not even recognize the name of so powerful a demon-god. It could not be frightened—it had to be fought.

And as it approached Elric for the second time, the clouds belched rain from their bowels and a downpour lashed the forest.

Half-blinded by the rain smashing against his face, Elric backed behind a tree, his runesword ready. In ordinary terms, Quaolonarn was blind. It could not see Elric or the forest. It could not feel the rain. It could only see and smell men's souls—its food. The toad-demon blundered past him and, as it did so, Elric leapt high, holding his blade with both hands, and plunged it to the hilt into the demon's soft and quivering back. Flesh—or whatever Earth-bound stuff formed the demon's body—squelched nauseatingly. Elric pulled at Stormbringer's hilt as the sorcerous sword seared into the hellbeast's back, cutting down where the spine should be but where no spine was. Quaolonarn piped its pain. Its voice was thin and reedy, even in such extreme agony. It retaliated. Elric felt his mind go numb and then his head was filled with a pain which was not natural in any sense. He could not even shriek. His eyes widened in horror as he realised what was happening to him. His soul was being drawn from his body. He knew it. He felt no physical weakness, he was only aware of looking out into...

But even that awareness was fading. Everything was fading, even the pain, even the dreadful hellspawned pain.

"Arioch!" he croaked.

Savagely, he summoned strength from somewhere. Not from himself, not even from Stormbringer—from somewhere. Something was aiding him at last, giving him strength—enough strength to do what he must. He wrenched the blade from the demon's back. He stood over Quaolonarn. Above him. He was floating somewhere, not in the air of Earth. Just floating over the demon. With thoughtful deliberation he selected a spot on the demon's skull which he somehow knew to be the only spot on his body where Stormbringer might slay. Slowly and carefully, he lowered Stormbringer and twisted the runesword through Quaolonarn's skull. The toad-thing whimpered, dropped—and vanished. Elric lay sprawled in the undergrowth, trembling the length of his aching body. He picked himself up slowly. All his energy had been drained from him. Stormbringer, too, seemed to have lost its vitality, but that, Elric knew would return and, in returning, bring him new strength.

But then he felt his whole frame tugged rigid. He was astounded. What was happening? His senses began to blank out. He had the feeling that he was staring down a long, black tunnel which stretched into nowhere. Everything was vague. He was aware of motion. He was travelling. How—or where, he could not tell.

For brief seconds he travelled, conscious only of an unearthly feeling of motion and the fact that Stormbringer, his life, was clutched in his right hand.

Then he felt hard stone beneath him and he opened his eyes—or was it, he wondered, that his vision returned—and looked up at the gloating face above him.

"Theleb K'aarna," he whispered hoarsely, "how did you effect this?"

The sorcerer bent down and tugged Stormbringer from Elric's enfeebled grasp. He sneered. "I followed your commendable battle with my messenger, Lord Elric. When it was obvious that somehow you had sum-moned aid—I quickly conjured another spell and brought you here. Now I have your sword and your strength. I know that without it you are nothing. You are in my power, Elric of Melnibone."

Elric gasped air into his lungs. His whole body was pain-racked. He tried to smile, but he could not. It was not in his nature to smile when he was beaten. "Give me back my sword."

Theleb K'arna gave a self-satisfied smirk. He chuckled. "Who talks of vengeance, now, Elric?"

"Give me my sword!" Elric tried to rise but he was too weak. His vision blurred until he could hardly see the gloating sorcerer.
"And what kind of bargain do you offer?" Theleb K'aarna asked. "You are not a well man, Lord Elric—and sick men do not bargain. They beg."

Elric trembled in impotent anger. He tightened his mouth. He would not beg—neither would he bargain. In silence, he glowered at the sorcerer.

"I think that first," Theleb K'aarna said smiling. "I shall lock this away." He hefted Stormbringer in his hand and turned towards a cupboard behind him. From his robes he produced a key with which he unlocked the cupboard and placed the runesword inside, carefully locking the door again when he had done so. "Then, I think, I'll show our virile hero to his ex-mistress—the sister of the man he betrayed four years ago."

Elric said nothing.

"After that," Theleb K'aarna continued, "my em-ployer Nikorn shall be shown the assassin who thought he could do what others failed to achieve." He smiled. "What a day," he chuckled. "What a day! So full. So rich with pleasure."

Theleb K'aarna tittered and picked up a hand-bell. He rang it. A door behind Elric opened and two tall desert warriors strode in. They glanced at Elric and then at Theleb K'aarna. They were evidently amazed.

"No questions," Theleb K'aarna snapped. "Take this refuse to the chambers of Queen Yishana."

Elric fumed as he was hefted up between the two. The men were dark-skinned, bearded and their eyes were deep-set beneath shaggy brows. They wore the heavy wool-trimmed metal caps of their race, and their armour was not of iron but of thick, leather-covered wood. Down a long corridor they lugged Elric's weak-ended body and one of them rapped sharply on a door.


The desert men entered. Elric could not see Yishana but he heard her gasp. "On the couch," directed the sorcerer. Elric was deposited on yielding fabric. He lay completely exhausted on the couch, staring up at a bright, lewd mural which had been painted on the ceiling. Yishana bent over him. Elric could smell her erotic perfume. He said hoarsely: "An unprecedented reunion, Queen." Yishana's eyes were, for a moment, concerned, then they hardened and she laughed cynically.

"Oh-my hero has returned to me at last. But I'd rather he'd come at his own volition, not dragged here by the back of his neck like a puppy. The wolf's teeth have all been drawn and there's no one to savage me at nights." She turned away, disgust on her painted face. "Take him away, Theleb K'aarna. You have proved your point."

The sorcerer nodded.

"And now," he said, "to visit Nikorn—I think he should be expecting us by this time ..."

FOUR

Nikorn of Ilmar was not a young man. He was well past fifty but had preserved his youth. His face was that of a peasant, firm-boned but not fleshy. His eyes were keen and hard as he stared at Elric who had been mockingly propped in a chair.

"So you are Elric of Melnibone the Wolf of the Snarling Sea, spoiler, reaver and woman-slayer. I think that you could hardly slay a child now. However, I will say that it discomforts me to see any man in such a posi-tion—particularly one who has been so active as you. Is it true what the spell-maker says? Were you sent here by my enemies to assassinate me?"

Elric was concerned for his men. What would they do? Wait—or go on. If they stormed the palace now they were doomed—and so was he.

"Is it true?" Nikorn was insistent.

"No," whispered Elric. "My quarrel was with Theleb K'aarna. I have an old score to settle with him."
"I am not interested in old scores, my friend," Nikorn said, not unkindly. "I am interested in preserving my life. Who sent you here?"
"Theleb K'aarna speaks falsely if he told you I was sent," Elric lied. "I was interested only in paying my debt."
"It is not only the sorcerer who told me, I'm afraid," Nikorn said. "I have many spies in the city and two of them independently informed me of a plot by local merchants to employ you to kill me."
Elric smiled faintly. "Very well," he agreed. "It was true, but I had no intention of doing what they asked."
Nikorn said: "I might believe you, Elric of Melni-bone. But now I do not know what to do with you. I would not turn anyone over to Theleb K'aarna's mercies. May I have your word that you will not make an attempt on my life again?"
"Are we bargaining, Master Nikorn?" Elric said faintly.
"We are."
"Then what do I give my word in return for, sir?"
"Your life and freedom, Lord Elric."
"And my sword?"
Nikorn shrugged regretfully. "I'm sorry-not your sword."
"Then take my life," said Elric brokenly.
"Come now-my bargain's good. Have your life and freedom and give your word that you will not plague me again."
Elric breathed deeply. "Very well."
Nikorn moved away. Theleb K'aarna who had been standing in the shadows put a hand on the merchant's arm. "You're going to release him?"
"Aye," Nikorn said. "He's no threat to either of us now."
Elric was aware of a certain feeling of friendship in Nikorn's attitude towards him. He, too, felt something of the same. Here was a man both courageous and clever. But Elric fought madness-without Storm-bringer, what could he do to fight back? The two hundred Imryrian warriors lay hidden in the undergrowth as dusk gave way to night. They watched and wondered. What had happened to Elric? Was he now in the castle as Dyvim Tvar thought? The Dragon Master knew something of the art of divining, as did all members of the royal line of Melnibone. From what small spells he had conjured, it seemed that Elric now lay within the castle walls. But without Elric to battle Theleb K'aarna's power, how could they take it? Nikorn's palace was also a fortress, bleak and un-lovely. It was surrounded by a deep moat of dark, stagnant water. It stood high above the surrounding forest, built into rather than on to the rock. Much of it had been carved out of the living stone. It was sprawling and rambling and covered a large area, surrounded by natural buttresses. The rock was porous in places, and slimy water ran down the walls of the lower parts, spreading through dark moss. It was not a pleasant place, judging from the outside, but it was almost certainly impregnable. Two hundred men could not take it, without the aid of magic. Some of the Melnibonean warriors were becoming impatient. There were a few who muttered that Elric had, once again, betrayed them. Dyvim Tvar and Moonglum did not believe this. They had seen the signs of conflict—and heard them—in the forest.
They waited: Hoping for a signal from the castle itself. They watched the castle's great main gate—and their patience at last proved of value. The huge wood and metal gate swung inwards on chains and a white-faced man in the tattered regalia of Melnibone appeared be-tween two desert warriors. They were supporting him, it seemed. They pushed him forward—he staggered a few yards along the causeway of slimy stone which bridged the moat. Then he fell. He began to crawl wearily, painfully, forward.
Moonglum growled. "What have they done to him? I must help him." But Dyvim Tvar held him back.
"No-it would not do to betray our presence here. Let him reach the forest first, then we can help him."
Even those who had cursed Elric, now felt pity for the albino as, staggering and crawling alternately, he
dragged his body slowly towards them. From the battle-ments of the fortress a tittering laugh was borne
down to the ears of those below. They also caught a few words.
"What now, wolf?" said the voice. "What now?"
Moonglum clenched his hands and trembled with rage, hating to see his proud friend so mocked in his
weakness. "What's happened to him? What have they done?"
"Patience," Dyvim Tvar said. "We'll find out in a short while."
It was an agony to wait until Elric finally crawled on his knees into the undergrowth.
Moonglum went forward to aid his friend. He put a Supporting arm around Elric's shoulders but the
albino snarled and shook it off, his whole countenance aflame with terrible hate-made more terrible
because it was impotent. Elric could do nothing to destroy that which he hated. Nothing.
Dyvim Tvar said urgently: "Elric, you must tell us What happened. If we're to help you-we must know
what happened."
Elric breathed heavily and nodded his agreement. His face partially cleared of the emotion he felt and
weakly he stuttered out the story.
"So," Moonglum growled, "our plans come to noth-ing-and you have lost your strength for ever."
Elric shook his head. "There must be a way," he gasped. "There must!"
"What? How? If you have a plan, Elric-let me hear it
now."
Elric swallowed thickly and mumbled. "Very well,
Moonglum, you shall hear it. But listen carefully, for I have not the strength to repeat it."
Moonglum was a lover of the night, but only when it was lit by the torches found in cities. He did not
like the night when it came to open countryside and he was not fond of it when it surrounded a castle
such as Nikorn's, but he pressed on and hoped for the best.
If Elric had been right in his interpretation, then the battle might yet be won and Nikorn's palace taken.
But it still meant danger for Moonglum and he was not one deliberately to put himself into danger.
As he viewed the stagnant waters of the moat with dis-taste he reflected that this was enough to test any
friend-ship to the utmost. Philosophically, he lowered himself down into the water and began to swim
across it.
The moss on the fortress offered a flimsy handhold, but it led to ivy which gave a better grip. Moonglum
slowly clambered up the wall. He hoped that Elric had been right and that Theleb K'aarna would need to
rest for a while before he could work more sorcery. That was why Elric had suggested he make haste.
Moonglum clambered on, and eventually reached the small un-barred window he sought. A normal size
man could not have entered, but Moonglum's small frame was proving useful.
He wriggled through the gap, shivering with cold, and landed on the hard stone of a narrow staircase
which ran both up and down the interior wall of the fortress. Moonglum frowned, and then took the
steps leading up-wards. Elric had given him a rough idea of how to reach his destination.
Expecting the worst, he went soft-footed up the stone steps. He went towards the chambers of Yishana,
Queen of Jharkor.
In an hour, Moonglum was back, shivering with cold and dripping with water. In his hands he carried
Stormbringer. He carried the runesword with cautious care-nervous of its sentient evil. It was alive
again; alive with black, pulsating life.
"Thank the gods I was right," Elric murmured weakly from where he lay surrounded by two or three
Imrryri-ans, including Dyvim Tvar who was staring at the albino with concern. "I prayed that I was
correct in my assumption and Theleb K'aarna was resting after his earlier exertions on my behalf..."
He stirred, and Dyvim Tvar helped him to sit up-right. Elric reached out a long white hand-reached like
an addict of some terrible drug towards the sword. "Did you give her my message?" he asked as he
gratefully seized the pommel.
"Aye," Moonglum said shakily, "and she agreed. You were also right in your other interpretation, Elric. It did not take her long to inveigle the key out of a weary Theleb K'aarna. The sorcerer was tremendously tired and Nikorn was becoming nervous wondering if an attack of any kind would take place while Theleb K'aarna was incapable of action. She went herself to the cupboard and got me the blade."

"Women can sometimes be useful," said Dyvim Tvar dryly. "Though usually, in matters like these, they're a hindrance." It was possible to see that something other than immediate problems of taking the castle were worrying Dyvim Tvar, but no one thought to ask him what it was that bothered him. It seemed a personal thing.

"I agree, Dragon Master," Elric said, almost gaily. The gathered men were aware of the strength which poured swiftly back into the albino's deficient veins, imbuing him with a new hellborn vitality. "It is time for our vengeance. But remember-no harm to Nikorn. I gave him my word."

He folded his right hand firmly around Stormbringer's hilt. "Now for a sword-quenching. I believe I can obtain the help of just the allies we need to keep the sorcerer occupied while we storm the castle. I'll need no pentacle to summon my friends of the air!"

Moonglum licked his long lips. "So it's sorcery again. In truth, Elric, this whole country is beginning to stink of wizardry and the minions of Hell."

Elric murmured for his friend's ears: "No Hell-beings these—but honest elementals, equally powerful in many ways. Curb your belly-fear, Moonglum—a little more simple conjuring and Theleb K'aarna will have no desire to retaliate."

The albino frowned, remembering the secret pacts of his forefathers. He took a deep breath and closed his pain-filled scarlet eyes. He swayed, the runesword half-loose in his grip. His chant was low, like the far-off moaning of the wind itself. His chest moved quickly up and down, and some of the younger warriors, those who had never been fully initiated into the ancient lore of Melnibone", stirred with discomfort. Elric's voice was not addressing human folk—his words were for the invisible, the intangible—the supernatural. An old and ancient rhyme began the casting of word-runes ...

"Hear the doomed one's dark decision,
Let the Wind Giant's wail be heard,
Graoll and Misha's mighty moaning
Send my enemy like a bird.

"By the sultry scarlet stones,
By the bane of my black blade,
By the Lasshaar's lonely mewling,
Let a mighty wind be made.

"Speed of sunbeams from their homeland,
Swifter than the sundering storm,
Speed of arrow deerwards shooting,
Let the sorcerer so be borne."

His voice broke and he called high and clear:
"Misha! Misha! In the name of my fathers I summon thee, Lord of the Winds!"

Almost at once, the trees of the forest suddenly bent as if some great hand had brushed them aside. A terri-ble soughing voice swam from nowhere. And all but El-ric, deep in his trance, shivered.
"ELRIC OF MELNIBONE," the voice roared like a distant storm, 'WE KNEW YOUR FATHERS, I KNOW THEE. THE DEBT WE OWE THE LINE OF ELRIC IS FORGOTTEN BY MORTALS BUT GRAOLL AND MISHA, KINGS OF THE WIND, REMEMBER. HOW MAY THE LASSAHAR AID
THEE?"
The voice seemed almost friendly—but proud and aloof and awe-inspiring.
Elric, completely in a state of trance now, jerked his whole body in convulsions. His voice shrieked piercingly from his throat—and the words were alien, unhuman, violently disturbing to the ears and nerves of the human listeners. Elric spoke briefly and then the invisible Wind Giant's great voice roared and sighed:
"I WILL DO AS YOU DESIRE." Then the trees bent once more and the forest was still and muted. Somewhere in the gathered ranks, a man sneezed sharply and this was a sign for others to start talking—speculating.

For many moments, Elric remained in his trance and then, quite suddenly, he opened his enigmatic eyes and looked gravely around him, puzzled for a second. Then he clapped Stormbringer more firmly and leaned forward, speaking to the men of Imrryr. "Soon Theleb K'aarna will be in our power, my friends, and so also will we possess the loot of Nikorn's palace!"
But Dyvim Tvar shuddered then. "I'm not so given skilled in the esoteric arts as you, Elric," he said quietly. "But in my soul I see three wolves leading a pack to slaughter and one of those wolves must die. My doom is near me, I think."
Elric said uncomfortably: "Worry not, Dragon Master. You'll live to mock the ravens and spend the spoils of Bakshaan." But his voice was not convincing.

FIVE
In his bed of silk and ermine, Theleb K'aarna stirred and awoke. He had a brooding inkling of coming trouble and he remembered that earlier in his tiredness he had given more to Yishana than had been wise. He could not remember what it was and now he had a presentiment of danger—the closeness of which over-shadowed thoughts of any past indiscretion. He arose hurriedly and pulled his robe over his head, shrugging into it as he walked towards a strangely-silvered mirror which was set on one wall of his chamber and reflected no image.

With bleary eyes and trembling hands he began preparations. From one of the many earthenware jars resting on a bench near the window, he poured a substance which seemed like dried blood mottled with the hardened blue venom of the black serpent whose home-land was in far Dorel which lay on the edge of the world. Over this, he muttered a swift incantation, scooped the stuff into a crucible and hurled it at the mirror, one arm shielding his eyes. A crack sounded, hard and sharp to his ears, and bright green light erupted suddenly and was gone. The mirror flickered deep within itself, the silvering seemed to undulate and flicker and flash and then a picture began to form.
Theleb K'aarna knew that the sight he witnessed had taken place in the recent past. It showed him Elric's summoning of the Wind Giants.
Theleb K'aarna's dark features grinned with a terrible fear. His hands jerked as spasms shook him. Half-gibbering, he rushed back to his bench and, leaning his hands upon it, stared out of the window into the deep night.
He knew what to expect.
A great and dreadful storm was blowing—and he was the object of the Lasshaar's attack. He had to retaliate, else his own soul would be wrenched from him by the Giants of the Wind and flung to the air spirits, to be borne for eternity on the winds of the world. Then his voice would moan like a banshee around the cold peaks of high ice-clothed mountains for ever-lost and lonely. His soul would be damned to travel with the four winds wherever their caprice might bear it, knowing no rest.
Theleb K'aarna had a respect born of fear for the powers of the aeromancer, the rare wizard who could control the wind elementals—and aeromancy was only one of the arts which Elric and his ancestors possessed. Then Theleb K'aarna realised what he was battling—ten thousand years and hundreds of generations of sorcerers who had gleaned knowledge from the Earth and beyond it and passed it down to
the albino whom he, Theleb K'aarna, had sought to destroy. Then Theleb K'aarna fully regretted his actions. Then—it was too late.

The sorcerer had no control over the powerful Wind Giants as Elric had. His only hope was to combat one element with another. The fire-spirits must be summoned, and quickly. All of Theleb K'aarna's pyromantic powers would be required to hold off the ravening supernatural winds which were soon to shake the air and the earth. Even Hell would shake to the sound and the thunder of the Wind Giants' wrath.

Quickly, Theleb K'aarna marshalled his thoughts and, with trembling hands, began to make strange passes in the air and promise unhealthy pacts with whichever of the powerful fire elementals would help him this once. He promised himself to eternal death for the sake of a few more years of life.

With the gathering of the Wind Giants came the thunder and the rain. The lightning flashed sporadically, but not lethally. It never touched the earth. Elric, Moonglum, and the men of Imrryr were aware of disturbing movements in the atmosphere, but only Elric with his witch sight could see a little of what was happening. The Lasshaar Giants were invisible to other eyes.

The war engines which the Imrryrians were even now constructing from pre-fashioned parts were puny things compared to the Wind Giants' might. But victory depended upon these engines since the Lasshaar's fight would be with the supernatural not the natural.

Battle-rams and siege ladders were slowly taking shape as the warriors worked with frantic speed. The hour of the storming came closer as the wind rose and thunder rattled. The moon was blanked out by huge billowings of black cloud, and the men worked by the light of torches. Surprise was no great asset in an attack of the kind planned.

Two hours before dawn, they were ready.

At last the men of Imrryr, Elric, Dyvim Tvar and Moonglum riding high at their head, moved towards the castle of Nikorn. As they did so, Elric raised his voice in an unholy shout and thunder rumbled in answer to him. A great gout of lightning seared out of the sky towards the palace and the whole place shook and trembled as a ball of mauve and orange fire suddenly appeared over the castle and absorbed the lightning! The battle between fire and air had begun.

The surrounding countryside was alive with a weird and malignant shrieking and moaning, deafening to the ears of the marching men. They sensed conflict all round them, and only a little was visible.

Over most of the castle an unearthly glow hung, waxing and waning, defending a gibbering wretch of a sorcerer who knew that he was doomed if once the Lords of the Flame gave way to the roaring Wind Giants.

Elric smiled without humour as he observed the war.

On the supernatural plane, he now had little to fear. But there was still the castle and he had no extra supernatural aid to help him take it. Swordplay and skill in battle was the only hope against the ferocious desert warriors who now crowded the battlements, preparing to destroy the two hundred men who came against them.

Up rose the Dragon Standards their cloth-of-gold fabric flashing in the eerie glow. Spread out, walking slowly, the sons of Imrryr moved forward to do battle. Up, also, rose the siege ladders as captains directed warriors to begin the assault. The defenders' faces were pale spots against the dark stone and thin shouts came from them; but it was impossible to catch their words.

Two great battle-rams, fashioned the day before, were brought to the vanguard of the approaching warriors. The narrow causeway was a dangerous one to pass over, but it was the only means of crossing the moat at ground level. Twenty men carried each of the great iron-tipped rams and now they began to run forward while arrows hailed downwards. Their shields protecting them from most of the shafts, the
warriors reached the causeway and rushed across it. Now the first ram connected with the gate. It seemed to Elric as he watched this operation that nothing of wood and iron could withstand the vicious impact of the ram, but the gates shivered almost imperceptibly—and held!

Like vampires, hungry for blood, the men howled and staggered aside crabwise to let pass the log held by their comrades. Again the gates shivered, more easily noticed this time, but they yet held. Dyvim Tvar roared encouragement to those now scaling the siege ladders. These were brave, almost desperate men, for few of the first climbers would reach the top and even if they were successful, they would be hard-pressed to stay alive until their comrades arrived.

Boiling lead hissed from great cauldrons set on spindles so that they could be easily emptied and filled quickly. Many a brave Imrryrian warrior fell earthwards, dead from the searing metal before he reached the sharp rocks beneath. Large stones were released out of leather bags hanging from rotating pulleys which could swing out beyond the battlements and rain bone-crushing death on the besiegers. But still the invaders advanced, voicing half-a-hundred war-shouts and steadily scaling their long ladders, whilst their comrades, using a shield barrier still, to protect their heads, concentrated on breaking down the gates.

Elric and his two companions could do little to help the sealers or the rammers at that stage. All three were hand-to-hand fighters, leaving even the archery to their rear ranks of bowmen who stood in rows and shot their shafts high into the castle defenders. The gates were beginning to give. Cracks and splits appeared in them, ever widening. Then, all at once, when hardly expected, the right gate creaked on tortured hinges and fell. A triumphant roar erupted from the throats of the invaders and, dropping their hold on the logs, they led their companions through the breach, axes and maces swinging like scythes and flails before them—and enemy heads springing from necks like wheat from the stalk.

"The castle is ours!" shouted Moonglum, running forward and upward towards the gap in the archway. "The castle's taken."

"Speak not too hastily of victory," replied Dyvim Tvar, but he laughed as he spoke and ran as fast as the others to reach the castle.

"And where is your doom, now?" Elric called to his fellow Melnibonean, then broke off sharply when Dyvim Tvar's face clouded and his mouth set grimly. For a moment there was tension between them, even as they ran, then Dyvim Tvar laughed loud and made a joke of it. "It lies somewhere, Elric, it lies somewhere—but let us not worry about such things, for if my doom hangs over me, I cannot stop its descent when my hour arrives!" He slapped Elric's shoulder, feeling for the albino's uncharacteristic confusion.

Then they were under the mighty archway and in the courtyard of the castle where savage fighting had developed almost into single duels, enemy choosing enemy and fighting him to the death. Stormbringer was the first of the three men's blades to take blood and send a desert man's soul to Hell. The song it sang as it was lashed through the air in strong strokes was an evil one—evil and triumphant. The dark-faced desert warriors were famous for their courage and skill with swords. Their curved blades were reaping havoc in the Imrryrian ranks for, at that stage, the desert men far outnumbered the Melnibonean force.

Somewhere above, the inspired sealers had got a firm foothold on the battlements and were closing with the men of Nikorn, driving them back, forcing many over the unrailed edges of the parapets. A falling, still screaming warrior plummeted down, to land almost on Elric, knocking his shoulder and causing him to fall heavily to the blood-and-rain-slick cobbles. A badly scarred desert man, quick to see his chance, moved forward with a gloating look on his travesty of a face. His scimitar moved up, poised to hack Elric's neck from his shoulders, and then his helmet split open and his fore-head spurted a sudden gout of blood.

Dyvim Tvar wrenched a captured axe from the skull of the slain warrior and grinned at Elric as the albino rose.
"We'll both live to see victory, yet," he shouted over the din of the warring elementals above them and the sound of clashing arms. "My doom, I will escape until-" He broke off, a look of surprise on his fine-boned face, and Elric's stomach twisted inside him as he saw a steel point appear in Dyvim Tvar's right side. Behind the Dragon Master, a maliciously smiling desert warrior pulled his blade from Dyvim Tvar's body. Elric cursed and rushed forward. The man put up his blade to defend himself, backing hurriedly away from the infuriated albino. Stormbringer swung up and then down, it howled a death-song and sheared right through the curved steel of Elric's opponent-and it kept on going, straight through the man's shoulder blade, splitting him half in two. Elric turned back to Dyvim Tvar who was still standing up, but was pale and strained. His blood dripped from his wound and seeped through his garments.

"How badly are you hurt?" Elric said anxiously. "Can you tell?"
"That trollspawn's sword passed through my ribs, I think-no vitals were harmed." Dyvim Tvar gasped and tried to smile. "I'm sure I'd know if he'd made more of the wound."
Then he fell. And when Elric turned him, he looked into a dead and staring face. The Dragon Master, Lord of the Dragon Caves, would never tend his beasts again.
Elric felt sick and weary as he got up, standing over the body of his kinsman. Because of me, he thought, another fine man has died. But this was the only conscious thought he allowed himself for the meantime. He was forced to defend himself from the slashing swords of a couple of desert men who came at him in a rush.

The archers, their work done outside, came running through the breach in the gate and their arrows poured into the enemy ranks.
Elric shouted loudly: "My kinsman Dyvim Tvar lies dead, stabbed in the back by a desert warrior-avenge him brethren. Avenge the Dragon Master of Imrryr!"
A low moaning came from the throats of the Melniboneans and their attack was even more, ferocious than before. Elric called to a bunch of axe-men who ran down from the battlements, their victory assured.
"You men, follow me. We can avenge the blood that Theleb K'aarna took!" He had a good idea of the geography of the castle.
Moonglum shouted from somewhere. "One moment, Elric, and I'll join you!" A desert warrior fell, his back to Elric, and from behind him emerged a grinning Moonglum, his sword covered in blood from point to pommel.
Elric led the way to a small door, set into the main tower of the castle. He pointed at it and spoke to the axe-men. "Set to with your axes, lads, and hurry!"
Grimly, the axe-men began to hack at the tough timber. Impatiently, Elric watched as the wood chips started to fly.
The conflict was appalling. Theleb K'aarna sobbed in frustration. Kakatal, the Fire Lord, and his minions were having little effect on the Wind Giants. Their power appeared to be increasing if anything. The sorcerer gnawed his knuckles and quaked in his chamber while below him the human warriors fought, bled and died. Theleb K'aarna made himself concentrate on one thing only-total destruction of the Lasshaar forces. But he knew, somehow, even then, that sooner or later, in one way or another, he was doomed.
The axes drove deeper and deeper into the stout timber. At last it gave. "We're through, my lord," one of the axe-men indicated the gaping hole they'd made.
Elric reached his arm through the gap and prised up the bar which secured the door. The bar moved upwards and then fell with a clatter to the stone flagging. Elric put his shoulder to the door and pushed. Above them, now, two huge, almost-human figures had appeared in the sky, outlined against the night. One was golden and glowing like the sun and seemed to wield a great sword of fire. The other was dark blue and silver, writhing, smoke-like, with a flickering spear of restless orange in his hand.
Misha and Kakatal clashed. The outcome of their mighty struggle might well decide Theleb K'aarna's fate.

"Quickly," Elric said. "Upwards!"

They ran up the stairs. The stairs which led to Theleb K'aarna's chamber.

Suddenly the men were forced to stop as they came to a door of jet-black, studded with crimson iron. It had no keyhole, no bolts, no bars, but it was quite secure. Elric directed the axe-men to begin hewing at it. All six struck at the door in unison.

In unison, they screamed and vanished. Not even a wisp of smoke remained to mark where they had disap-peared.

Moonglum staggered backwards, eyes wide in fear. He was backing away from Elric who remained firmly by the door, Stormbringer throbbing in his hand. "Get out, Elric-this is a sorcery of terrible power. Let your friends of the air finish the wizard!"

Elric shouted half-hysterically: "Magic is best fought by magic!" He hurled his whole body behind the blow which he struck at the black door. Stormbringer whined into it, shrieked as if in victory and howled like a soul-hungry demon. There was a blinding flash, a roaring in Elric's ears, a sense of weightlessness; and then the door had crashed inwards. Moonglum witnessed this-he had remained against his will.

"Stormbringer has rarely failed me, Moonglum," cried Elric as he leapt through the aperture. "Come, we have reached Theleb K'aarna's den-" He broke off, staring at the gibbering thing on the floor. It had been a man. It had been Theleb K'aarna. Now it was hunched and twisted-sitting in the middle of a broken pentacle and tittering to itself.

Suddenly, intelligence came into its eyes. "Too late for vengeance, Lord Elric," it said. "I have won, you see-I have claimed your vengeance as my own."

Grim-faced and speechless, Elric stepped forward, lifted Stormbringer and brought the moaning runesword down into the sorcerer's skull. He left it there for several moments.

"Drink your fill, hell-blade," he murmured. "We have earned it, you and I."

Overhead, there was a sudden silence.

SIX

"It's untrue! You lie!" screamed the frightened man. "We were not responsible." Pilarmo faced the group of leading citizens. Behind the overdressed merchant were his three colleagues-those who had earlier met Elric and Moonglum in the tavern.

One of the accusing citizens pointed a chubby finger towards the north and Nikorn's palace.

"So-Nikorn was an enemy of all other traders in Bakshaan. That I accept. But now a horde of bloody-handed reavers attack his castle with the aid of demons-and Elric of Melnibone leads them! You know that you were responsible-the gossip's all over the city. You employed Elric-and this is what's happened!"

"But we didn't know he would go to such lengths to kill Nikorn!" Fat Tormiel wrung his hands, his face ag-grieved and afraid. "You are wronging us. We only ..."

"We're wronging you!" Faratt, spokesman for his fel-low citizens, was thick-lipped and florid. He waved his hands in angry exasperation. "When Elric and his jackals have done with Nikorn-they'll come to the city. Fool! That is what the albino sorcerer planned to begin with. He was only mocking you-for you provided him with an excuse. Armed men we can fight-but not foul sorcery!"

"What shall we do? What shall we do? Bakshaan will be razed within the day!" Tormiel turned on Pilarmo. "This was your idea-you think of a plan!"

Pilarmo stuttered: "We could pay a ransom-bribe them-give them enough money to satisfy them."

"And who shall give this money?" asked Faratt.

Again the argument began.

Elric looked with distaste at Theleb K'aarna's broken corpse. He turned away and faced a blanch-featured
Moonglum who said hoarsely: "Let's away, now, Elric. Yishana awaits you in Bakshaan as she promised. You must keep your end of the bargain I made for you."

Elric nodded wearily. "Aye-the Imrryrians seem to have taken the castle by the sound of it. We'll leave them to their spoiling and get out while we may. Will you allow me a few moments here, alone? The sword rejects the soul."

Moonglum sighed thankfully. "I'll join you in the courtyard within the quarter hour. I wish to claim some measure of the spoils." He left clattering down the stairs while Elric remained standing over his enemy's body. He spread out his arms, the sword, dripping blood, still in his hand.

"Dyvim Tvar," he cried, "You and our countrymen have been avenged. Let any evil one who holds the soul of Dyvim Tvar release it now and take instead the soul of Theleb K'aarna."

Within the room something invisible and intangible-but sensed all the same-flowed and hovered over the sprawled body of Theleb K'aarna. Elric looked out of the window and thought he heard the beating of dragon wings-smelled the acrid breath of dragons-saw a shape winging across the dawn sky bearing Dyvim Tvar the Dragon Master away.

Elric half-smiled. "The Gods of Melnibone protect thee wherever thou art," he said quietly and turned away from the carnage, leaving the room.

On the stairway, he met Nikorn of Ilmar.

The merchant's rugged face was full of anger. He trembled with rage. There was a big sword in his hand. "So I've found you, wolf," he said. "I gave you your life-and you have done this to me!"

Elric said tiredly: "It was to be. But I gave my word that I would not take your life and, believe me, I would not, Nikorn, even had I not pledged my word."

Nikorn stood two steps from the door blocking the exit. "Then I'll take yours. Come-engage!" He moved out into the courtyard, half-stumbled over an Imrryrian corpse, righted himself and waited, glowering, for Elric to emerge. Elric did so, his runesword sheathed.

"No."

"Defend yourself, wolf!"

Automatically, the albino's right hand crossed to his sword hilt, but he still did not unsheath it. Nikorn cursed and aimed a well-timed blow which barely missed the white-faced sorcerer. He skipped back and now he tugged out Stormbringer, still reluctant, and stood poised and wary, waiting for the Bakshaanite's next move.

Elric intended simply to disarm Nikorn. He did not want to kill or maim this brave man who had spared him when he had been entirely at the other's mercy.

Nikorn swung another powerful stroke at Elric and the albino parried. Stormbringer was moaning softly, shuddering and pulsating. Metal clanged and then the fight was on in full earnest as Nikorn's rage turned to calm, possessed fury. Elric was forced to defend himself with all his skill and power. Though older than the albino, and a city merchant, Nikorn was a superb swords-man. His speed was fantastic and, at times, Elric was not on the defensive only because he desired it.

But something was happening to the runeblade. It was twisting in Elric's hand and forcing him to make a counter-attack. Nikorn backed away-a light akin to fear in his eyes as he realised the potency of Elric's hell-forged steel. The merchant fought grimly-and Elric did not fight at all. He felt entirely in the power of the whining sword which hacked and cut at Nikorn's guard.

Stormbringer suddenly shifted in Elric's hand. Nikorn screamed. The runesword left Elric's grasp and plunged on its own accord towards the heart of his opponent.

"No!" Elric tried to catch hold of his blade but could not. Stormbringer plunged into Nikorn's great heart and wailed in demoniac triumph. "No!" Elric got hold of the hilt and tried to pull it from Nikorn. The merchant shrieked in hell-brought agony. He should have been dead.
He still half-lived.  
"It's taking me—the thrice-damned thing is taking me!" Nikorn gurgled horribly, clutching at the black  
steel with hands turned to claws. "Stop it, Elric—I beg you, stop it! Please!"

Elric tried again to tug the blade from Nikorn's heart. He could not. It was rooted in flesh, sinew and  
vitals. It moaned greedily, drinking into it all that was the being of Nikorn of Ilmar. It sucked the life-
force from the dy-ing man and all the while its voice was soft and disgust-ingly sensuous. Still Elric  
struggled to pull the sword free. It was impossible. "Damn you!" he moaned. "This man was almost my  
friend—I gave him my word not to kill him." But Stormbringer, though sentient, could not hear its master.  
Nikorn shrieked once more, the shriek dying to a low, lost whimper. And then his body died.  
It died—and the soul-stuff of Nikorn joined the souls  
of the countless others, friends, kin and enemies who  
had gone to feed that which fed Elric of Melnibone

Elric sobbed.  
"Why is this curse upon me? Why?"

He collapsed to the ground in the dirt and the blood. 
Minutes later, Moonglum came upon his friend lying face downward. He grasped Elric by his shoulder  
and turned him. He shuddered when he saw the albino's ag-ony-racked face.

"What happened?"

Elric raised himself on one elbow and pointed to where Nikorn's body lay a few feet away. "Another,  
Moonglum. Oh, curse this blade!"

Moonglum said uncomfortably: "He would have killed you no doubt. Do not think about it. Many a word's been broken through no fault of he who gave it. Come, my friend, Yishana awaits us in the  
Tavern of the Purple Dove."

Elric struggled upright and began to walk slowly towards the battered gates of the palace where horses  
awaited them.

As they rode for Bakshaan, not knowing what was troubling the people of that city, Elric tapped Storm-
bringer which hung, once more, at his side. His eyes were hard and moody, turned inwards on his own  
feelings.

"Be wary of this devil-blade, Moonglum. It kills the foe—but savours the blood of friends and kin-folk  
most."

Moonglum shook his head quickly, as if to clear it, and looked away. He said nothing.

Elric made as if to speak again but then changed his mind. He needed to talk, then. He needed to—but  
there was nothing to say at all.

Pilarmo scowled. He stared, hurt-faced, as his slaves struggled with his chests of treasure, lugging them  
out to pile them in the street beside his great house. In other parts of the city, Pilarmo's three colleagues  
were also in various stages of heart-break. Their treasure, too, was being dealt with in a like manner. The  
burghers of Bakshaan had decided who was to pay any possible ran-som.

And then a ragged citizen was shambling down the street, pointing behind him and shouting.

"The albino and his companion—at the North gate!"

The burghers who stood near to Pilarmo exchanged glances. Faratt swallowed.  
He said: "Elric comes to bargain. Quick. Open the treasure chests and tell the city guard to admit him."

One of the citizens scurried off.  
Within a few minutes, while Faratt and the rest worked frantically to expose Pilarmo's treasure to the  
gaze of the approaching albino, Elric was galloping up the street, Moonglum beside him. Both men were  
ex-pressionless. They knew enough not to show their puz-zlement.

"What's this?" Elric said, casting a look at Pilarmo.  
There is no need to use sorcery. No need for your men to at-tack us. The treasure here is fabulous—its  
value is enor-mous. Will you take it and leave the city in peace?"
Moonglum almost smiled, but he controlled his features.
Elric said coolly: "It will do. I accept it. Make sure this and the rest is delivered to my men at Nikorn's
castle or we'll be roasting you and your friends over open fires by the morrow."
Faratt coughed suddenly, trembling. "As you say, Lord Elric. It shall be delivered."
The two men wheeled their horses in the direction of the Tavern of the Purple Dove. When they were out
of earshot Moonglum said: "From what I gathered, back there, it's Master Pilarmo and his friends who
are paying that unasked for toll."
Elric was incapable of any real humour, but he half-chuckled. "Aye. I'd planned to rob them from the
start and now their own fellows have done it for us. On our way back, we shall take our pick of the
spoils."
He rode on and reached the tavern. Yishana was waiting there, nervously, dressed for travelling.
When she saw Elric's face she sighed with satisfaction and smiled silkily. "So Theleb K'aarna is dead,"
she said. "Now we can resume our interrupted relationship, Elric."
The albino nodded. "That was my part of the bargain - you kept yours when you helped Moonglum to get
my sword back for me." He showed no emotion.
She embraced him, but he drew back. "Later," he murmured. "But that is one promise I shall not break,
Yishana."
He helped the puzzled woman mount her waiting horse. They rode back towards Pilarmo's house.
She asked: "And what of Nikorn - is he safe? I liked that man."
"He died," Elric's voice was strained.
"How?" she asked.
"Because, like all merchants," Elric answered, "he bar-gained too hard."
There was an unnatural silence among the three as they made their horses speed faster towards the Gates
of Bakshaan, and Elric did not stop when the others did, to take their pick of Pilarmo's riches. He rode
on, unsee-ing, and the others had to spur their steeds in order to catch up with him, two miles beyond the
city.
Over Bakshaan, no breeze stirred in the gardens of the rich. No winds came to blow cool on the sweating
faces of the poor. Only the sun blazed in the heavens, round and red, and a shadow, shaped like a dragon,
moved across it once, and then was gone.

BOOK TWO
Kings in Darkness
Three Kings in Darkness lie,
Gutheran of Org, and I,
Under a bleak and sunless sky
The third Beneath the Hill.

-Song of Veerkad
by James Cawthorn.

ONE
Elric, Lord of the lost and sundered Empire of Melnibo-
ne rode like a fanged wolf from a trap - all slavering
madness and mirth. He rode from Nadsokor, City of
Beggars, and there was hate in his wake for he had been
recognised as their old enemy before he could obtain the
secret he had sought there. Now they hounded him and
the grotesque little man who rode laughing at Elric's
side; Moonglum the Outlander, from Elwher and the
unmapped East
The flames of brands devoured the velvet of the night as the yelling, ragged throng pushed their bony nags in pursuit of the pair.
Starvelings and tattered jackals that they were, there was strength in their gaudy numbers and long knives and bone bows glinted in the brandlight. They were too strong for a couple of men to fight, too few to represent serious danger in a hunt, so Elric and Moonglum had chosen to leave the city without dispute and now sped towards the full and rising moon which stabbed its sickly beams through the darkness to show them the dis-turbing waters of the Varkalk River and a chance of es-cape from the incensed mob.
They had half a mind to stand and face the mob, since the Varkalk was their only alternative. But they knew well what the beggars would do to them, whereas they were uncertain what would become of them once they had entered the river. The horses reached the sloping banks of the Varkalk and reared, with hooves lashing.
Cursing, the two men spurred the steeds and forced them down towards the water. Into the river the horses plunged, snorting and spluttering. Into the river which led a roaring course towards the hell-spawned Forest of Troos which lay within the borders of Org, country of necromancy and rotting, ancient evil. Elric blew water away from his mouth and coughed. "They'll not follow us to Troos, I think," he shouted at his companion.
Moonglum said nothing. He only grinned, showing his white teeth and the unhidden fear in his eyes. The horses swam strongly with the current and behind them the ragged mob shrieked in frustrated blood-lust while some of their number laughed and jeered.
"Let the forest do our work for us!"
Elric laughed back at them, wildly, as the horses swam on down the dark, straight river, wide and deep, towards a sun-starved morning, cold and spiky with ice. Scat-tered, slim-peaked crags loomed on either side of the flat plain, through which the river ran swiftly. Green-tinted masses of jutting blacks and browns spread colour through the rocks and the grass was waving on the plain as if for some purpose. Through the dawnlight, the beggar crew chased along the banks, but eventually gave up their quarry to return, shuddering, to Nadsokor.
When they had gone, Elric and Moonglum made their mounts swim towards the banks and climb them, stum-bling, to the top where rocks and grass had already given way to sparse forest land which rose starkly on all sides, staining the earth with sombre shades. The foliage waved jerkily, as if alive-sentient. It was a forest of malignantly erupting blooms, blood-coloured and sickly-mottled. A forest of bending, sinuously smooth trunks, black and shiny; a forest of spiked leaves of murky purples and gleaming greens-certainly an unhealthy place if judged only by the odour of rot-ting vegetation which was almost unbearable, impinging as it did upon the fastidious nostrils of Elric and Moon-glum. Moonglum wrinkled his nose and jerked his head in the direction they had come. "Back now?" he inquired.
"We can avoid Troos and cut swiftly across a corner of Org to be in Bakshaan in just over a day. What say you, Elric?"
Elric frowned. "I don't doubt they'd welcome us in Bakshaan with the same warmth we received in Nadsokor. They'll not have forgotten the destruction we wrought there-and the wealth we acquired from their merchants. No, I have a fancy to explore the forest a little. I have heard tales of Org and its unnatural forest and should like to investigate the truth of them. My blade and sorcery will protect us, if necessary."
Moonglum sighed. "Elric-this once, let us not court the danger."
Elric smiled icily. His scarlet eyes blazed out of his dead white skin with peculiar intensity. "Danger? It can bring only death."
"Death is not to my liking, just yet," Moonglum said. "The fleshpots of Bakshaan, or if you prefer-
Jadmar—on the other hand...
But Elric was already urging his horse onward, heading for the forest. Moonglum sighed and followed. Soon dark blossoms hid most of the sky, which was dark enough, and they could see only a little way in all directions. The rest of the forest seemed vast and sprawling; they could sense this, though sight of most of it was lost in the depressing gloom.
Moonglum recognised the forest from descriptions he had heard from mad-eyed travellers who drank purpose-fully in the shadows of Nadsokor's taverns.
"This is the Forest of Troos, sure enough," he said to Elric. "It's told of how the Doomed Folk released tremendous forces upon the earth and caused terrible changes among men, beasts and vegetation. This forest is the last they created, and the last to perish."
"A child will always hate its parents at certain times," Elric said mysteriously.
"Children of whom to be extremely wary, I should think," Moonglum retorted. "Some say that when they were at the peak of their power, they had no Gods to frighten them."
"A daring people, indeed," Elric replied, with a faint smile. "They have my respect. Now fear and the Gods are back and that, at least, is comforting."
Moonglum puzzled over this for a short time, and then, eventually, said nothing. He was beginning to feel uneasy.
The place was full of malicious rustlings and whispers, though no living animal inhabited it, as far as they could tell. There was a discomforting absence of birds, rodents or insects and, though they normally had no love for such creatures, they would have appreciated their company in the disconcerting forest. In a quavering voice, Moonglum began to sing a song in the hope that it would keep his spirits up and his thoughts off the lurking forest.
"A grin and a word is my trade; From these, my profit is made. Though my body's not tall and my courage is small, My fame will take longer to fade."
So singing, with his natural amiability returning, Moonglum rode after the man he regarded as a friend—a friend who possessed something akin to mastery over him, though neither admitted it. Elric smiled at Moonglum's song. "To sing of one's own lack of size and absence of courage is not an action designed to ward off one's enemies, Moonglum."
"But this way I offer no provocation," Moonglum replied glibly. "If I sing of my shortcomings, I am safe. If I were to boast of my talents, then someone might consider this to be a challenge and decide to teach me a lesson."
"True," Elric assented gravely, "and well-spoken."
He began pointing at certain blossoms and leaves, re-marking upon their alien tint and texture, referring to them in words which Moonglum could not understand, though he knew the words to be part of a sorcerer's vocabulary. The albino seemed to be untroubled by the fears which beset the Eastlander, but often, Moonglum knew, appearances with Elric could hide the opposite of what they indicated. They stopped for a short break while Elric sifted through some of the samples he had torn from trees and plants. He carefully placed his prizes in his belt-pouch but would say nothing of why he did so to Moonglum.
"Come," he said, "Troos's mysteries await us."
But then a new voice, a woman's, said softly from the gloom: "Save the excursion for another day, strangers."
Elric reined his horse, one hand at Stormbringer's hilt. The voice had had an unusual effect upon him. It had been low, deep and had, for a moment, sent the pulse in his throat throbbing. Incredibly, he sensed that he was suddenly standing on one of Fate's roads, but where the road would take him, he did not know. Quickly, he controlled his mind and then his body and looked towards the shadows from where the voice had come.
"You are very kind to offer us advice, madam," he said sternly. "Come, show yourself and give explanation ..."
She rode then, very slowly, on a black-coated gelding that pranced with a power she could barely restrain. Moonglum drew an appreciative breath for although heavy-featured, she was incredibly beautiful. Her face and bearing was patrician, her eyes were grey-green, combining enigma and innocence. She was very young. For all her obvious womanhood and beauty, Moonglum aged her at seventeen or little more.
Elric frowned: "Do you ride alone?"
"I do now," she replied, trying to hide her obvious astonishment at the albino's colouring. "I need aid-protection. Men who will escort me safely to Karlaak. There, they will be paid."
"Karlaak, by the Weeping Waste? It lies the other side of Ilmiora, a hundred leagues away and a week's trav-elling at speed." Elric did not wait for her to reply to this statement. "We are not hirelings, madam."
"Then you are bound by the vows of chivalry, sir, and cannot refuse my request."
Elric laughed shortly. "Chivalry, madam? We come not from the upstart nations of the South with their strange codes and rules of behaviour. We are nobles of older stock whose actions are governed by our own desires. You would not ask what you do, if you knew our names."
She wetted her full lips with her tongue and said almost timidly: "You are...?
"Elric of Melnibone", madam, called Elric Woman-slayer in the West, and this is Moonglum of Elwher; he has no conscience."
She said: "There are legends-the white-faced reaver, the hell-driven sorcerer with a blade that drinks the souls of men ..."
"Aye, that's true. And however magnified they are with the retelling, they cannot hint, those tales, at the darker truths which lie in their origin. Now, madam, do you still seek our aid?" Elric's voice was gentle, without menace, as he saw that she was very much afraid, although she had managed to control the signs of fear and her lips were tight with determination.
"I have no choice. I am at your mercy. My father, the Senior Senator of Karlaak, is very rich. Karlaak is called the City of the Jade Towers, as you will know, and such rare jades and ambers we have. Many could be yours."
"Be careful, madam, lest you anger me," warned Elric, although Moonglum's bright eyes lighted with avarice. "We are not nags to be hired or goods to be bought. Besides which," he smiled disdainfully, "I am from crumbling Imrryr, the Dreaming City, from the Isle of the Dragon, hub of Ancient Melnibone, and I know what beauty really is. Your baubles cannot tempt one who has looked upon the milky Heart of Arioch, upon the blinding iridescence that throbs from the Ruby Throne, of the languorous and unnameable colours in the Actorios stone of the Ring of Kings. These are more than jewels, madam-they contain the life-stuff of the universe."
"I apologise, Lord Elric, and to you Sir Moonglum."
Elric laughed, almost with affection. "We are grim clowns, lady, but the Gods of Luck aided our escape from Nadsokor and we owe them a debt. We'll escort you to Karlaak, City of the Jade Towers, and explore the Forest of Troos another time."
Her thanks was tempered with a wary look in her eyes.
"And now we have made introductions," said Elric, "perhaps you would be good enough to give your name and tell us your story."
"I am Zarozinia from Karlaak, a daughter of the Voashoon, the most powerful clan in South Eastern Ilmiora. We have kinsmen in the trading cities on the coasts of Pikarayd and I went with two cousins and my uncle to visit them."
"A perilous journey, Lady Zarozinia."
"Aye and there are not only natural dangers, sir. Two weeks ago we made our goodbyes and began the
journey home. Safely we crossed the Straits of Vilmir and there employed men-at-arms, forming a strong caravan to journey through Vilmir and so to Ilmiora. We skirted Nadsokor since we had heard that the City of Beggars is inhospitable to honest travellers ..."

Here, Elric smiled: "And sometimes to dishonest trav-ellers, as we can appreciate."

Again the expression on her face showed that she had some difficulty in equating his obvious good humour with his evil reputation. "Having skirted Nadsokor," she continued, "we came this way and reached the borders of Org wherein, of course, Troos lies. Very warily we travelled, knowing dark Org's reputation, along the fringes of the forest. And then we were ambushed and our hired men-at-arms deserted us."

"Ambushed, eh?" broke in Moonglum. "By whom, madam, did you know?"

"By their unsavoury looks and squat shapes they seemed natives. They fell upon the caravan and my uncle and cousins fought bravely but were slain. One of my cousins slapped the rump of my gelding and sent it galloping so that I could not control it. I heard-terrible screams-mad, giggling shouts-and when I at last brought my horse to a halt, I was lost. Later I heard you approach and waited in fear for you to pass, thinking you also were of Org, but when I heard your accents and some of your speech, I thought that you might help me."

"And help you we shall, madam," said Moonglum bowing gallantly from the saddle. "And I am indebted to you for convincing Lord Elric here of your need. But for you, we should be deep in this awful forest by now and experiencing strange terrors no doubt. I offer my sorrow for your dead kinsfolk and assure you that you will be protected from now onwards by more than swords and brave hearts, for sorcery can be called up if needs be."

"Let's hope there'll be no need," frowned Elric. "You talk blithely of sorcery, friend Moonglum-you who hate the art."

Moonglum grinned.

"I was consoling the young lady, Elric. And I've had occasion to be grateful for your horrid powers. I'll admit. Now I suggest that we make camp for the night and so refreshed be on our way at dawn."

"I'll agree to that," said Elric, glancing almost with embarrassment at the girl. Again he felt the pulse in his throat and this time he had more difficulty in controlling it.

The girl also seemed fascinated by the albino. There was an attraction between them which might be strong enough to throw both their destinies along wildly different paths than any they had guessed. Night came again quickly, for the days were short in those parts. While Moonglum tended the fire, nervously peering around him, Zarozinia, her richly embroidered cloth-of-gold gown shimmering in the firelight, walked gracefully to where Elric sat sorting the herbs he had collected. She glanced at him cautiously and then seeing that he was absorbed, stared at him with open curiosity.

He looked up and smiled faintly, his eyes for once unprotected, his strange face frank and pleasant. "Some of these are healing herbs," he said, "and others are used in summoning spirits. Yet others give unnatural strength to the imbiber and some turn men mad. They will be useful to me."

She sat down beside him, her thick-fingered hands pushing her black hair back. Her small breasts lifted and fell rapidly.

"Are you really the terrible evil-bringer of the legends, Lord Elric? I find it hard to credit."

"I have brought evil to many places," he said, "but usually there has already been evil to match mine. I seek -no excuses, for I know what I am and I know what I have done. I have slain malignant sorcerers and destroyed oppressors, but I have also been responsible for slaying fine men, and a woman, my cousin, whom I loved, I killed-or my sword did."

"And you are master of your sword?"

"I often wonder. Without it, I am helpless." He put his hand around Stormbringer's hilt. "I should be grateful to it."

"Do not feel sorry, Lady Zarozinia. The pain is within..."
me—you did not put it there. In fact I’d say you relieve it greatly by your presence."
Half-startled, she glanced at him and smiled. "I am no wanton, sir," she said, "but..."
He got up quickly.
"Moonglum, is the fire going well?"
"Aye, Elric. She'll stay in for the night." Moonglum cocked his head on one side. It was unlike Elric to
make such empty queries, but Elric said nothing further so the Eastlander shrugged, turned away to
check his gear.
Since he could think of little else to say, Elric turned and said quietly, urgently: "I'm a killer and a thief,
not fit to ...
"Lord Elric, I am ...
"You are infatuated by a legend, that is all." "No! If you feel what I feel, then you'll know it's more."
"You are young."
"Old enough."
"Beware. I must fulfil my destiny."
"Your destiny?"
"It is no destiny at all, but an awful thing called
doom. And I have no pity except when I see something in my own soul. Then I have pity—and I pity. But
I hate to look and this is part of the doom which drives me. Not Fate, nor the Stars, nor Men, nor
Demons, nor Gods. Look at me, Zarozinia—it is Elric, poor white chosen plaything of the Gods of Time-
Elric of Melni-bone who causes his own gradual and terrible destruc-tion."
"It is suicide!"
"Aye. I drive myself to slow death. And those who go with me suffer also."
"You speak falsely, Lord Elric—from guilt-madness."
"Because I am guilty, lady."
"And does Sir Moonglum go to doom with you?"
"He is unlike others—he is indestructible in his own self-assurance."
"I am confident, also, Lord Elric."
"But your confidence is that of youth, it is different"
"Need I lose it with my youth?"
"You have strength. You are as strong as we are. I'll
grant you that"
She opened her arms, rising. "Then be reconciled, El-
ric of Melnibone"
And he was. He seized her, kissing her with a deeper need than that of passion. For the first time
Cymoril of Imrryr was forgotten as they lay down, together on the soft turf, oblivious of Moonglum who
polished away at his curved sword with wry jealousy.
They all slept and the fire waned.
Elric, in his joy, had forgotten, or not heeded, that he had a watch to take and Moonglum, who had no
source of strength but himself, stayed awake for as long as he could but sleep overcame him.
In the shadows of the awful trees, figures moved with shambling caution.
The misshapen men of Org began to creep inwards towards the sleepers.
Then Elric opened his eyes, aroused by instinct, stared
at Zarozinia's peaceful face beside him, moved his eyes
without turning his head and saw the danger. He rolled over, grasped Stormbringer and tugged the
runeblade from its sheath. The sword hummed, as if in anger at being awakened.
"Moonglum! Danger!" Elric bellowed in fear, for he had more to protect than his own life. The little
man's head jerked up. His curved sabre was already across his knees and he jumped to his feet, ran
towards Elric as the men of Org closed in.
"I apologise," he said.
'My fault, I...'
And then the men of Org were at them. Elric and Moonglum stood over the girl as she came awake, saw the situation and did not scream. Instead she looked around for a weapon but found none. She remained still, where she was, the only thing to do.
Smelling like offal, the gibbering creatures, some dozen of them, slashed at Elric and Moonglum with heavy blades like cleavers, long and dangerous.
Stormbringer whined and smote through a cleaver, cut into a neck and beheaded the owner. Blood gurgled from the corpse as it slumped back across the fire. Moonglum ducked beneath a howling cleaver, fell, slashed at his opponent's legs and ham-strung him so that he collapsed shrieking. Moonglum stayed on the ground and lunged upwards, taking an-other in the heart. Then he sprang to his feet and stood shoulder to shoulder with Elric while Zarozinia got up behind them.
"The horses," grunted Elric. "If it's safe, try to get them."
There were still seven natives standing and Moonglum groaned as a cleaver sliced flesh from his left arm, retaliated, pierced the man's throat, turned slightly and sheared off another's face. They pressed forward, taking the attack to the incensed foe. His left hand covered with his own blood, Moonglum painfully pulled his long poignard from its sheath and held it with his thumb along the handle, blocked an opponent's swing, closed in and killed him with a ripping upward thrust of the dagger, the action of which caused his wound to pound with agony.
Elric held his great runesword in both hands and swung it in a semi-circle, hacking down the howling mis-shapen things. Zarozinia darted towards the horses, leaped on to her own and led the other two towards the fighting men. Elric smote at another and got into his saddle, thanking his own forethought to leave the equipment on the horses in case of danger. Moonglum quickly joined him and they thundered out of the clearing.
"The saddle-bags," Moonglum called in greater agony than that created by his wound. "We've left the saddle-bags!"
"What of it? Don't press your luck, my friend."
"But all our treasure's in them!"
Elric laughed, partly in relief, partly from real humour. "We'll retrieve them, friend, never fear."
"I know you, Elric. You've no value for the realities."
But even Moonglum was laughing as they left the en-raged men of Org behind them and slowed to a canter.
Elric reached and hugged Zarozinia. "You have the courage of your noble clan in your veins," he said. "Thank you," she replied, pleased with the compliment, "but we cannot match such swordsmanship as that displayed by you and Moonglum. It was fantastic."
"Thank the blade," he said shortly.
"No. I will thank you. I think you place too much reliance upon that hell weapon, however powerful it is."
"I need it"
"For what?"
"For my own strength and, now, to give strength to you."
"I'm no vampire," she smiled, "and need no such fear-ful strength as that supplies."
"Then be assured that I do," he told her gravely. "You would not love me if the blade did not give me what I need. I am like a spineless sea-thing without it."
"I do not believe that, but will not dispute with you now."
They rode for a while without speaking.
Later, they stopped, dismounted, and Zarozinia put herbs that Elric had given her upon Moonglum's wounded arm and began to bind it.

Elric was thinking deeply. The forest rustled with macabre, sensuous sounds. "We're in the heart of Troos," he said, "and our intention to skirt the forest has been forestalled. I have it in mind to call on the King of Org and so round off our visit."

Moonglum laughed. "Shall we send our swords along first? And bind our own hands?" His pain was already eased by the herbs which were having quick effect.

"I mean it. We owe, all of us, much to the men of Org. They slew Zarozinia's uncle and cousins, they wounded you and they now have our treasure. We have many reasons for asking the King for recompense. Also, they seem stupid and should be easy to trick."

"Aye. The King will pay us back for our lack of common-sense by tearing our limbs off."

"I'm in earnest. I think we should go."

"I'll agree that I'd like our wealth returned to us. But we cannot risk the lady's safety, Elric."

"I am to be Elric's wife, Moonglum. Therefore if he visits the King of Org, I shall come too."

Moonglum lifted an eyebrow. "A quick courtship."

"She speaks the truth, however. We shall all go to Org and sorcery will protect us from the King's un-called-for wrath."

"And still you wish for death and vengeance, Elric," shrugged Moonglum mounting. "Well, it's all the same to me since your roads, whatever else, are profitable ones. You may be the Lord of Bad Luck by your own reckoning, but you bring good luck to me, I'll say that."

"No more courting death," smiled Elric, "but we'll have some revenge, I hope."

"Dawn will be with us soon," Moonglum said. "The Orgian citadel lies six hours ride from here by my working, south-south-east by the Ancient Star, if the map I memorised in Nadsokor was correct."

"You have an instinct for direction that never fails, Moonglum. Every caravan should have such a man as you."

"We base an entire philosophy on the stars in Elwher," Moonglum replied. "We regard them as the master plan for everything that happens on Earth. As they revolve around the planet they see all things, past, present and future. They are our Gods."

"Predictable Gods, at least," said Elric and they rode off towards Org with light hearts considering the enormity of their risk.

TWO

Little was known of the tiny kingdom of Org save that the Forest of Troos lay within its boundaries and to that, other nations felt, it was welcome. The people were unpleasant to look upon, for the most part, and their bodies were stunted and strangely altered. Legend had it that they were the descendants of the Doomed Folk. Their rulers, it was said, were shaped like normal men in so far as their outward bodily appearance went, but their minds were warped more horribly than the limbs of their subjects.

The inhabitants were few and were generally scattered, ruled by their king from his citadel which was also called Org.

It was for this citadel that Elric and his companions rode and, as they did so, Elric explained how he planned to protect them all from the natives of Org.

In the forest he had found a particular leaf which, when used with certain invocations (which were harmless in that the invoker was in little danger of being harmed by the spirits he marshalled) would invest that person, and anyone else to whom he gave the drug distilled from the leaf, with temporary invulnerability.

The spell somehow reknitted the skin and flesh structure so that it could withstand any edge and almost any blow. Elric explained, in a rare garrulous mood, how the drug and spell combined to achieve the effect, but his archaicisms and esoteric words meant little to the other two.
They stopped an hour's ride from where Moonglum expected to find the citadel so that Elric could prepare the drug and invoke the spell.

He worked swiftly over a small fire, using an al-chemist's pestle and mortar, mixing the shredded leaf with a little water. As the brew bubbled on the fire, he drew peculiar runes on the ground, some of which were twisted into such alien forms that they seemed to disappear into a different dimension and reappear beyond it.

"Bone and blood and flesh and sinew,
Spell and spirit bind anew;
Potent potion work the life charm,
Keep its takers safe from harm."

So Elric chanted as a small pink cloud formed in the air over the fire, wavered, reformed into a spiral shape which curled downwards into the bowl. The brew spluttered and then was still. The albino sorcerer said: "An old boyhood spell, so simple that I'd near forgotten it. The leaf for the potion grows only in Troos and therefore it is rarely possible to perform."

The brew, which had been liquid, had now solidified and Elric broke it into small pellets. "Too much," he warned, "taken at one time is poison, and yet the effect can last for several hours. Not always, though, but we must accept that small risk." He handed both of them a pellet which they received dubiously.

"Swallow them just before we reach the citadel," he told them, "or in the event of the men of Org finding us first."

Then they mounted and rode on again.

Some miles to the south-east of Troos, a blind man sang a grim song in his sleep and so woke himself...

They reached the brooding citadel of Org at dusk.

Guttural voices shouted at them from the battlements of the square-cut ancient dwelling place of the Kings of Org. The thick rock oozed moisture and was corroded by lichen and sickly, mottled moss. The only entrance large enough for a mounted man to pass through was reached by a path almost a foot deep in evil-smelling black mud.

"What's your business at the Royal Court of Gutheran the Mighty?"

They could not see who asked the question.

"We seek hospitality and an audience with your liege," called Moonglum cheerfully, successfully hiding his nervousness. "We bring important news to Org."

A twisted face peered down from the battlements, "Enter strangers and be welcome," it said unwelcomingly.

The heavy wooden drawgate shifted upwards to allow them entrance and the horses pushed their way slowly through the mud and so into the courtyard of the citadel.

Overhead, the grey sky was a racing field of black tattered clouds which streamed towards the horizon as if to escape the horrid boundaries of Org and the disgusting Forest of Troos.

The courtyard was covered, though not so deeply, with the same foul mud as had unpaired their progress to the citadel. It was full of heavy, unmoving shadow. On Elric's right, a flight of steps went up to an arched entrance which was hung, partially, with the same unhealthy lichen he had seen on the outer walls and, also, in the Forest of Troos.

Through this archway, brushing at the lichen with a pale, beinged hand, a tall man came and stood on the top step, regarding the visitors through heavy-lidded eyes. He was, in contrast to the others, handsome, with a massive, leonine head and long hair as white as Elric's; although the hair on the head of this great, solid man was somewhat dirty, tangled, unbrushed. He was dressed in a heavy jerkin of quilted, embossed leather, a yellow kit which reached to his ankles and he carried a wide-
bladed dagger, naked in his belt. He was older than El-ric, aged between forty and fifty and his powerful if somewhat decadent face was seamed and pock-marked.

He stared at them in silence and did not welcome them; instead he signed to one of the battlement guards who caused the drawgate to be lowered. It came down with a crash, blocking off their way of escape.

"Kill the men and keep the woman," said the massive man in a low monotone. Elric had heard dead men speak in that manner.

As planned, Elric and Moonglum stood either side of Zarozinia and remained where they were, arms folded.

Puzzled, shambling creatures came warily at them, their loose trousers dragging in the mud, their hands hidden by the long shapeless sleeves of their filthy garments. They swung their cleavers. Elric felt a faint shock as the blade thudded on to his arm, but that was all. Moonglum's experience was similar.

The men fell back, amazement and confusion on their bestial faces.

The tall man's eyes widened. He put one ring-covered hand to his thick lips, chewing at a nail.

"Our swords have no effect upon them, King! They do not cut and they do not bleed. What are these folk?"

Elric laughed theatrically. "We are not common folk, little human, be assured. We are the messengers of the Gods and come to your King with a message from our great masters. Do not worry, we shall not harm you since we are in no danger of being harmed. Stand aside and make us welcome."

Elric could see that King Gutheran was puzzled and not absolutely taken in by his words. Elric cursed to himself. He had measured their intelligence by those he had seen. This king, mad or not, was much more intelligent, was going to be harder to deceive. He led the way up the steps towards glowering Gutheran.

"Greetings, King Gutheran. The Gods have, at last, returned to Org and wish you to know this."

"Org has had no Gods to worship for an eternity," said Gutheran hollowly, turning back into the citadel.

"Why should we accept them now?"

"You are impertinent, King."

"And you are audacious. How do I know you come from the Gods?" He walked ahead of them, leading them through the low-roofed halls.

"You saw that the swords of your subjects had no effect upon us."

"True. I'll take that incident as proof for the moment. I suppose there must be a banquet in your-honour-I shall order it. Be welcome, messengers." His words were ungracious but it was virtually impossible to detect anything from Gutheran's tone, since the man's voice stayed at the same pitch.

Elric pushed his heavy riding cloak back from his shoulders and said lightly: "We shall mention your kindness to our masters."

The Court was a place of gloomy halls and false laughter and although Elric put many questions to Gutheran, the king would not answer them, or did so by means of ambiguous phrases which meant nothing. They were not given chambers wherein they could refresh themselves but instead stood about for several hours in the main hall of the citadel and Gutheran, while he was with them and not giving orders for the banquet, sat slumped on his throne and chewed at his nails, ignoring them.

"Pleasant hospitality," whispered Moonglum.

"Elric-how long will the effects of the drug last?" Zarozinia had remained close to him. He put his arm around her shoulders. "I do not know. Not much longer. But it has served its purpose. I doubt if they will try to attack us a second time. However, beware of other attempts, subtler ones, upon our lives."

The main hall, which had a higher roof than the others and was completely surrounded by a gallery which ran around it well above the floor, fairly close to the room, was chilly and unwarmed. No fires burned in the several hearths, which were open and let into the floor, and the walls dripped moisture and were undecorated; damp, solid stone, timeworn and gaunt. There were not
even rushes upon the floor which was strewn with old bones and pieces of decaying food. "Hardly house-proud, are they?" commented Moon-glum looking around him with distaste and glancing at brooding Gutheran who was seemingly oblivious of their presence. A servitor shambled into the hall and whispered a few words to the king. He nodded and arose, leaving the Great Hall. Soon men came in, carrying benches and tables and began to place them about the hall. The banquet was, at last, due to commence. And the air had menace in it. The three visitors sat together on the right of the King who had donned a richly jewelled chain of kingship, whilst his son and several pale-faced female members of the Royal line sat on the left, unspeaking even among themselves. Prince Hurd, a sullen-faced youth who seemed to bear a resentment against his father, picked at the unappetising food which was served them all. He drank heavily of the wine which had little flavour but was strong, fiery stuff and this seemed to warm the company a little. "And what do the Gods want of us poor folk of Org?" Hurd said, staring hard at Zarozinia with more than friendly interest Elric answered: "They ask nothing of you but your recognition. In return they will, on occasions, help you." "That is all?" Hurd laughed. "That is more than those from the Hill can offer, eh, father?" Gutheran turned his great head slowly to regard his son. "Yes," he murmured, and the word seemed to carry warning. Moonglum said: "The Hill-what is that?" He got no reply. Instead a high-pitched laugh came from the entrance to the Great Hall. A thin, gaunt man stood there staring ahead with a fixed gaze. His features, though emaciated, strongly resembled Gutheran's. He carried a stringed instrument and plucked at the gut so that it wailed and moaned with melancholy insistence. Kurd said savagely: "Look, father, 'tis blind Veerkad, the minstrel, your brother. Shall he sing for us?" "Sing?" "Shall he sing his songs, father" Gutheran's mouth trembled and twisted and he said after a moment: "He may entertain our guests with an heroic ballad if he wishes, but..." "But certain other songs he shall not sing..." Kurd grinned maliciously. He seemed to be tormenting his father deliberately in some way which Elric could not guess. Kurd shouted at the blind man: "Come Uncle Veerkad-sing!" "There are strangers present," said Veerkad hollowly above the wail of his own music. "Strangers in Org" Kurd giggled and drank more wine. Gutheran scowled and continued to tremble, gnawing at his nails. Elric called: "We'd appreciate a song, minstrel." "Then you'll have the song of the Three Kings in Darkness, strangers, and hear the ghastly story of the Kings of Org." "No!" shouted Gutheran, leaping from his place, but Veerkad was already singing: "Three Kings in darkness lie, Gutheran of Org, and I, Under a bleak and sunless sky- The third beneath the Hill When shall the third arise..."
"Stop!" Gutheran got up in an obviously insane rage and stumbled across the table, trembling in terror, his face blanched, striking at the blind man, his brother. Two blows and the minstrel fell, slumping to the floor and not moving. "Take him out! Do not let him enter again." The king shrieked and foam flecked his lips.

Hurd, sober for a moment, jumped across the table, scattering dishes and cups and took his father's arm. "Be calm, father. I have a new plan for our entertain-ment."
"You! You seek my throne. 'Twas you who goaded Veerkad to sing his dreadful song. You know I cannot listen without ..." He stared at the door. "One day the legend shall be realised and the Hill-King shall come. Then shall I, you and Org perish."
"Father," Hurd was smiling horribly, "let the female visitor dance for us a dance of the Gods."
"What"
"Let the woman dance for us, father."
Elric heard him. By now the drug must have worn off. He could not afford to show his hand by offering his companions further doses. He got to his feet.
"What sacrilege do you speak, Prince"
"We have given you entertainment. It is the custom in Org for our visitors to give us entertainment also."

The hall was filled with menace. Elric regretted his plan to trick the men of Org. But there was nothing he could do. He had intended to exact tribute from them in the name of the Gods, but obviously these mad men feared more immediate and tangible dangers than any the Gods might represent.

He had made a mistake, put the lives of his friends in danger as well as his own. What should he do? Zarozinia murmured: "I have learned dances in Ilmiora where all ladies are taught the art. Let me dance for them. It might placate them and bedazzle them to make our work easier."
"Arioch knows our work is hard enough now. I was a fool to have conceived this plan. Very well, Zarozinia, dance for them, but with caution." He shouted at Hurd: "Our companion will dance for you, to show you the beauty that the Gods create. Then you must pay the tribute, for our masters grow impatient."
"The tribute" Gutheran looked up. "You mentioned nothing of tribute."
"Your recognition of the Gods must take the form of precious stones and metals, King Gutheran. I thought you to understand that."
"You seem more like common thieves than uncom- mon messengers, my friends. We are poor in Org and have nothing to give away to charlatans."
"Beware of your words, King!" Elric's clear voice echoed warningly through the hall.
"We'll see the dance and then judge the truth of what you've told us."

Elric seated himself, grasped Zarozinia's hand beneath the table as she arose, giving her comfort. She walked gracefully and confidently into the centre of the hall and there began to dance. Elric, who loved her, was amazed at her splendid grace and artistry. She danced the old, beautiful dances of Ilmiora, entrancing even the thick-skulled men of Org and, as she danced, a great golden Guest Cup was brought in.

Kurd leaned across his father and said to Elric: "The Guest Cup, Lord. It is our custom that our guests drink from it in friendship."

Elric nodded, annoyed at being disturbed in his watching of the wonderful dance, his eyes fixed on Zarozinia as she postured and glided. There was silence in the hall.

Kurd handed him the cup and absently he put it to his lips, seeing this Zarozinia danced on to the table and began to weave along it to where Elric sat. As he took the first sip, Zarozinia cried out and, with her foot, knocked the cup from his hand. The wine splashed on to Gutheran and Hurd who half rose, startled.
"It was drugged, Elric. They drugged it!"
Hurd lashed at her with his hand, striking her across
the face. She fell from the table and lay moaning
slightly on the filthy floor. "Bitch! Would the messengers
of the Gods be harmed by a little drugged wine"
Enraged, Elric pushed aside Gutheran and struck savagely at Hurd so that the young man's mouth
bushed blood. But the drug was already having effect. Gutheran shouted something and Moonglum drew
his sabre, glancing upwards. Elric was swaying, his senses were jumbled and the scene had an unreal
quality. He saw servants grasp Zarozinia but could not see how Moonglum was faring. He felt sick and
dizzy, could hardly control his limbs.
Summoning up his last remaining strength, Elric dubbed Hurd down with one tremendous blow. Then he
collapsed into unconsciousness.

THREE
There was the cold clutch of chains about his wrists and
a thin drizzle was falling directly on to his face which
stung where Hurd's nails had ripped it
He looked about him. He was chained between two stone menhirs upon an obvious burial barrow of
gigantic size. It was night and a pale moon hovered in the heavens above him. He looked down at the
group of men below. Hurd and Gutheran were among them. They grinned at him mockingly.
"Farewell, messenger. You will serve us a good purpose and placate the Ones from the Hill!" Hurd
called as he and the others scurried back towards the citadel which lay, silhouetted, a short distance
away.
Where was he? What had happened to Zarozinia—and Moonglum? Why had he been chained thus upon-
realisation and remembrance came the Hill!
He shuddered, helpless in the strong chains which held him. Desperately he began to tug at them, but
they would not yield. He searched his brain for a plan, but he was confused by torment and worry for his
friends' safety. He heard a dreadful scuttling sound from below and saw a ghastly white shape dart into
the gloom.
Wildly he struggled in the rattling iron which held him,
In the Great Hall of the citadel, a riotous celebration was now reaching the state of an ecstatic orgy.
Gutheran and Hurd were totally drunk, laughing insanely at their victory.
Outside the Hall, Veerkad listened and hated. Particularly he hated his brother, the man who had
deposed and blinded him to prevent his study of sorcery by means of which he had planned to raise the
King from Beneath the Hill.
"The time has come, at last," he whispered to himself and stopped a passing servant.
"Tell me—where is the girl kept?"
"In Gutheran's chamber, master."
Veerkad released the man and began to grope his way through the gloomy corridors up twisting steps,
until he reached the room he sought. Here he produced a key, one of many he'd had made without
Gutheran's knowing, and unlocked the door.
Zarozinia saw the blind man enter and could do nothing. She was gagged and bound with her own dress
and still dazed from the blow Hurd had given her. They had told her of Elric's fate, but Moonglum had
so far escaped them, guards hunted him now in the stinking corridors of Org.
"I've come to take you to your companion, lady," smiled blind Veerkad, grasping her roughly with
strength that his insanity had given him, picked her up and fumbled his way towards the door. He knew
the passages of Org perfectly, for he had been born and grown up among them.
But two men were in the corridor outside Gutheran's chambers. One of them was Hurd, Prince of Org,
who resented his father's appropriation of the girl and desired her for himself. He saw Veerkad bearing
the girl away and stood silent while his uncle passed.
The other man was Moonglum, who observed what was happening from the shadows where he had
hidden from the searching guards. As Hurd followed Veerkad, on cautious feet. Moonglum followed him.

Veerkad went out of the citadel by a small side door and carried his living burden towards the looming Burial Hill.

All about the foot of the monstrous barrow swarmed the leprous-white ghouls who sensed the presence of El-ric, the folk of Org's sacrifice to them. Now Elric understood.

These were the things that Org feared more than the Gods. These were the living-dead ancestors of those who now revelled in the Great Hall. Perhaps these were actually the Doomed Folk. Was that their doom? Never to rest? Never to die? Just to degenerate into mindless ghouls? Elric shuddered.

Now desperation brought back his memory. His voice was an agonised wail to the brooding sky and the puls-ing earth.

"Arioch! Destroy the stones. Save your servant! Ari-och-master-aid me!"

It was not enough. The ghouls gathered together and began to scuttle, gibbering up the barrow towards the helpless albino.

"Arioch! These are the things that would forsake your memory! Aid me to destroy them!"

The earth trembled and the sky became overcast, hiding the moon but not the white-faced, bloodless ghouls who were now almost upon him.

And then a ball of fire formed in the sky above him and the very sky seemed to shake and sway around it. Then, with a roaring crash two bolts of lightning slashed down, pulverising the stones and releasing Elric.

He got to his feet, knowing that Arioch would demand his price, as the first ghouls reached him. He did not retreat, but in his rage and desperation leapt among them, smashing and flailing with the lengths of chain. The ghouls fell back and fled, gibber-ing in fear and anger, down the hill and into the bar-row.

Elric could now see that there was a gaping entrance to the barrow below him; black against the blackness. Breathing heavily, he found that his belt pouch had been left him. From it he took a length of slim, gold wire and began frantically to pick at the locks of the manacles.

Veerkad chuckled to himself and Zarozinia hearing him was almost mad with terror. He kept drooling the words into her ear: "When shall the third arise? Only when other dies. When that other's blood flows red-we'll hear the footfalls of the dead. You and I, we shall resurrect him and such vengeance will he wreak upon my cursed brother. Your blood, my dear, it will be that released him." He felt that the ghouls were gone and judged them placated by their feast. "Your lover has been useful to me," he laughed as he began to enter the barrow. The smell of death almost overpowered the girl as the blind madman bore her downwards into the heart of the Hill.

Hurd, sobered after his walk in the colder air, was horrified when he saw where Veerkad was going; the barrow, the Hill of the King, was the most feared spot in the land of Org. Hurd paused before the black entrance and turned to run. Then, suddenly, he saw the form of Elric, looming huge and bloody, descending the barrow slope, cutting off his escape.

With a wild yell he fled into the Hill passage.

Elric had not previously noticed the Prince, but the yell startled him and he tried to see who had given it but was too late. He began to run down the steep in-cline towards the entrance of the barrow. Another figure came scampering out of the darkness.

"Elric! Thank the stars and all the Gods of Earth! You live!"

"Thank Arioch, Moonglum. Where's Zarozinia?"

"In there-the mad minstrel took her with him and Hurd followed. They are all insane, these kings and princes, I see no sense to their actions."

"I have an idea that the minstrel means Zarozinia no good. Quickly, we must follow."
"By the stars, the stench of death! I have breathed nothing like it—not even at the great battle of the Eshmir Valley where the armies of Elwher met those of Ka-leg Vogun, usurper prince of the Tanghensi, and half a million corpses strewed the valley from, end to end."
"If you've no stomach..."
"I wish I had none. It would not be so bad.
Come..."
They rushed into the passage, led by the far away sounds of Veerkad's maniacal laughter and the somewhat nearer movements of a fear-maddened Kurd who was now trapped between two enemies and yet more afraid of a third.
Hurd blundered along in the blackness, sobbing to himself in his terror. __
In the phosphorescent Central Tomb, surrounded by the mummified corpses of his ancestors, Veerkad chanted the resurrection ritual before the great coffin of the Hill-King—a giant thing, half as tall again as Veer-kad who was tall enough. Veerkad was forgetful for his own safety and thinking only of vengeance upon his brother Gutheran. He held a long dagger over Zarozinia who lay huddled and terrified upon the ground near the coffin.
The spilling of Zarozinia's blood would be the culmination of the ritual and then—Then Hell would, quite literally, be let loose. Or so Veerkad planned. He finished his chanting and raised the knife just as Hurd came screeching into the Central Tomb with his own sword drawn. Veerkad swung round, his blind face working in thwarted rage.
Savagely, without stopping for a moment, Hurd ran his sword into Veerkad's body, plunging the blade in up to the hilt so that its bloody point appeared sticking from his back. But the other, in his groaning death spasms, locked his hands about the Prince's throat.  Locked them immovably.
Somehow, the two men retained a semblance of life and, struggling with each other in a macabre death-dance, swayed about the glowing chamber. The coffin of the Hill-King began to tremble and shake slightly, the movement hardly perceptible.
So Elric and Moonglum found Veerkad and Hurd.
Seeing that both were near dead, Elric raced across the Central Tomb to where Zarozinia lay, unconscious, mercifully, from her ordeal. Elric picked her up and made to return.
He glanced at the throbbing coffin.
"Quickly, Moonglum. That blind fool has invoked the dead, I can tell. Hurry, my friend, before the hosts of Hell are upon us."
Moonglum gasped and followed Elric as he ran back towards the cleaner air of night.
"Where to now, Elric?"
"We'll have to risk going back to the citadel. Our horses are there and our goods. We need the horses to take us quickly away, for I fear there's going to be a terrible blood-letting soon if my instinct is right."
"There should not be too much opposition, Elric They were all drunk when I left That was how I managed to evade them so easily. By now, if they continued drinking as heavily as when last I saw them, they'll be unable to move at all."
"Then let's make haste."
The left the Hill behind them and began to run towards the citadel.
FOUR
Moonglum had spoken truth. Everyone was lying about the Great Hall in drunken sleep. Open fires had been lit in the hearths and they blazed, sending shadows skipping around the Hall. Elric said softly:
"Moonglum, go with Zarozinia to the stables and prepare our horses. I will settle our debt with Gutheran first." He pointed. "See, they have heaped their booty upon the table, gloating in their apparent victory."
Stormbringer lay upon a pile of burst sacks and saddlebags which contained the loot stolen from Zarozinia's uncle and cousins and from Elric and
Moonglum.
Zarozinia, now conscious but confused, left with Moonglum to locate the stables and Elric picked his way towards the table, across the sprawled shapes of drunken men of Org, around the blazing fires and caught up, thankfully, his hell-forged runeblade.
Then he leaped over the table and was about to grasp Gutheran, who still had his fabulously gemmed chain of kingship around his neck, when the great doors of the Hall crashed open and a howling blast of icy air sent the torches dancing and leaping. Elric turned, Gutheran forgotten, and his eyes widened. Framed in the doorway stood the King from Beneath the Hill.
The long-dead monarch had been raised by Veerkad whose own blood had completed the work of resurrection. He stood in rotting robes, his fleshless bones covered by tight, tattered skin. His heart did not beat, for he had none; he drew no breath, for his lungs had been eaten by the creatures which feasted on such things. But, horribly, he lived ...
The King from the Hill. He had been the last great ruler of the Doomed Folk who had, in their fury, destroyed half the Earth and created the Forest of Troos. Behind the dead King crowded the ghastly hosts who had been buried with him in a legendary past
The massacre began!
What secret vengeance was being reaped, Elric could only guess at—but whatever the reason, the danger was still very real.
Elric pulled out Stormbringer as the awakened horde vented their anger upon the living. The Hall became filled with the shrieking, horrified screams of the unfortunate Orgians. Elric remained, half-paralysed in his horror, beside the throne. Aroused, Gutheran woke up and saw the King from the Hill and his host. He screamed, almost thankfully:
"At last I can rest!"
And fell dying in a seizure, robbing Elric of his vengeance.
Veerkad's grim song echoed in Elric's memory. The Three Kings in Darkness-Gutheran, Veerkad and the King from Beneath the Hill. Now only the last lived—and he had been dead for millennia.
The King's cold, dead eyes roved the Hall and saw Gutheran sprawled upon his throne, the ancient chain of office still about his throat. Elric wrenched it off the body and backed away as the King from Beneath the Hill advanced. And then his back was against a pillar and there were feasting ghouls everywhere else.
The dead King came nearer and then, with a whistling moan which came from the depths of his decaying body, launched himself at Elric who found himself fighting desperately against the Hill-King's clawing, abnormal strength, cutting at flesh that neither bled nor suffered pain. Even the sorcerous runeblade could do nothing against this horror that had no soul to take and no blood to let.
Frantically, Elric slashed and hacked at the Hill-King but ragged nails raked his flesh and teeth snapped at his throat. And above everything came the almost overpowering stench of death as the ghouls, packing the Great Hall with their horrible shapes, feasted on the living and the dead.
Then Elric heard Moonglum's voice calling and saw him upon the gallery which ran around the Hall. He held a great oil jar.
"Lure him close to the central fire, Elric. There may be a way to vanquish him. Quickly man, or you're finished!"
In a frantic burst of energy, the Melnibonean forced the giant king towards the flames. Around them, the ghouls fed off the remains of their victims, some of whom still lived, their screams calling hopelessly over the sound of carnage.
The Hill-King now stood, unfeeling, with his back to the leaping central fire. He still slashed at Elric. Moon-glum hurled the jar.
It shattered upon the stone hearth, spraying the King
with blazing oil. He staggered, and Elric struck with his full power, the man and the blade combining to push the Hill-King backwards. Down went the King into the flames and the flames began to devour him. A dreadful, lost howling came from the burning giant as he perished. Flames licked everywhere throughout the Great Hall and soon the place was like Hell itself, an inferno of licking fire through which the ghouls ran about, still feasting, unaware of their destruction. The way to the door was blocked.

Elric stared around him and saw no way of escape-save one. Sheathing Stormbringer, he ran a few paces and leaped upwards, just grasping the rail of the gallery as flames engulfed the spot where he had been standing.

Moonglum reached down and helped him to clamber across the rail. "I'm disappointed, Elric," he grinned, "you forgot to bring the treasure."

Elric showed him what he grasped in his left hand—the jewel-encrusted chain of kingship. "This bauble is some reward for our hardships," he smiled, holding up the glittering chain. "I stole nothing, by Arioch! There are no kings left in Org to wear it! Come let's join Zarozinia and get our horses."

They ran from the gallery as masonry began to crash downwards into the Great Hall. They rode fast away from the halls of Org and looking back saw great fissures appear in the walls and heard the roar of destruction as the flames consumed everything that had been Org. They destroyed the seat of the monarchy, the remains of the Three Kings in Darkness, the present and the past. Nothing would be left of Org save an empty burial mound and two corpses, locked together, lying where their ancestors had lain for centuries in the Central Tomb. They destroyed the last link with the previous age and cleansed the Earth of an ancient evil. Only the dreadful Forest of Troos remained to mark the coming and the passing of the Doomed Folk.

And the Forest of Troos was a warning.

Weary and yet relieved, the three saw the outlines of Troos in the distance, behind the blazing funeral pyre.

And yet, in his happiness, Elric had a fresh problem on his mind now that danger was past. "Why do you frown now, love?" asked Zarozinia.

"Because I think you spoke the truth. Remember you said I placed too much reliance on my runeblade here?"

"Yes—and I said I would not dispute with you."

"Agreed. But I have a feeling that you were partially right. On the burial mound and in it I did not have Stormbringer with me—yet I fought and won, because I feared for your safety." His voice was quiet. "Perhaps, in tune, I can keep my strength by means of certain herbs I found in Troos and dispense with the blade for ever?"

Moonglum shouted with laughter hearing these words. "Elric—I never thought I'd witness this. You daring to think of dispensing with that foul weapon of yours. I don't know if you ever shall, but the thought is comforting."

"It is, my friend, it is." He leaned in his saddle and grasped Zarozinia's shoulders, pulling her dangerously towards him as they galloped without slackening speed. And as they rode he kissed her, heedless of their pace. "A new beginning!" he shouted above the wind. "A new beginning, my love!"

And then they all rode laughing towards Karlaak by the Weeping Waste, to present themselves, to enrich themselves, and to attend the strangest wedding the Northern Lands had ever witnessed.

BOOK THREE
The Flamebringers
In which Moonglum returns from the East.
lands with disturbing news ...

ONE
Bloody-beaked hawks soared on the frigid wind. They soared high above a mounted horde inexorably moving across the Weeping Waste.
The horde had crossed two deserts and three mountain ranges to be there and hunger drove them onwards. They were spurred on by remembrances of stories heard from travellers who had come to their Eastern home-land, by the encouragements of their thin-lipped leader who swaggered in his saddle ahead of them, one arm wrapped around a ten-foot lance decorated with the gory trophies of his pillaging campaigns.
The riders moved slowly and wearily, unaware that they were nearing their goal.
Far behind the horde, a stocky rider left Elwher, the singing, boisterous capital of the Eastern world, and came soon to a valley.
The hard skeletons of trees had a blighted look and the horse kicked earth the colour of ashes as its rider drove it fiercely through the sick wasteland that had once been gentle Eshmir, the golden garden of the East.
A plague had smitten Eshmir and the locust had stripped her of her beauty. Both plague and locust went by the same name-Terarn Gashtek, Lord of the Mounted Hordes, sunken-faced carrier of destruction; Terarn Gashtek, insane blood-drawer, the shrieking flame bringer. And that was his other name-Flame Bringer.
The rider who witnessed the evil that Terarn Gashtek had brought to gentle Eshmir was named Moonglum.
Moonglum was riding, now, for Karlaak by the Weeping Waste, the last outpost of the Western civilisation of which those in the Eastlands knew little. In Karlaak, Moonglum knew he would find Elric of Melnibone who now dwelt permanently in his wife's graceful city. Moonglum was desperate to reach Karlaak quickly, to warn Elric and to solicit his help.
He was small and cocky, with a broad mouth and a shock of red hair, but now his mouth did not grin and his body was bent over the horse as he pushed it on towards Karlaak. For Eshmir, gentle Eshmir, had been Moonglum's home province and, with his ancestors, had formed him into what he was.
So, cursing, Moonglum rode for Karlaak.
But so did Terarn Gashtek. And already the Flame Bringer had reached the Weeping Waste. The horde moved slowly, for they had wagons with them which had at one time dropped far behind but now the supplies they carried were needed. As well as provisions, one of the wagons carried a bound prisoner who lay on his back cursing Terarn Gashtek and his slant-eyed battle-mongers.
Drinij Bara was bound by more than strips of leather, that was why he cursed, for Drinij Bara was a sorcerer who could not normally be held in such a manner. If he had not succumbed to his weakness for wine and women just before the Flame Bringer had come down on the town in which he was staying, he would not have been trussed so, and Terarn Gashtek would not now have Drinij Bara's soul.
Drinij Bara's soul reposed in the body of a small, black cat-the cat which Terarn Gashtek had caught and carried with him always, for, as was the habit of Eastern sorcerers, Drinij Bara had hidden his soul in the body of the cat for protection. Because of this he was now slave to the Lord of the Mounted Hordes, and had to obey him lest the man slay the cat and so send his soul to Hell.
It was not a pleasant situation for the proud sorcerer, but he did not deserve less.
There was on the pale face of Elric of Melnibone some slight trace of an earlier haunting, but his mouth smiled and his crimson eyes were at peace as he looked down at the young, black-haired woman with whom he walked in the terraced gardens of Karlaak.
"Elric," said Zarozinia, "have you found your hap-piness?"
He nodded. "I think so. Stormbringer, now hangs amid cobwebs in your father's armoury. The drugs I dis-
covered in Troos keep me strong, my eyesight clear, and need to be taken only occasionally. I need never
think of travelling or fighting again. I am content, here, to spend my time with you and study the books
in Kar-laak's library. What more would I require?"
"You compliment me overmuch, my lord. I would be-come complacent."
He laughed. "Rather that than you were doubting. Do not fear, Zarozinia, I possess no reason, now, to
jour-ney on. Moonglum, I miss, but it was natural that he should become restless of residence in a city
and wish to revisit his homeland."
"I am glad you are at peace, Elric. My father was at first reluctant to let you live here, fearing the black
evil that once accompanied you, but three months have proved to him that the evil has gone and left no
fuming berserker behind it."
Suddenly there came a shouting from below them, in the street a man's voice was raised and he banged
at the gates of the house.
"Let me in, damn you, I must speak with your mas-ter."
A servant came running: "Lord Elric-there is a man at the gates with a message. He pretends friendship
with you."
"His name?"
"An alien one-Moonglum, he says."
"Moonglum! His stay in Elwher has been short. Let him in!"
Zarozinia's eyes held a trace of fear and she held El-
ric's arm fiercely. "Elric-pray he does not bring news
to take you hence."
"No news could do that. Fear not, Zarozinia." He hur-
rried out of the garden and into the courtyard of the
house. Moonglum rode hurriedly through the gates, dismounting as he did so.
"Moonglum, my friend! Why the haste? Naturally, I am pleased to see you after such a short time, but
you have been riding hastily-why?"
The little Eastlander's face was grim beneath its coating of dust and his clothes were filthy from hard rid-
ing.
"The Flame Bringer comes with sorcery to aid him," he panted. "You must warn the city."
"The Flame Bringer? The name means nothing-you sound delirious, my friend."
"Aye, that's true, I am. Delirious with hate. He destroyed my homeland, killed my family, my friends and
now plans conquests in the West. Two years ago he was little more than an ordinary desert raider but
then he began to gather a great horde of barbarians around him and has been looting and slaying his way
across the Eastern lands. Only Elwher has not suffered from his at-tacks, for the city was too great for
even him to take. But he has turned two thousand miles of pleasant coun-try into a burning waste. He
plans world conquest, rides westwards with five hundred thousand warriors!"
"You mentioned sorcery-what does this barbarian know of such sophisticated arts?"
"Little himself, but he has one of our greatest wizards in his power-Drinij Bara. The man was captured as
he lay drunk between two wenches in a tavern in Phum. He had put his soul into the body of a cat so
that no rival sorcerer might steal it while he slept. But Terarn Gashtek, the Flame Bringer, knew of this
trick, seized the cat and bound its legs, eyes and mouth, so imprison-ing Drinij Bara's evil soul. Now the
sorcerer is his slave-if he does not obey the barbarian, the cat will be killed by an iron blade and Drinij
Bara's soul will go to Hell."
"These are unfamiliar sorceries to me," said Elric.
"They seem little more than superstitious."
"Who knows that they may be-but so long as Drinij
Bara believes what he believes, he will do as Terarn
Gashtek dictates. Several proud cities have been de-stroyed with the aid of his magic."
"How far away is this Flame Bringer?"
"Three days' ride at most. I was forced to come hence by a longer route, to avoid his outriders."
"Then we must prepare for a siege."
"No, Elric—you must prepare to flee!"
"To flee—should I request the citizens of Karlaak to leave their beautiful city unprotected, to leave their homes?"
"If they will not—you must, and take your bride with you. None can stand against such a foe."
"My own sorcery is no mean thing."
"But one man's sorcery is not enough to hold back half a million men also aided by sorcery."
"And Karlaak is a trading city—not a warrior's fortress. Very well, I will speak to the Council of Elders and try to convince them."
"You must convince them quickly, Elric, for if you do not Karlaak will not stand half a day before Terarn Gashtek's howling blood-letters."
"They are stubborn," said Elric as the two sat in his private study later that night. "They refuse to realise the magnitude of the danger. They refuse to leave and I cannot leave them for they have welcomed me and made me a citizen of Karlaak."
"Then we must stay here and die?"
"Perhaps. There seems to be no choice. But I have another plan. You say that this sorcerer is a prisoner of Terarn Gashtek. What would he do if he regained his soul?"
"Why he would take vengeance upon his captor. But Terarn Gashtek would not be so foolish as to give him the chance. There is no help for us there."
"What if we managed to aid Drinij Bara?"
"How? It would be impossible."
"It seems our only chance. Does this barbarian know of me or my history?"
"Not as far as I know."
"Would he recognise you?"
"Why should he?"
"Then I suggest we join him."
"Join him—Elric you are no more sane than when we rode as free travellers together!
"I know what I am doing. It would be the only way to get close to him and discover a subtle way to defeat him. We will set off at dawn, there is no time to waste."
"Very well. Let's hope your old luck is good, but I doubt it now, for you've forsaken your old ways and the luck went with them."
"Let us find out."
"Will you take Stormbringer?"
"I had hoped never to have to make use of that hell-forged blade again. She's a treacherous sword at best."
"Aye—but I think you'll need her in this business."
"Yes, you're right. I'll take her."
Elric frowned, his hands clenched. "It will mean breaking my word to Zarozinia."
"Better break it—than give her up to the Mounted Hordes."
Elric unlocked the door to the armoury, a pitch torch flaring in one hand. He felt sick as he strode down the narrow passage lined with dulled weapons which had not been used for a century.
His heart pounded heavily as he came to another door and flung off the bar to enter the little room in which lay the disused regalia of Karlaak's long-dead War Chieftains—and Stormbringer. The black blade began to moan, as if welcoming him as he took a deep breath of the musty air and reached for the sword. He clutched the hilt and his body was racked by an unholy sensation of awful ecstasy. His face twisted as he sheathed the blade and he almost ran from the armoury towards cleaner air.
Elric and Moonglum mounted their plainly equipped horses and, garbed like common mercenaries, bade urgent farewell to the Councillors of Karlaak.
Zarozinia kissed Elric's pale hand.
"I realise the need for this," she said, her eyes full of tears, "but take care, my love."
"I shall. And pray that we are successful in whatever we decide to do."
"The White Gods be with you."
"No-pray to the Lords of the Darks, for it is their evil help I'll need in this work. And forget not my words to the messenger who is to ride to the south-west and find Dyvim Slorm."
"I'll not forget," she said, "though I worry lest you succumb again to your old black ways."
"Fear for the moment-I'll worry about my own fate later."
"Then farewell, my lord, and be lucky."
"Farewell, Zarozinia. My love for you will give me more power even than this foul blade here." He spurred his horse through the gates and then they were riding for the Weeping Waste and a troubled future.

TWO
Dwarfed by the vastness of the softly turfed plateau which was the Weeping Waste, the place of eternal rains, the two horsemen drove their hard-pressed steeds through the drizzle.
A shivering desert warrior, huddled against the weather, saw them come towards him. He stared through the rain trying to make out details of the riders, then wheeled his stocky pony and rode swiftly back in the direction he had come. Within minutes he had reached a larger group of warriors attired like himself in furs and tasselled iron helmets. They carried short bone bows and quivers of long arrows fletched with hawk feathers. There were curved scimitars at their sides.
He exchanged a few words with his fellows and soon they were all lashing their horses towards the two riders.
"How much further lies the camp of Terarn Gashtek, Moonglum?" Elric's words were breathless, for both men had ridden for a day without halt "Not much further, Elric. We should be-look!" Moonglum pointed ahead. About ten riders came swiftly towards them. "Desert barbarians-the Flame Bringer's men. Prepare for a fight-they won't waste time parleying."
Stormbringer scraped from the scabbard and the heavy blade seemed to aid Elric's wrist as he raised it, so that it felt almost weightless.
Moonglum drew both his swords, holding the short one with the same hand with which he grasped his horse's reins.
The Eastern warriors spread out in a half circle as they rode down on the companions, yelling wild war-shouts. Elric reared his mount to a savage standstill and met the first rider with Stormbringer's point full in the man's throat. There was a stink like brimstone as it pierced flesh and the warrior drew a ghastly choking breath as he died, his eyes staring out in full realisation of his terrible fate-for Stormbringer drank souls as well as blood.
Elric cut savagely at another desertman, lopping off his sword arm and splitting his crested helmet and the skull beneath. Rain and sweat ran down his white, taut features and into his glowing crimson eyes, but he blinked it aside, half-fell in his saddle as he turned to defend himself against another howling scimitar, parried the sweep, slid his own runeblade down its length, turned the blade with a movement of his wrist and disarmed the warrior. Then he plunged his sword into the man's heart and the desert warrior yelled like a wolf at the moon, a long baying shout before Stormbringer took his soul.
Elric's face was twisted in self-loathing as he fought intently with superhuman strength. Moonglum stayed clear of the albino's sword for he knew its liking for the lives of Elric's friends.
Soon only one opponent was left. Elric disarmed him and had to hold his own greedy sword back from the man's throat.
Reconciled to the horror of his death, the man said something in a guttural tongue which Elric half-recog-nised. He searched his memory and realised that it was a language close to one of the many ancient tongues which, as a sorcerer, he had been required to learn years before.
He said in the same language: "Thou art one of the warriors of Terarn Gashtek the Flame Bringer."
"That is true. And you must be the White-faced Evil One of legends. I beg you to slay me with a cleaner
weapon than that which you hold."
"I do not wish to kill thee at all. We were coming hence to join Terarn Gashtek. Take us to him."
The man nodded hastily and clambered back on his horse.
"Who are you who speaks the High Tongue of our people?"
"I am called Elric of Melnibone-dost thou know the name?"
The warrior shook his head. "No, but the High Tongue has not been spoken for generations, save by
shamans-yet you're no shaman but, by your dress, seem a warrior."
"We are both mercenaries. But speak no more. I will explain the rest to thy leader."
They left a jackal's feast behind them and followed the quaking Easterner in the direction he led them.
Fairly soon, the low-lying smoke of many camp-fires could be observed and at length they saw the
sprawling camp of the barbarian War Lord's mighty army.
The camp encompassed over a mile of the great plateau. The barbarians had erected skin tents on
rounded frames and the camp had the aspect of a large primitive town. Roughly in the centre was a much
larger construction, decorated with a motley assortment of gaudy silks and brocades.
Moonglum said in the Western tongue: "That must be Terarn Gashtek's dwelling. See, he has covered its
half-cured hides with a score of Eastern battle-flags." His face grew grimmer as he noted the torn
standard of Esh-mir, the lion-flag of Okara and the blood-soaked pen-nants of sorrowing Changshai.
The captured warrior led them through the squating ranks of barbarians who stared at them impassively
and muttered to one another. Outside Terarn Gashtek's tasteless dwelling was his great war-lance
decorated with more trophies of his conquests-the skulls and bones of Eastern princes and kings.
Elric said: "Such a one as this must not be allowed to destroy the reborn civilisation of the Young
Kingdoms."
"Young kingdoms are resilient," remarked Moonglum, "but it is when they are old that they fall-and it is
of-ten Terarn Gashtek's kind that tear them down."
"While I live he shall not destroy Karlaak-nor reach as far as Bakshaan."
Moonglum said: "Though, in my opinion, he'd be welcome to Nadsokor. The City of Beggars deserves
such visitors as the Flame Bringer. If we fail, Elric, only the sea will stop him-and perhaps not that."
"With Dyvim Slorm's aid-we shall stop him. Let us
hope Karlaak's messenger finds my kinsman soon."
"If he does not we shall be hard put to fight off half a million warriors, my friend."
The barbarian shouted: "Oh, Conqueror-mighty Flame Bringer-there are men here who wish to speak
with you."
A slurred voice snarled: "Bring them in."
They entered the badly smelling tent which was lighted by a fire flickering in a circle of stones. A gaunt
man, carelessly dressed in bright captured clothing, lounged on a wooden bench. There were several
women in the tent, one of whom poured wine into a heavy golden goblet which he held out.
Terarn Gashtek pushed the woman aside, knocking her sprawling and regarded the newcomers. His face
was almost as fleshless as the skulls hanging outside his tent. His cheeks were sunken and his slanting
eyes narrow beneath thick brows.
"Who are these?"
"Lord, I know not-but between them they slew ten of our men and would have slain me."
"You deserved no more than death if you let yourself be disarmed. Get out-and find a new sword quickly
or I'll let the shamans have your vitals for divination." The man slunk away.
Terarn Gashtek seated himself upon the bench once more.
"So, you slew ten of my bloodletters, did yon, and came here to boast to me about it? What's the explana-
tion?"
"We but defended ourselves against your warriors—we sought no quarrel with them." Elric now spoke the cruder tongue as best he could.

"You defended yourselves fairly well, I grant you. We reckon three soft-living house-dwellers to one of us. You are a Westerner, I can tell that, though your silent friend has the face of an Elwherite. Have you come from the East or the West?"

"The West," Elric said, "we are free travelling war-riors, hiring our swords to those who'll pay or promise us good booty."

"Are all Western warriors as skilful as you?" Terarn Gashtek could not hide his sudden realisation that he might have under-estimated the men he hoped to con-quer.

"We are a little better than most," lied Moonglum, "but not much."

"What of sorcery—is there much strong magic here?"

"No," said Elric, "the art has been lost to most."

The barbarian's thin mouth twisted into a grin, half of relief, half of triumph. He nodded his head, reached into his gaudy silks and produced a small black and white bound cat. He began to stroke its back. It wriggled but could do no more than hiss at its captor. "Then we need not worry," he said.

"Now, why did you come here? I could have you tor-tured for days for what you did, slaying ten of my best outriders."

"We recognised the chance of enriching ourselves by aiding you, Lord Flame Bringer," said Elric. "We could show you the richest towns, lead you to ill-defended cit-ies that would take little time to fall. Will you enlist us?"

"I've need of such men as you, true enough. I'll enlist you readily—but mark this, I'll not trust you until you've proved loyal to me. Find yourselves quarters now—and come to the feast, tonight. There I'll be able to show you something of the power I hold—the power which will smash the strength of the West and lay it waste for ten thousand miles."

"Thanks," said Elric. "I'll look forward to tonight."

They left the tent and wandered through the haphaz-ard collection of tents and cooking fires, wagons and ani-mals. There seemed little food, but wine was in abun-dance and the taut, hungry stomachs of the barbarians were placated with that.

They stopped a warrior and told him of Terarn Gashtek's orders to them. The warrior sullenly led them to a tent.

"Here—it was shared by three of the men you slew. It is yours by right of battle, as are the weapons and booty inside."

"We're richer already," grinned Elric with feigned de-light.

In the privacy of the tent, which was less clean than Terarn Gashtek's, they debated.

"I feel uncommonly uncomfortable," said Moonglum, "surrounded by this treacherous horde. And every time I think of what they made of Eshmir, I itch to slay more of them. What now?"

"We can do nothing now—let us wait until tonight and see what develops." Elric sighed. "Our task seems impossible—I have never seen so great a horde as this."

"They are invincible as they are," said Moonglum.

"Even without Drinij Bara's sorcery to tumble down the walls of cities, no single nation could withstand them and, with the Western Nations squabbling among them-selves, they could never unite in time. Civilisation itself is threatened. Let us pray for inspiration—your dark gods are at least sophisticated, Elric, and we must hope that they'll resent the barbarian's intrusion as much as we do."

"They play strange games with their human pawns," Elric replied, "and who knows what they plan?"

Terarn Gashtek's smoke-wreathed tent had been fur-ther lighted by rush torches when Elric and
Moonglum swaggered in, and the feast, consisting primarily of wine, was already in progress.
"Welcome, my friends," shouted the Flame Bringer, waving his goblet. "These are my captains—come, join them!"

Elric had never seen such an evil-looking group of barbarians. They were all half-drunk and, like their leader, had draped a variety of looted articles of clothing about themselves. But their swords were their own.

Room was made on one of the benches and they accepted wine which they drank sparingly.

"Bring in our slave I," yelled Terarn Gashtek. "Bring in Drinij Bara our pet sorcerer." Before him on the table lay the bound and struggling cat and beside it an iron blade.

Grinning warriors dragged a morose-faced man close to the fire and forced him to kneel before the barbarian chief. He was a lean man and he glowered at Terarn Gashtek and the little cat. Then his eyes saw the iron blade and his gaze faltered.

"What do you want with me now?" he said sullenly.

"Is that the way to address your master, spell-maker? Still, no matter. We have guests to entertain—men who have promised to lead us to fat merchant cities. We require you to do a few minor tricks for them."

"I'm no petty conjurer. You cannot ask this of one of the greatest sorcerers in the world!"

"We do not ask—we order. Come, make the evening lively. What do you need for your magic-making? A few slaves—the blood of virgins? We shall arrange it."

"I'm no mumbling shaman—I need no such trappings."

Suddenly the sorcerer saw Elric. The albino felt the man's powerful mind tentatively probing his own. He had been recognised as a fellow sorcerer. Would Drinij Bara betray him?

Elric was tense, waiting to be denounced. He leaned back in his chair and, as he did so, made a sign with his hand which would be recognised by Western sorcerers—would the Easterner know it?

He did. For a moment he faltered, glancing at the barbarian leader. Then he turned away and began to make new passes in the air, muttering to himself.

The beholders gasped as a cloud of golden smoke formed near the roof and began to metamorphose into the shape of a great horse bearing a rider which all recognised as Terarn Gashtek. The barbarian leader leaned forward, glaring at the image.

"What's this?"

A map showing great land areas and seas seemed to unroll beneath the horse's hooves. "The Western lands," cried Drinij Bara. "I make a prophecy."

"What is it?"

The ghostly horse began to trample the map. It split and flew into a thousand smoky pieces. Then the image of the horseman faded, also, into fragments.

"Thus will the mighty Flame Bringer rend the bountiful nations of the West," shouted Drinij Bara.

The barbarians cheered exultantly, but Elric smiled thinly. The Eastern wizard was mocking Terarn Gashtek and his men.

The smoke formed into a golden globe which seemed to blaze and vanish.

Terarn Gashtek laughed. "A good trick, magic-maker—and a true prophecy. You have done your work well. Take him back to his kennel!"

As Drinij Bara was dragged away, he glanced questioningly at Elric but said nothing.

Later that night, as the barbarians drank themselves into a stupor, Elric and Moonglum slipped out of the tent and made their way to the place where Drinij Bara was imprisoned.

They reached the small hut and saw that a warrior stood guard at the entrance. Moonglum produced a skin of wine and, pretending drunkenness, staggered towards the man. Elric stayed where he was.

"What do you want, Outlander?" growled the guard.

"Nothing my friend, we are trying to get back to our own tent, that's all. Do you know where it is?"
"How should I know?"
"True—how should you? Have some wine—it's good—from Terarn Gashtek's own supply."
The man extended a hand. "Let's have it."
Moonglum took a swig of the wine. "No, I've changed my mind. It's too good to waste on common warriors."
"Is that so?" The warrior took several paces towards Moonglum. "We'll find out, won't we? And maybe we'll mix some of your blood with it to give it flavour, my little friend."
Moonglum backed away. The warrior followed.
Elric ran softly towards the tent and ducked into it to find Drinij Bara, wrists bound, lying on a pile of uncured hides. The sorcerer looked up.
"You—what do you want?"
"We've come to aid you, Drinij Bara."
"As a fellow sorcerer, I thought I'd help you," Elric said.
"I thought you were that. But, in my land, sorcerers are not so friendly to one another—the opposite, in fact."
"I'll tell you the truth—we need your aid to halt the barbarian's bloody progress. We have a common enemy. If we can help you regain your soul, will you help?"
"Help—of course. All I do is plan the way I'll avenge myself. But for my sake be careful—if he suspects that you're here to aid me, he'll slay the cat and slay us, too."
"We'll try to bring the cat to you. Will that be what you need?"
"Yes. We must exchange blood, the cat and I, and my soul will then pass back into my own body."
"Very well, I'll try to—" Elric turned, hearing voices outside. "What's that?"
The sorcerer replied fearfully. "It must be Terarn Gashtek—he comes every night to taunt me."
"Where's the guard?" The barbarian's harsh voice came closer as he entered the little tent. "What's . . . ?"
He saw Elric standing above the sorcerer.
His eyes were puzzled and wary. "What are you doing here, Westerner—and what have you done with the guard?"
"Guard?" said Elric, "I saw no guard. I was looking for my own tent and heard this cur cry out, so I entered. I was curious, anyway, to see such a great sorcerer clad in filthy rags and bound so."
Terarn Gashteck scowled. "Any more of such unwary curiosity my friend, and you'll be discovering what your own heart looks like. Now, get hence—we ride on in the morning."
Elric pretended to flinch and stumbled hurriedly from the tent. A lone man in the livery of an Official Messenger of Karlaak goaded his horse southwards. The mount galloped over the crest of a hill and the messenger saw a village ahead. Hurriedly he rode into it, shouting at the first man he saw.
"Quickly, tell me—know you ought of Dyvim Slorm and his Imrryrian mercenaries? Have they passed this way?"
"Aye—a week ago. They went towards Rignariom by Jadmar's border, to offer their services to the Vilmirian Pretender."
"Were they mounted or on foot?"
"Both."
"Thanks, friend," cried the messenger behind him and galloped out of the village in the direction of Rignariom.
The messenger from Karlaak rode through the night—rode along a recently made trail. A large force had passed that way. He prayed that it had been Dyvim Slorm and his Imrryrian warriors.
In the sweet-smelling garden city of Karlaak, the atmosphere was tense as the citizens waited for news they knew they could not expect for some time. They were relying on both Elric and on the messenger. If only one were successful, there would be no hope for
them. Both had to be successful. Both.

THREE

The tumbling sound of moving men cut through the weeping morning and the hungry voice of Terarn Gashtek lashed at them to hurry.

Slaves packed up his tent and threw it into a wagon. He rode forward and wrenched his tall war-lance from the soft earth, wheeled his horse and rode westwards, his captains, Elric and Moonglum among them, behind him.

Speaking the Western tongue, Elric and Moonglum debated their problem. The barbarian was expecting them to lead him to his prey, his outriders were covering wide distances so that it would be impossible to lead him past a settlement. They were in a quandary for it would be disgraceful to sacrifice another township to give Karlaak a few days’ grace, yet...

A little later two whooping outriders came galloping up to Terarn Gashtek.
"A town, lord! A small one and easy to take!"
"At last-this will do to test our blades and see how easy Western flesh is to pierce. Then we’ll aim at a bigger target." He turned to Elric: "Do you know this town?"
"Where does it lie?" asked Elric thickly.
"A dozen miles to the south-west." replied the outrider.

In spite of the fact that the town was doomed, Elric felt almost relieved. They spoke of the town of Gorjhan. "I know it," he said.

Cavim the Saddler, riding to deliver a new set of horse furniture to an outlying farm, saw the distant riders, their bright helmets caught by a sudden beam of sunlight. That the riders came from off the Weeping Waste was undoubtable-and he recognised menace in their massed progress.

He turned his mount about and rode with the speed of fear, back the way he had come to the town of Gorjhan.

The flat, hard mud of the street trembled beneath the thudding hooves of Cavim's horse and his high, excited shout knifed through shuttered windows.
"Raiders come! 'Ware the raiders!"

Within a quarter of an hour, the head-men of the town had met in hasty conference and debated whether to run or to fight. The older men advised their neighbours to flee the raiders, other younger men preferred to stay ready, armed to meet a possible attack. Some argued that their town was too poor to attract any raider.

The townspeople of Gorjhan debated and quarrelled, and the first wave of raiders came screaming to their walls.

With the realisation that there was no time for further argument came the realisation of their doom, and they ran to the ramparts with their pitiful weapons.

Terarn Gashtek roared through the milling barbarians who churned the mud around Gorjhan: "Let's waste no time in siege. Fetch the sorcerer!"

They dragged Drinij Bara forward. From his garments, Terarn Gashtek produced the small black cat and held an iron blade at its throat.
"Work your spell, sorcerer, and tumble the walls quickly."

The sorcerer scowled, his eyes seeking Elric, but the albino averted his own eyes and turned his horse away.

The sorcerer produced a handful of powder from his belt pouch and hurled it into the air where it became first a gas, then a flickering ball of flame and finally a face, a dreadful unhuman face, formed in the flame.
"Dag-Gadden the Destroyer," intoned Drinij Bara, "you are sworn to our ancient pact-will you obey me?"
"I must, therefore I will. What do you command?"
"That you obliterate the walls of this town and so leave the men inside naked, like crabs without their shells."
"My pleasure is to destroy and destroy I shall." The flaming face faded, altered, shrieked a searing course up-ward and became a blossoming scarlet canopy which hid the sky. Then it swept down over the town and, in the instant of its passing, the walls of Gorjhan groaned, crumbled and vanished.
Elric shuddered-if Dag-Gadden came to Karlaak, such would be their fate.
Triumphant, the barbarian battlemongers swept into the defenceless town.
Careful to take no part in the massacre, Elric and Moonglum were also helpless to aid the slaughtered townspeople. The sight of the senseless, savage blood-shed around them enervated them. They ducked into a small house which seemed so far untouched by the pil-laging barbarians. Inside they found three cowering chil-dren huddled around an older girl who clutched an old scythe in her soft hands. Shaking with fear, she prepared to stand them off.
"Do not waste our time, girl," Elric said, "or you'll be wasting your lives. Does this house have a loft?"
She nodded.
"Then get to it quickly. We'll make sure you're un-harmed."
They stayed in the house, hating to observe the slaughter-madness which had come upon the howling barbarians. They heard the dreadful sounds of carnage and smelled the stench of dead flesh and running blood.
A barbarian, covered in blood which was not his own, dragged a woman into the house by her hair. She made no attempt to resist, her face stunned by the horror she had witnessed.
Elric growled: "Find another nest, hawk-we've made this our own."
The man said: "There's room enough here for what I want."
Then, at last, Elric's clenched muscles reacted almost in spite of him. His right hand swung over to his left hip and the long fingers locked around Stormbringer's black hilt. The blade leapt from the scabbard as Elric stepped forward and, his crimson eyes blazing his sick-ened hatred, he smashed his sword down through the man's body. Unnecessarily, he clove again, hacking the barbarian in two. The woman remained where she lay, conscious but unmoving.
Elric picked up her inert body and passed it gently to Moonglum. "Take her upstairs with the others," he said brusquely.
The barbarians had begun to fire part of the town, their slaughtering all but done. Now they looted. Elric stepped out of the doorway.
There was precious little for them to loot but, still hungry for violence, they spent their energy on smash-ing inanimate things and setting fire to the broken, pil-laged dwellings. Stormbringer dangled loosely in Elric's hand as he looked at the blazing town. His face was a mask of shadow and frisking light as the fire threw up still long-er tongues of flame to the misty sky. Around him, barbarians squabbled over the pitiful booty; and occasionally a woman's scream cut above the other sounds, intermingled with rough shouts and the clash of metal. Then he heard voices which were pitched differently to those in the immediate vicinity. The accents of the reavers mingled with a new tone-a whining, pleading tone. A group led by Terarn Gashtek came into view through the smoke.
Terarn Gashtek held something bloody in his hand-a human hand, severed at the wrist-and behind him swaggered several of his captains holding a naked old man between them. Blood ran over his body and gushed from his ruined arm, spurting sluggishly.
Terarn Gashtek frowned when he saw Elric. Then he shouted: "Now Westerner, you shall see how we placate our Gods with better gifts than meal and sour milk as this swine once did. He'll soon be dancing a pretty measure, I'll warrant-won't you, Lord Priest?"
The whining note went out of the old man's voice then and he stared with fever-bright eyes at Elric. His voice rose to a frenzied and high-pitched shriek which was curiously repellent.
"You dogs can howl over me!" he spat, "but Mirath and T'aargano will be revenged for the ruin of their priest and their temple—you have brought flame here and you shall die by flame." He pointed the bleeding stump of his arm at Elric—"And you—you are a traitor and have been one in many causes, I can see it written in you. Though now ... You are—" the priest drew breath...

Elric licked his lips.
"I am what I am," he said, "And you are nothing but an old man soon to die. Your gods cannot harm us, for we do not pay them any respect. I'll listen no more to your senile meanderings!"

There was in the old priest's face all the knowledge of his past torment and the torment which was to come. He seemed to consider this and then was silent.

"Save your breath for screaming," said Terarn Gashtek to the uncomprehending priest. And then Elric said: "It's bad luck to kill a priest, Flame Bringer!"

"You seem weak of stomach, my friend. His sacrifice to our own gods will bring us good luck, fear not."

Elric turned away. As he entered the house again, a wild shriek of agony seared out of the night and the laughter which followed was not pleasant.

Later, as the still burning houses lit the night, Elric and Moonglum, carrying heavy sacks on their shoulders, clasping a woman each, moved with a simulation of drunkenness to the edge of the camp. Moonglum left the sacks and the women with Elric and went back, re-turning soon with three horses. They opened the sacks to allow the children to climb out and watched the silent women mount the horses, aiding the children to clamber up. Then they galloped away.

"Now," said Elric savagely, "we must work our plan tonight, whether the messenger reached Dyvim Slorm or not. I could not bear to witness another such sword-quenching."

Terarn Gashtek had drunk himself insensible. He lay sprawled in an upper room of one of the unburned houses.

Elric and Moonglum crept towards him. While Elric watched to see that he was undisturbed, Moonglum knelt beside the barbarian leader and, lightfingered, cautiously reached inside the man's garments. He smiled in self-approval as he lifted out the squirming cat and re-placed it with a stuffed rabbit-skin he had earlier prepared for the purpose. Holding the animal tight, he arose and nodded to Elric. Together, warily, they left the house and made their way through the chaos of the camp.

"I ascertained that Drinij Bara lies in the large wagon," Elric told his friend. "Quickly, now, the main danger's over."

Moonglum said: "When the cat and Drinij Bara have exchanged blood and the sorcerer's soul is back in his body—what then, Elric?"

"Together, our powers may serve at least to hold the barbarians back, but—" he broke off as a large group of warriors came weaving towards them.

"It's the Westerner and his little friend," laughed one.

"Where are you off to, comrades?"

Elric sensed their mood. The slaughter of the day had not completely satiated their blood-lust. They were looking for trouble.

"Nowhere in particular," he replied. The barbarians lurched around them, encircling them.

"We've heard much of your straight blade, stranger," grinned their spokesman, "and I'd a mind to test it against a real weapon." He grabbed his own scimitar out of his belt. "What do you say?"

"I'd spare you that," said Elric coolly.

"You are generous—but I'd rather you accepted my in-vitation."

"Let us pass," said Moonglum.

The barbarians' faces hardened. "Speak you so to the conquerors of the world?" said the leader. Moonglum took a step back and drew his sword, the cat squirming in his left hand.

"We'd best get this done," said Elric to his friend. He tugged his runeblade from its scabbard. The sword sang a soft and mocking tune and the barbarians heard it. They were disconcerted.
"Well?" said Elric, holding the half-sentient blade out.
The barbarian who had challenged him looked uncertain of what to do. Then he forced himself to shout:
"Clean iron can withstand any sorcery," and launched himself forward.
Elric, grateful for the chance to take further vengeance, blocked his swing, forced the scimitar back and
aimed a blow which sliced the man's torso just above the hip. The barbarian screamed and died.
Moonglum, dealing with a couple more, killed one but another came in swiftly and his sweeping sword
sliced the little Eastlander's left shoulder. He howled-and dropped the cat. Elric stepped in, slew
Moonglum's opponent, Stormbringer wailing a triumphant dirge. The rest of the barbarians turned and
ran off.
"How bad is your wound?" gasped Elric, but Moonglum was on his knees staring through the gloom.
"Quick, Elric-can you see the cat? I dropped it in the struggle. If we lose it-we too are lost."
Frantically, they began to hunt through the camp.
But they were unsuccessful, for the cat, with the dexterity of its kind, had hidden itself.
A few moments later they heard the sounds of uproar coming from the house which Terarn Gashtek had
commandeered.
"He's discovered that the cat's been stolen!" exclaimed Moonglum. "What do we do now?"
"I don't know-keep searching and hope he does not suspect us."
They continued to hunt, but with no result. While they searched, several barbarians came up to them.
One of them said:
"Our leader wishes to speak with you."
"Why?"
"He'll inform you of that. Come on."
Reluctantly, they went with the barbarians to be confronted by a raging Terarn Gashtek. He clutched the
stuffed rabbit skin in one claw-like hand and his face was warped with fury.
"My hold over the sorcerer has been stolen from me," he roared. "What do you know of it?"
"I don't understand," said Elric.
"The cat is missing-I found this rag in its place. You were caught talking to Drinij Bara recently, I think
you were responsible."
"We know nothing of this," said Moonglum.
Terarn Gashtek growled: "The camp's in disorder, it will take a day to re-organise my men-once loosed
like this they will obey no one. But when I've restored order, I shall question the whole camp. If you tell
the truth, then you will be released, but meanwhile you will be given all the time you need to speak with
the sorcerer." He jerked his head. "Take them away, disarm them, bind them and throw them in Drinij
Bara's kennel."
As they were led away, Elric muttered: "We must escape and find that cat, but meanwhile we need not
waste this opportunity to confer with Drinij Bara."
Drinij Bara said in the darkness: "No, Brother Sorcerer, I will not aid you. I will risk nothing until the
cat and I are united."
"But Terarn Gashtek cannot threaten you any more."
"What if he recaptures the cat-what then?"
Elric was silent. He shifted his bound body uncomfortably on the hard boards of the wagon. He was
about to continue his attempts at persuasion when the awning was thrown aside and he saw another
trussed figure thrown towards them. Through the blackness he said in the Eastern tongue: "Who are
you?"
The man replied in the language of the West: "I do not understand you."
"Are you, then, a Westerner?" asked Elric in the common speech.
"Yes-I am an Official Messenger from Karlaak. I was captured by these odorous jackals as I returned to
the city."
"What? Are you the man we sent to Dyvim Slorm, my kinsman? I am Elric of Melnibone."
"My lord, are we all, then prisoners? Oh, gods-Kar-laak is truly lost."
"Did you get to Dyvim Slorm?"
"Aye-I caught up with him and his band. Luckily they were nearer to Karlaak than we suspected."
"And what was his answer to my request?"
"He said that a few young ones might be ready, but even with sorcery to aid him it would take some time to get to the Dragon Isle. There is a chance."
"A chance is all we need-but it will be no good unless we accomplish the rest of our plan. Somehow Drinij Bara's soul must be regained so that Terarn Gashtek cannot force him to defend the barbarians. There is one idea I have-a memory of an ancient kin-ship that we of Melnibone had for a being called Meer-clar. Thank the gods that I discovered those drugs in Troos and I still have my strength. Now, I must call my sword to me."

He closed his eyes and allowed his mind and body first to relax completely and then concentrate on one single thing-the sword Stormbringer.

For years the evil symbiosis had existed between man and sword and the old attachments lingered. He cried: "Stormbringer! Stormbringer, unite with your brother! Come, sweet runeblade, come hell-forged kinslayer, your master needs thee ...

Outside, it seemed that a wailing wind had suddenly sprung up. Elric heard shouts of fear and a whistling sound. Then the covering of the wagon was sliced apart to let in the starlight and the moaning blade quivered in the air over his head. He struggled upwards, already feeling nauseated at what he was about to do, but he was reconciled that he was not, this time, guided by self-interest but by the necessity to save the world from the barbarian menace.

"Give me thy strength, my sword," he groaned as his bound hands grasped the hilt. "Give me thy strength and let us hope it is for the last time."

The blade writhed in his hands and he felt an awful sensation as its power, the power stolen vampire-like, from a hundred brave men, flowed into his shuddering body.

He became possessed of a peculiar strength which was not by any means wholly physical. His white face twisted as he concentrated on controlling the new power and the blade, both of which threatened to possess him en-tirely. He snapped his bonds and stood up.

Barbarians were even now running towards the wagon. Swiftly he cut the leather ropes binding the others and, unconscious of the nearing warriors, called a different name.

He spoke a new tongue, an alien tongue which nor-mally he could not remember. It was a language taught to the Sorcerer Kings of Melnibone, Elric's ancestors, even before the building of Imrryr, the Dreaming City, over ten thousand years previously.

"Meerclar of the Cats, it is I, your kinsman, Elric of Melnibone, last of the line that made vows of friendship with you and your people. Do you hear me, Lord of the Cats?"

Far beyond the Earth, dwelling within a world set apart from the physical laws of space and time which governed the planet, glowing in a deep warmth of blue and amber, a manlike creature stretched itself and yawned, displaying tiny, pointed teeth. It pressed its head languidly against its furry shoulder-and listened.

The voice it heard was not that of one of its people, the kind he loved and protected. But he recognised the language.

He smiled to himself as remembrance came and he felt the pleasant sensation of fellowship. He remem-bered a race which, unlike other humans (whom he dis-dained) had shared his qualities-a race which, like him, loved pleasure, cruelty and sophistication for its own sake. The race of Melniboneans.
Meerclar, Lord of the Cats, Protector of the Feline Kind, projected himself gracefully towards the source of the voice, "How may I aid thee?" he purred.
"We seek one of your folk, Meerclar, who is some-where close to here."
"Yes, I sense him. What do you want of him?"
"Nothing which is his-but he has two souls, one of them not his own."
"That is so-his name is Fiarshern of the great family of Trrechoww. I will call him. He will come to me."
Outside, the barbarians were striving to conquer their fear of the supernatural events taking place in the wagon. Terarn Gashtek cursed them: "There are five hundred thousand of us and a few of them. Take them now!"

His warriors began to move cautiously forward. Fiarshern, the cat, heard a voice which it knew instinctively to be that of one which it would be foolish to disobey. It ran swiftly towards the source of that voice.
"Look-the cat-there it is. Seize it quickly."
Two of Terarn Gashtek's men jumped forward to do his bidding, but the little cat eluded them and leaped lightly into the wagon.
"Give the human back its soul, Fiarshern," said Meer-clar softly. The cat moved towards its human master and dug its delicate teeth into the sorcerer's veins.
A moment later Drinij Bara laughed wildly. "My soul is mine again. Thank you, great Cat Lord. Let me repay you!"
"There is no need," smiled Meerclar mockingly, "and, anyway, I perceive that your soul is already bartered. Goodbye, Elric of Melnibone. I was pleased to answer your call, though I see that you no longer follow the an-cient pursuits of your fathers. Still, for the sake of old loyalties I do not begrudge you this service. Farewell, I go back to a warmer place than this inhospitable one."
The Lord of the Cats faded and returned to the world of blue and amber warmth where he once more resumed his interrupted sleep.
"Come, Brother Sorcerer," cried Drinij Bara exul-tantly. "Let us take the vengeance which is ours."
He and Elric sprang from the wagon, but the two oth-ers were not quite so quick to respond. Terarn Gashtek and his men confronted them. Many had bows with long arrows fitted to them.
"Shoot them down swiftly," yelled the Flame Bringer. "Shoot them now before they have time to summon fur-ther demons!"
A shower of arrows whistled towards them. Drinij Bara smiled, spoke a few words as he moved his hands almost carelessly. The arrows stopped in midflight, turned back and each uncannily found the throat of the man who had shot it. Terarn Gashtek gasped and wheeled back, pushing past his men and, as he retreated, shouted for them to attack the four.
Driven by the knowledge that if they fled they would be doomed, the great mass of barbarians closed in.
Dawn was bringing light to the cloud-ripped sky as Moonglum looked upwards. "Look, Elric," he shouted pointing.
"Only five," said the albino. "Only five-but perhaps enough."
He parried several lashing blades on his own sword and, although he was possessed of superhuman strength, all the power seemed to have left the sword so that it was only as useful as an ordinary blade. Still fighting, he relaxed his body and felt the power leave him, flowing back into Stormbringer. Again the runeblade began to whine and thirstily sought the throats and hearts of the savage barbarians. Drinij Bara had no sword, but he did not need one, he was using subtler means to defend himself. All around him were the gruesome results, boneless masses of flesh and sinew.
The two sorcerers and Moonglum and the messenger forced their way through the half-insane barbarians who
were desperately attempting to overcome them. In the confusion it was impossible to work out a coherent plan of action. Moonglum and the messenger grabbed scimitars from the corpses of the barbarians and joined in the battle.

Eventually, they had reached the outer limits of the camp. A whole mass of barbarians had fled, spurring their mounts westwards. Then Elric saw Terarn Gashtek, holding a bow. He saw the Flame Bringer's intention and shouted a warning to his fellow sorcerer who had his back to the barbarian. Drinij Bara, yelling some disturbing incantation, half-turned, broke off, attempted to begin another spell, but the arrow pierced his eye.

He screamed: "No!"

Then he died.

Seeing his ally slain, Elric paused and stared at the sky and the great wheeling beasts which he recognised.

Dyvim Slorm, son of Elric's cousin Dyvim Tvar the Dragon Master, had brought the legendary dragons of Imrryr to aid his kinsman. But most of the huge beasts slept, and would sleep for another century-only five dragons had been aroused. As yet, Dyvim Slorm could do nothing for fear of harming Elric and his comrades.

Terarn Gashtek, too, had seen the magnificent beasts. His grandiose plans of conquest were already fading and, thwarted, he ran towards Elric.

"You white-faced filth," he howled, "you have been responsible for all this-and you will pay the Flame Bringer's price!"

Elric laughed as he brought up Stormbringer to protect himself from the incensed barbarian. He pointed to the sky: "These, too, can be called Flame Bringers, Terarn Gashtek-and are better named than thou!"

Then he plunged the evil blade full into Terarn Gashtek's body and the barbarian gave a choking moan as his soul was drawn from him.

"Destroyer, I may be, Elric of Melnibone," he gasped, "but my way was cleaner than yours. May you and all you hold dear be cursed for eternity!"

Elric laughed, but his voice shook slightly as he stared at the barbarian's corpse. "I've rid myself of such curses once before, my friend. Yours will have little effect, I think." He paused. "By Arioch, I hope I'm right. I'd thought my fate cleansed of doom and curses, but perhaps I was wrong...."

The huge horde of barbarians were nearly all mounted now and fleeing westwards. They had to be stopped for, at the pace they were travelling, they would soon reach Karlaak and only the Gods knew what they would do when they got to the unprotected city.

Above him, he heard the flapping of thirty-foot wings and scented the familiar smell of the great flying reptiles which had pursued him years before when he had led a reaver fleet on the attack of his home-city. Then he heard the curious notes of the Dragon Horn and saw that Dyvim Slorm was seated on the back of the leading beast, a long spearlike goad in his gauntleted right hand.

The dragon spiralled downward and its great bulk came to rest on the ground thirty feet away, its leathery wings folding back along its length. The Dragon Master waved to Elric.

"Greetings, King Elric, we barely managed to arrive in time I see."

"Time enough, kinsman," smiled Elric. "It is good to see the son of Dyvim Tvar again. I was afraid you might not answer my plea."

"Old scores were forgotten at the Battle of Bakshaan when my father Dyvim Tvar died aiding you in the siege of Nikorn's fortress. I regret only the younger beasts were ready to be awakened. You'll remember the others were used but a few years past."

"I remember," said Elric. "May I beg another favour Dyvim Slorm?"

"What is that?"
"Let me ride the chief dragon. I am trained in the arts of the Dragon Master and have good reason for riding against the barbarians—we were forced to witness in-sensate carnage a while ago and may, perhaps, pay them back in their own coinage."

Dyvim Slorm nodded and swung off his mount. The beast stirred restlessly and drew back the lips of its tapering snout to reveal teeth as thick as a man's arm, as long as a sword. Its forked tongue flickered and it turned its huge, cold eyes to regard Elric.

Elric sang to it in the old Melnibonean speech, took the goad and the Dragon Horn from Dyvim Slorm and carefully climbed into the high saddle at the base of the dragon's neck. He placed his booted feet into the great silver stirrups.

"Now, fly, dragon brother," he sang, "up, up and have your venom ready."

He heard the snap of displaced air as the wings began to beat and then the great beast was clear of the ground and soaring upwards into the grey and brooding sky. The other four dragons followed the first and, as he gained height, sounding specific notes on the horn to give them directions, he drew his sword from its scabbard.

Centuries before, Elric's ancestors had ridden their dragon steeds to conquer the whole of the Western World. There had been many more dragons in the Dragon Caves in those days. Now only a handful remained, and of those only the youngest had slept sufficiently long enough to be awakened. High in the wintry sky climbed the huge reptiles and Elric's long white hair and stained black cloak flew behind him as he sang the exultant Song of the Dragon Masters and urged his charges westwards.

Wild wind-horses soar the cloud-trails,
Unholy horn doth sound its blast,
You and we were first to conquer,
You and we shall be the last!

Thoughts of love, of peace, of vengeance even were lost in that reckless sweeping across the glowing skies which hung over that ancient Age of the Young Kingdoms. Elric, archetypal, proud and disdainful in his knowledge that even his deficient blood was the blood of the Sorcerer Kings of Melnibone, became detached.

He had no loyalties then, no friends and, if evil possessed him, then it was a pure, brilliant evil, untainted by human drivings. High soared the dragons until below them was the heaving black mass, marring the landscape, the fear-driven horde of barbarians who, in their ignorance, had sought to conquer the lands beloved of Elric of Melnibone.

"Ho, dragon brothers—loose your venom—burn—burn!
And in your burning cleanse the world!"

Stormbringer joined in the wild shout and, diving, the dragons swept across the sky, down upon the crazed barbarians, shooting streams of combustible venom which water could not extinguish, and the stink of charred flesh drifted upwards through the smoke and flame so that the scene became a scene of Hell—and proud Elric was a Lord of Demons reaping awful vengeance.

He did not gloat, for he had done only what was needed, that was all. He shouted no more but turned his dragon mount back and upward, sounding his horn and summoning the other reptiles to him. And as he climbed, the exultation left him and was replaced by cold horror.

"I am still a Melnibonean," he thought, "and cannot rid myself of what else I do. And, in my strength I am still weak, ready to use this cursed blade in any small emergency." With a shout of loathing, he flung the sword away, flung it into space. It screamed like a woman and went plummeting downwards towards the distant earth.

"There," he said, "It is done at last." Then, in calmer mood, he returned to where he had left his friends and guided his reptilian mount to the ground.
Dyvim Slorm said: "Where is the sword of your fore-fathers, King Elric?" But the albino did not answer, just thanked his kinsman for the loan of the dragon leader. Then they all remounted the dragons and flew back towards Karlaak to tell them the news.
Zarozinia saw her lord riding the first dragon and knew that Karlaak and the Western World were saved, the Eastern World avenged. His stance was proud but his face was grave as he went to meet her outside the city. She saw in him a return of an earlier sorrow which he had thought forgotten. She ran to him and he caught her in his arms, holding her close but saying nothing.
He bade farewell to Dyvim Slorm and his fellow Imrryrians and, with Moonglum and the messenger following at a distance, went into the city and thence to his house, impatient of the congratulations which the citizens showered upon him.
"What is it, my lord?" Zarozinia said as, with a sigh, he sprawled wearily upon the great bed. "Can speaking help?"
"I'm tired of swords and sorcery, Zarozinia, that is all. But at last I have rid myself once and for all of that hell-blade which I had thought my destiny to carry always."
"Stormbringer you mean?"
"What else?"
She said nothing. She did not tell him of the sword which, apparently of its own volition, had come screaming into Karlaak and passed into the armoury to hang, in its old place, in darkness there.
He closed his eyes and drew a long, sighing breath.
"Sleep well, my lord," she said softly. With tearful eyes and a sad mouth she lay herself down beside him.
She did not welcome the morning.

EPILOGUE

To Rescue Tanelorn...

In which we learn of the further adventures of Rackhir the Red Archer and other heroes and places Elric has hitherto encountered only in what he chooses to consider, his dreams...
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 slashing 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 Tane-lorn, 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 prin-ciple, 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 realised 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 look-ing 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 en-mies of Chaos and mightier than the Grey Lords?" Uroch said.

"Because Tanelorn is a city owing allegiance to nei-ther 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 defence 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-fletched arrows, Rackhir set off for the Sighing Desert.
From Nadsokor, South West through the land of Vil-mir, 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 inso-lent, 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 ap-proach 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 cen-turies, 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 Sigh-ing Desert? There was no city beyond Karlaak, which they had skirted, only the Signing Desert-and beyond that the edge of the world. Was that their destination? Were they heading, lemming-like, to their destruction?
Everyone hoped so, in their hate for the horrible horde.
Rackhir rode through the mournful wind of the Sigh-ing Desert, his face and eyes protected against the parti-cles 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 recognised Rackhir immediately, by his dress, beck-oned him into the cave, and disappeared back inside. Rackhir dismounted and led his horse to the cave en-trance and went in.
Lamsar was seated on a smooth rock. "You are wel-come, 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 sud-denly 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 Tane-lorn 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 dwell-ers 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. Memorise 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 human-ity always contains the power to dominate itself."
"A strange equation," said Rackhir.
"Aye-but memorise 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 realised 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 fol-lowed him. They went out of the cave-mouth but, in-stead 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 entertain-ment."

The two men thanked them graciously and accompa-nied 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 com-mence. 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, ex-cited-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 an-swer."
"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. Gordan!"

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.
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 increas-ing 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 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, mesmerised, 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 travellers 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 out-stretched.
"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 on to 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 re-minded 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 throne 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 out-wards 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 have 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, how-ever, 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 realised 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 trav-
ellers 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 travellers 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 world. 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 Ream 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, forever. 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. He 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-thai is the only truth."

"But what of this world? Barren as it is, it still has light and firm rock. You have not succeeded in reason-
ing 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, ac-cording 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 ar-row 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 world 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 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 will 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 careened across the grasslands of the North, screaming and singing behind the black-armoured horseman, their leader. Nearer and nearer they came to lonely Tane-lorn, 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 out-riders 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
Sigh-ing Desert. Three more days and the city would be en-gulfed 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 own, 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 defence of Tanelorn—a defence 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 hooves 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 Kaarlak, by the Weeping Waste, one of the nearest major cities to Tanelorn.

The messenger gasped: "I asked Kaarlak 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 mat-ter now—for the beggar army is not three days march
from Tanelorn and it would take two weeks for a Jad-marian force to reach us."
"And Rackhir?"
"I have heard nothing and he has not returned. I have the feeling he will not return. Tanelorn is doomed."
Rackhir and Lamsar bowed before the three small men who sat in the tent, but one of them said impa-
tiently: "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 realised 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, re-alised the situation and he said:
"In our pride, Lords, we have come to learn the sim-pler truths which are only truths—the truths which
you can teach us."

The speaker gave us a self-deprecating smile and re-plied: "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 mat-ter which concerns us—the protection of
our Tanelorn."

"We would not be so prideful as to interfere our own comments. We are not mighty intellects," the
speaker re-plied 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 learn-
ing—for it is the quiet man who observes and says little who sees the most. Therefore, though we realise
that you are not confident that your suggestions or help would be useful, none the less 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 every-thing 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 fel-lows 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 realised 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 defence 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 moun-tains. 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 Tane-lorn? 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 im-
mediately 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. 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 world 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 realise 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 world, 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 some-what 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 ar-rows left and it would have been useless against the air-fish to have shot them, for there were many of the fish.

But Lamsar laughed and spoke in a high-pitched, staccato speech. "Crackhor-pishtasta salaflar!"

Huge balls of flame materialised 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 an-chor 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 moun-tains. 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 signalled 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 a 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 Andlermaigne, but he doubted whether it would suc-cessfully 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 war-riors 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 dear 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-pomelled sword was
still gripped in his single hand and his soul was fleeing for Limbo as Uroch, too, was slaying fighting.

Then the Ships of Xerlerenes suddenly materialised 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 wagons and made themselves ready for war. Their black faces had a concen-
trated 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 bil-
lowing, the warrior crews straining over the side and keen for battle.

Then Narjhan summoned the Kyreneee.

Huge as a storm-cloud, black as its native Hell, the Kyreneee 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 Kyreneee.
The two masses met and there was an explosion which blinded the Red Archer with multi-coloured 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 poi-
on blackness from the body of the Kyreneee were flung
about, slaying those they touched before disappearing.
There was a terrible stink in the air—a smell of bum-ing, a smell of outraged elements which had never
been meant to meet.

The Kyreneee died, lashing about a wailing, while the flame elementals, dying or returning to their own
sphere, faded and vanished. The remaining bulk of the great Kyreneee 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 standings with their tridents or spears. 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 Xerlernes 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," pulled at the net to release her.

She stood up shakily, looking at Rackhir apprehensively. Rackhir smiled quite softly and said: "Come here, So-rana." 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.
For J. G. Ballard, whose enthusiasm for Eiric gave me the encouragement to begin this particular book, my first attempt at a full-length novel, and for Jim Cawthorn, whose illustrations based on my ideas in turn gave me inspiration for certain scenes in this book, and for Dave Britten, who kept the magazines in which the serial first appeared and who kindly loaned them to me so that I could restore this novel to its original shape and length.

STORMBRINGER

Prologue

There came a time when there was great movement upon the Earth and above it, when the destiny of Men and Gods was hammered out upon the forge of Fate, when monstrous wars were brewed and mighty deeds were designed. And there rose up in this time, which was called the Age of the Young Kingdoms, heroes. Greatest of these heroes was a doom-driven adventurer who bore a crooning rune blade that he loathed.

His name was Brie of Melnibone, king of ruins, lord of a scattered race that had once ruled the ancient world. Eiric, sorcerer and swordsman, slayer of kin, despoiler of his homeland, white-faced albino, last of his line.

Eiric, who had come to Kariaak by the Weeping Waste and had married a wife in whom he found some peace, some surcease from the torment in him.

And Eiric, who had within him a greater destiny than he knew, now dwelt in Kariaak with Zarozinia, his wife, and his sleep was troubled, his dream dark, one brooding night in the Month of the Anemone.

BOOK ONE

Dead God's Homecoming

In which, at long last, Eric's fate begins to be revealed to
hhn as the forces of Law and Chaos gather strength for the final battle which will decide the future of Eiric's world...

One

Above the rolling earth great clouds tumbled down and bolts of lightning charged groundwards to slash the midnight black, split trees in twain and sear through roofs that cracked and broke.

The dark mass of forest trembled with the shock and out of it crept six hunched, unhuman figures who paused to stare beyond the low hills towards the outline of a city. It was a city of squat walls and slender spires, of graceful towers and domes; and it had a name which the leader of the creatures knew. Kariaak by the Weeping Waste it was called.

Not of natural origin, the storm was ominous. It groaned around the city of Kariaak as the creatures skulked past the open gates and made their way through shadows towards the elegant palace where Eiric slept. The leader raised an axe of black iron in its clawed hand. The group came to a stealthy halt and regarded the sprawling palace which lay on a hill surrounded by languorously-scented gardens. The earth shook as lightning lashed it and thunder prowled across the turbulent sky.

"Chaos has aided us in this matter," the leader grunted.

"Sec-already the guards fall in magic slumber and our entrance is thus made simple. The Lords of Chaos are good to their servants."

He spoke the truth. Some supernatural force had been at work and the warriors guarding Eiric's palace had dropped to the ground, their snores echoing the thunder. The servants of Chaos crept past the prone guards, into the main courtyard and from there into the darkened palace. Unerringly they climbed twisting staircases, moved softly along gloomy corridors, to arrive at length outside the room where Eiric and his wife lay in uneasy sleep.

As the leader laid a hand upon the door, a voice cried out

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from within the room: "What's this? What things of heU dis-
rupt my rest?

"He sees list" sharply whispered one of the creatures. "No," the leader said, "he sleeps—but such a sorcerer as this Eiric is not so easily lulled into a stupor. We had best make speed and do our work, for if he wakes it will be the harder!"

He twisted the handle and eased the door open, his axe half raised. Beyond the bed, heaped with tumbled furs and silks, lightning gashed the night again, showing the white face of the albino close to that of his dark-haired wife.

Even as they entered, he rose stiffly in the bed and his crimson eyes opened, staring out at them. For a moment the eyes were glazed and then the albino forced himself awake, shouting: "Begone, you creatures of my dreams!"

The leader cursed and leaped forward, but he had been instructed not to slay this man. He raised the axe threateningly.

"Silence—your guards cannot aid you!"

Eiric jumped from the bed and grasped the thing's wrist, his face close to the fanged muzzle. Because of his albinism he was physically weak and required magic to give him strength. But so quickly did he move, that he had wrested the axe from the creature's hand and smashed the shaft between its eyes. Snarling, it fell back, but its comrades jumped forward. There were five of them, huge muscles moving beneath their furred skins.

Eiric clove the skull of the first as others grappled with him. His body was spattered with the thing's blood and brains and he gasped in disgust at the fetid stuff. He managed to wrench his arm away and bring the axe up and down into the collarbone of another. But then he felt his legs gripped and he fell, confused but still battling. Then there came a great blow on his head and pain blazed through him. He made an effort to rise, failed and fell back insensible.

Thunder and lightning still disturbed the night when, with throbbing head, he awoke and got slowly to his feet using a bedpost as support. He stared dazedly around him.

Zarozinia was gone. The only other figure in the room was the stiff corpse of the beast he had killed. His black-haired girl-wife had been abducted.
Shaking, he went to the door and flung it open, calling for his guards, but none answered him.

His runesword Stonnbnnger hung in the city's armoury

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and would take time to get His throat tight with pain and

•nwf, he ran down the corridors and stairways, dazed with anxiety, trying to grasp the implications of his wife's disappearance.

Above (he palace, thunder still crashed, eddying about in the noisy night The palace seemed deserted and he had the sodden feeling that he was completely alone, mat he had been abandoned. But as be ran out into the main courtyard and saw me insensible guards he realised at once that their

•lumber could not be natural. Realisation was coming even as he ran through the gardens, through the gates and down to the city, but mere was no sign of bis wife's abductors.

Where bad they gone?

He raised his eyes to the shouting sky, his white face stark and twisted with frustrated anger. There was no sense to it Why had they taken her? He had enemies, he knew, but none who could summon such supernatural help. Who, apart from himself, could work this mighty sorcery that made the skies themselves shake and a city sleep?

To the house of Lord Voashoon. Chief Senator, of Kariaak.

•od father of Zarozinia, Eiric ran panting like a wolf. He banged with his fists upon the door, yelling at the astonished servants within.

"Opnl It is Eiric. HurryF

The doors gaped back and he was through them. Lord Voashoon came stumbling down the stair into the chamber, his face heavy with sleep.

"What is if Eiric?**

"Summon your warriors. Zarozinia has been abducted. Thoe who took her were demons and may be far from here by now—but we must search in case they escaped by land."
Lord Voashoon's face became instantly alert and he shouted terse orders to his servants between listening to El-\textit{ite}'s explanation of what had happened.

"And I must have entrance into the armoury," Eiric concluded. "'T must have Stonnbringeri"

"But you renounced the blade for fear of its evil power over you!" Lord Voashoon reminded him quietly.

Eiric replied impatiently. "Aye-but I renounced the blade tar Zarozinia's sake, too. I must have Stonnbringer if I am to bring her back. The logic is simple. Quickly, give me the key."

In silence Lord Voashoon fetched the key and led Eiric to

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the armoury where the weapons and armour of his ancestors was held, unused for centuries. Through the dusty place strode Eiric to a dark alcove that seemed to contain something which lived.

He heard a soft moaning come from the great black battle blade as he reached out a slim-fingered white hand to take it. It was heavy, yet perfectly balanced, a two-handed broadsword of prodigious size, with its wide crosspiece and its blade smooth and broad, stretching for over five feet from the hilt. Near the hilt, mystic runes were engraved and even Brie did not know what they fully signified.

"Again I must make use of you, Storrobringer," he said as he buckled the sheath about his waist, "and I must conclude (hat we are too closely linked now for less than death to separate us.**

With that he was striding from the armoury and back to the courtyard where mounted guards were already sitting nervous steeds, awaiting his instructions.

Standing before them, he drew Stonnbringer so that the sword's strange, black radiance flickered around him, his white face, as pallid as bleached bone, staring out of it at the horsemen.

"You go to chase demons this night Search the countryside, scour forest and plain for those who have done this
thing to our princess! Though it's likely that her -ibdnctors used supernatural means to make their escape, we cannot be sure. So search—and search well!"

All through the raging night they searched but could find no trace of either the creatures or EIric's wife. And when dawn came, a smear of blood in the morning sky, his men returned to Karlaak where EIric awaited them, now filled with the nigromantic vitality which his sword supplied.

"Lord EIric—shall we retrace our trail and see if daylight yields a clue?" cried one.

"He does not hear you," another murmured as EIric gave no sign.

But then EIric turned his pain-racked head and he said bleakly, "Search no more. I have had time to meditate and must seek my wife with the aid of sorcery. Disperse. You can do nothing further."

Then he left them and went back towards his palace, knowing that there was still no way of learning where Zaro-

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xfala had been taken. It was a method which he Ul-flcled. yet it would have to be employed.

Curtly, upon returning, EIric ordered everyone from his dumber, barred the door and stared down at the dead thing. to congealed blood was still on him, but the axe with which he had stain it had been taken away by his comrades.

EIric prepared the body, stretching out its limbs on the floor. He drew the shutters of the windows so that no tight filtered into the room, and lit a brazier in one corner. It swayed on its chains as me oil-soaked rushes flared. He went to a email chest by the window and took out a pouch. From thia he removed a bunch of dried herbs and with a hasty gesture flung them on the brazier so that it gave off a sickly odour and die room began to fill with smoke. Then he stood over the corpse, his body rigid, and began to sing an incantation in the old language of his forefathers, the sorcerer emperors of Mdnibone. The song seemed scarcely akin to human speech, riling and falling from a deep groan to a high-pitched shriek.

The brazier spread flaring red light over EIric's face and grotesque shadows skipped about the room. On the floor the
dead corpse began to stir, its ruined head moving from side to ride. EIric drew his runesword and placed it before him, his two hands on the hilt "Arise, soulless one!" he commanded.

Slowly, with jerky movements, the creature raised itself stiffly upright and pointed a clawed finger at EIric, its glazed eyes staring as if beyond him.

"An mis,*' it whispered, "was pre-ordained. Think not that you can escape your fate, EIric of Melnibone. You have tampered with my corpse and I am a creature of Chaos. My masters win avenge me.**

"How?"

"Your destiny is already laid down. You win know soon enough."

"Tell me, dead one, why did you come to abduct my wife? Who sent you hither? Where has my wife been taken?"

"Three questions. Lord EIric. Requiring three answers. You know that the dead who have been raised by sorcery can answer nothing directly.'*

"Aye-that I know. So answer as you can.**

"Then listen well for I may recite only once my reed and

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then must return to the nether-regions where my being may peacefully rot to nothing. Listen;

"Beyond the ocean brews a baffle;

Beyond the battle blood shall fall,
If Elfins kinsman ventures with him
(Bearing a twin of that he bears)
To a place where, man-forsaken.
Dwells the one who should not live,
Then a bargain shall be entered^
Bine's wife shall be restored."

With this, die dung fell to die floor and did not stir thereafter.

EIric went to die window and opened the shutters. Used as
be was to enigmatic verse-omens, this one was difficult to unravel. As daylight entered the room, the rushes spluttered and die smoke faded. Beyond the ocean . . . There were many oceans.

He resheathed his runesword and climbed on to the disordered bed to lie down and contemplate the reed. At last, after long minutes of this contemplation, he remembered something he had heard from a traveller who had come to Kariaak, from Tarkesh, a nation of me Western Continent, beyond the Pale Sea.

The traveller had told him how there was trouble brewing between me land of Dharijor and me other nations of me west Dharijor had contravened treaties she had signed with her neighbouring kingdoms and had signed a new one with me Theocrat of Pan Tang. Pan Tang was an unholy island dominated by its dark aristocracy of warrior-wizards. It was from here that Bine's old enemy, Theleb K'aarna, had come. Its capital of Hwamgaari was called the City of Screaming Statues and until recently its residents had had little contact with the folk of die outside world. Jagreen Lern was me new Theocrat and an ambitious man. His alliance with Dharijor could only mean that he sought more power over the nations of the Young Kingdoms. The traveller bad said dial strife was sure to break out at any moment since there was ample evidence that Dharijor and Pan Tang had entered a war alliance.

Now, as his memory improved, Eiric related mis information with me news he had had recently that Queen Yiabana of Ibarkor, a neighbouring kingdom to Dharijor, had recruited the aid of Dyvim Slorm and his Imryrian mercenaries. And Dyvim Slorm was Eiric's only kinsman. This meant that Jharkor must be preparing for battle against Dharijor. The two facts were too closely linked with die prophecy to be ignored.

Even as he thought upon it, be was gathering his clothes together and preparing for a journey. There was nothing for it but to go to Jharkor and speed ily, for there he was sure to meet his kinsman. Aod diere, also, diere would soon be a
battle if all die evidence were true.

Yet the prospect of die journey, which would take many days, caused a cold ache to grow in his heart as be thought of me weeks to come in which be would not know how his wife fared.

"No time for that," he told himself as he laced up bis black quilted jacket. "Action is all mat's required of me now-and speedy action."

He held me sheathed runeblade before him, staring beyond it into space. "I swear by Arioch diat tfiose who have done mis, whedier diey be man or immortal, shall suffer from their deed. Hear me, Arioch! That is my oadi!"

But his words found no answer and be sensed diat Arioch, bis patron demon, had either not heard him or else heard bis «ath and was unmoved.

Then he was striding from me death-heavy chamber, yelling for bis horse.

Two

Where the Sighing Desert gave way to the borders of Ilmiora, between the coasts of the Eastern continent and the lands of Tarkesh, Dharijor and Shazar, there lay the Pale Sea.

It was a cold sea, a morose and chilling sea, but ships preferred to cross from Ilmiora to Dharijor by means of it, rather than chance the weirder dangers of the Straits of Chaos which were lashed by eternal storms and inhabited by malevolent sea-creatures.

On the deck of an Umioran schooner, Eiric of Melnibone stood wrapped in his cloak, shivering and staring gloomily at the cloud-covered sky.

The captain, a stocky man with blue, humorous eyes, came struggling along the deck towards him. He had a cup of hot wine in his hands. He steadied himself by clinging to a piece of rigging and gave the cup to Eiric.

"Thanks,** said the albino gratefully. He sipped the wine. "How soon before we make the port of Banarva, captain?"

The captain pulled the collar of his leather jerkin about his unshaven face. **"We're sailing slow, but we should sight the Tarkesh peninsula well before sunset" Banarva was in
Eiric nodded vaguely, his mind on other things than the prospect of piracy.

Disembarking in the chilly evening at the port of Banarva, Eiric soon saw ample evidence that war darkened the lands of the Young Kingdoms. There were rumours rife, talk of nothing but battles gained and warriors lost. From the confined gossip, he could get no dear impression of how the war went, save that the decisive battle was yet to be fought.

Loquacious Banavans told him that all over the Western Continent men were marching. From Myyrhn, he heard, the winged men were flying. From Jharkor, the White Leopards, Queen Yishana's personal guard, ran towards Dharijor, while Dyvim Slonn and his mercenaries pressed northwards to meet them.

Dharijor was the strongest nation of the west and Pan Tang was a formidable ally, more for her people's occult knowledge than for her numbers. Next in power to Dharijor came Jharkor, who, with her allies Tarkesh, Myyrhn and Shazar, was still not as strong as those who threatened the security of the Young Kingdoms.

For some years Dharijor had sought an opportunity for conquest and the hasty alliance against her had been made in an effort to stop her before she had fully prepared for conquest. Whether this effort would succeed, Eiric did not know, and those who spoketo him were equally uncertain.

The streets of Banarva were packed with soldiers and supply trains of horses and oxen. The harbour was filled with warships and it was difficult to find lodgings since most inns and many private houses had been requisitioned by the army. And it was the same all over the Western Continent. Everywhere, men strapped metal about them, bestrode heavy chargers, sharpened their arms, and rode beneath bright silken banners to slay and to despoil.
Here, without doubt, Eiric reflected, he would find the battle of the prophecy. He tried to forget his tormented longing for news of Zarozinia and turned his moody eyes towards the west. Stormbringer hung like an anchor at his side and he fingered it constantly, hating it even as it fed him his vitality.

He spent the night in Banarva and by morning had hired a good horse and was riding through the sparse grassland towards Jharkor.

Across a war-torn world rode Eiric, his crimson eyes burning with a fierce anger at the sights of wanton destruction he witnessed. Although he had himself lived by his sword for many years and had committed acts of murder, robbery and urbicide, he disliked the senselessness of wars such as this, of men who killed one another for only the vaguest of reasons. It was not that he pitied the slain or hated the slayers; he was too remote from ordinary men to care greatly about what they did. Yet, in his own tortured way, he was an idea & t who, because he lacked peace and security himself, resulted in the sights of strife which this war brought to him. His ancestors, he knew, had also been remote, yet they had delighted in the conflicts of the men of the Young Kingdoms, observing them from a distance and judging themselves above nidi activities; above the morass of sentiment and emotion in which these new men struggled. For ten thousand years the sorcerer-emperors of Memibone had ruled this world, a race without conscience or moral creed, unneedful of reasons for their acts of conquest, seeking no excuses for their natural malicious tendencies. But Hric, the last in the direct line of emperors, was not like them. He was capable of cruelty and malevolent sorcery, had little pity, yet could love and hate more violently than ever his ancestors. And these strong passions, perhaps, had been the cause of his breaking with his homeland and travelling the world to compare himself against these new men since he could find none in Memibone who shared his feelings. And it was because of these twin forces of love and hate that he had returned to have vengeance on his cousin Yyrkoon who had put Cymorfl, Elric’s betrothed, into a magic slumber and usurped the kingship of Melnibone, the Dragon Isle, last territory of the fallen Bright Empire. With the aid of a fleet of reavers, Eiric had razed Inuryr in his vengeance-taking, destroyed the Dreaming City and scattered forever the race who had founded it so that the
last survivors were now mercenaries roaming the world to sell their arms to whomever bid highest. Love and hate; they had led him to kill Yyrkoon who deserved death and, inadvertently, Cymoril, who did not Love and hate. They welled in him now as bitter smoke stung his throat and be passed a straggling group of townspeople who were fleeing, without knowledge of their direction, from the latest depredation of the roving Dharijorian troops who had struck far into this part of Tarkesh and had met little hindrance from the armies of King Hilran of Tarkesh whose main force was concentrated further north, readying itself for the major battle.

Now Eiric rode close to the Western Marches, near the Jharkorian border. Here lived sturdy foresters and harvesters in better times. But now the forests were blackened and burnt and the crops of the field were mined.

His journey, which was speedy for he wasted no time, took him through one of the stark forests where remnants of trees cast cold silhouettes against the grey, seething sky. He raised the hood of his cloak over his head so that the heavy black fabric completely hid his face, and rode on as rain rushed suddenly down and beat through the skeleton trees, sweeping across the distant plains beyond so that all the world seemed grey and black with the hiss of the rain a constant and depressing sound.

Then, as he passed a ruined hovel which was half cottage and half hole in the earth, a cawing voice called out:

"Lord Eiricr

Astonished that he should be recognised, he turned his bleak face in the direction of the voice, pushing his hood back as he did so. A ragged figure appeared in the hole’s opening. It beckoned him closer. Puzzled, he walked his horse towards the figure and saw that it was an old man, or perhaps a woman, he couldn’t tell.

**You know my name. How?**

**Thou art a legend throughout the Young Kingdoms. Who could not recognise that white face and heavy blade thou art carrying?**

True, perhaps, but I have a notion there is more to this than chance recognition. Who are you and how do you know
"the High Speech of Memibone?" Eiric deliberately used the coarse Common Speech.

"Thou shouldst know all who practise dark sorcery use the High Tongue of those who are pastmasters in its arts. Wouldst thou guest with me a while?"

Eiric looked at the hovel and shook his head. He was fastidious at the best of times. The wretch smiled and made a mock bow, restoring to the Common Speech and saying: "So the mighty lord disdains to grace my poor home. But does he not perhaps wonder why the fire which raged through this forest a while ago did not, in fact, harm me?"

"Aye," said Eiric thoughtfully, "that is an interesting riddle."

The hag took a step towards him. "Soldiers came not a month gone-from Pan Tang they were. Devil Riders with weir hunting tigers running with mem. They despoiled the harvest and burnt even the forests that those who fled them might not eat game or berries here. I lived in this forest all my life, doing a little simple magic and prophecy for my needs. But when I saw the walls of flame soon to engulf me, I cried the name of • demon I knew-a thinf from ChftM which, latterly. I had dared not SUBUDOIL It cune.

"*Savc me,' cried I, 'And what would ye do in return?* •aid the demon. 'Anything,' I quoth. Then bear this message for my masters,' it said. 'When the fcinslayer known as Eiric of Melnibooe shall pass this way, tell him that there is one kinsman he shall not slay and be will be found in Sequaloris. If Brie loves his wife. he will play his role. If he plays it well, his wife shall be returned.' So I fixed the message in my mind and now give it thee as I swore."

"Thanks," said Eiric, "and what did you give in the first place for the power to summon such a demon?"

"Why, my soul, of course. But it was an old one and not of much worth. Hell could be no worse man this existence."

"Then why did you not let yourself burn, your soul unbartered?"

"I wish to live," said wretch, smiling again. "Oh, life is good. My own life, perhaps, is squalid, yet the life around me
that is what I love. But let me not keep you, my lord, for you have weightier matters on your mind.” Once more the wretch gave a mock bow as Eiric rode off, puzzled, but encouraged. His wife still lived and was safe. But what bargain must he strike before he could get her back?

Savagely he goaded his horse into a gallop, heading for Sequaloris in Jbarkor. Behind him, faintly through the beating rain, he heard a cackling at once mocking and miserable.

Now his direction was not so vague, and he rode at great speed, but cautiously, avoiding the roving bands of invaders, until at length the arid plains gave way to the lusher wheatlands of the Sequa province of Jharfcor. Another day’s ride and Eiric entered the small walled city of Sequaloris which had so far not suffered attack. Here, he discovered preparations for war and learnt news that was of greater interest to him.

The InuTyriao mercenaries, led by Dyvim Storm, Eiric's cousin and son of Dyvim Tvar, Eiric's old friend, were due to arrive next day in Sequaloris.

There had been a certain enmity between Eiric and the Inuryrians since the albino had been the direct cause of their need to leave the ruins of the Dreaming City and live as mercenaries. But those times were past, long since, and on two previous occasions he and the Imrryrians had fought on the same side. He was their leader by right and the ties of tradition were strong in the elder race. Eiric prayed to Arioch that Dyvim Storm would have some due to his wife's whereabouts.

At noon of the next day the mercenary army rode swaggering into the city. Eiric met them close to the city gate. The Inuryrian warriors were obviously weary from a long ride and were loaded with booty since, before Yishana sent for them, they had been raiding in Shazar close to the Marshes of the Mist. They were different from any other race, these Imrryrians, with their tapering faces, slanting eyes and high cheekbones. They were pale and slim with long, soft hair drifting to their shoulders. The finery they wore was not stolen, but definitely Meinibonean in design; shimmering cloths of gold, blue and green, metals of delicate workmanship and intricately patterned. They carried lances with long, sweeping heads and there were slender swords at their sides. They sat arrogantly in their saddles, convinced of their supe-
priority over other mortals, and were, as Eiric, not quite hu-
man in their unearthly beauty.

He rode up to meet Dyvim Slorm, his own sombre clothes
contrasting with theirs. He wore a tall-collared jacket of quilt-
ed leather, black and buckled in by a broad, plain belt at
which hung a poignard and Stonnbringer. His milk-white hair
was held from his eyes by a fillet of black bronze and his
breeks and boots were also black. All mis black set off sharply
his white skin and crimson, glowing eyes.

Dyvim Slorm bowed in his saddle, showing only slight sur-
prise.

"Cousin Eiric. So the omen was true.*
"What omen, Dyvim Slorm?**
"A falcon's-your name bird if I remember."
It had been customary for Melniboneans to identify new-
born children with birds of their choice; thus Eiric's was a
falcon, hunting bird of prey.

"What did it tell you, cousin?" Eiric asked eagerly.
"It gave a puzzling message. While we had barely gone
from the Marshes of the Mist, it came and perched on my
shoulder, and spoke in human tongue. It told me to come to
Sequaloris and there I would meet my king. From Sequaloris
we were to journey together to join Yishana's army and the
battle, whether won or lost, would resolve the direction of

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our linked destinies thereafter. Do you make sense of that,
cousin?"

"Some^ Eiric frowned. "But come-I haw a place
reserved for you at the inn. I will tell you all I know over
wine-if we can find decent wine in this forsaken hamlet I
need help, cousin; as much help as I can obtain* for Zaro-
zinia has been abducted by supernatural agents and I have a
feeling that this and the wars are but two elements in a
greater play.**

"Then quickly, to the inn. My curiosity is further piqued.
This matter increases in interest for me. First falcons and
omens, now abductions and strife! What else. I wonder, are
we to meet!**

With the Imrryrians straggling after diem through the
cobbled streets, scarcely a hundred warriors but hardened by
their outlawed lift, Eiric and Dyvim Slorm made their way to
the inn and there, in haste, Eiric outlined all he had learned.

Before replying, his cousin sipped his wine and carefully placed the cup upon the board, pursing his lips. "I have a feeling in my bones that we are puppets in some struggle between the gods. For all our blood and flesh and wul, we can see none of the bigger conflict save for a few scarcely related details."

"That may be so," said Eiric impatiently, "but I'm greatly angered at being involved and require my wife's release. I have no notion why we, together, must make the bargain for her return, neither can I guess what he is we have that those who captured her want. But, if the omens are sent by the same agents, then we had best do as we are told, for the meantime, until we can see matters more clearly. Then, perhaps, we can act upon our own volition."*

"That's wise," Dyviro Slorm nodded, "and I with you in it" He smiled slightly and added: "Whether I like it or not. I fancy."

Eiric said: "Where lies the main army of Dharijor and Pan Tang? I heard it was gathering."

"It has gathered—and marches closer. The impending battle will decide who rules the western lands. I'm committed to Yishana's aide, not only because she has employed us to aid her, but because I felt that if the warped lords of Pan Tang dominate these nations, then tyranny will come upon them and they will threaten the security of the whole world. It is a sad thing when a Mcnibonean has to consider such problems." He smiled ironically. "Aside from that, I like them not. These aorcerous upstarts—they seek to emulate the Bright Empire."

"Aye." Eiric said. They are an island culture, as ours was. They are sorcerers and warriors as our ancestors were. But their sorcery is less healthy than ever ours was. Our ancestors committed frightful deeds, yet it was natural to them. These newcomers, more human than we, have perverted their humanity whereas we never possessed it in the same degree. There will never be another Bright Empire, nor can their power last more than ten thousand years. This is a fresh age, Dyvims Slorm, in more man one way. The time of subtle sorcery is on the wane. Men an finding new means of harnessing natural power."
"Our knowledge is ancient," Dyvim Slorm agreed, "yet, so old is it that it has little relation to present events, I think. Our logic and learning are suited to the past..."

"I think you are right" said Eiric, whose mingled emotions were suited neither to past present nor future. "Aye, it is fitting that we should be wanderers, for we have no place in this world."

They drank in silence, moodily, their minds on matters of philosophy. Yef for all this, Eiric's thoughts were forever turning to Zarozinia and the fear of what might have befallen her. The very innocence of this girl, her vulnerability and her youth had been, to some degree at least his salvation. His protective love for her had helped to keep him from brooding too deeply on his own doom-filled life and her company had eased bis melancholy. The strange reed of the dead creature lingered in his memory. Undoubtedly the reed had referred to a battle, and the falcon which Dyvin Slorm had seen had spoken of one also The battle was sure to be the forthcoming one between Yishana's forces and those of Sarosto of Dhari-Jor and Jagreen Lem of Pan Tang. If he was to find Zarozinia then he must go with Dyvim Slonn and there take part in UK conflict. Though he might perish, he reasoned that he had best do as the omens ordered-otherwise he could lose even the slight chance of ever seeing Zarozinia again. He turned to his cousin.

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"I'll make my way with you tomorrow, and use my blade in the battle. Whatever else, I have the feeling that Yisbana will need every warrior against the Theocrat and his allies."

Dyvim Slorm agreed. "Not only our doom but the doom of nations will be at stake in this ..."

Three

Three terrible men drove their yellow chariots down a black - mountain which vomited blue and scarlet fire and shook in a spasm of destruction.

In such a manner, all over the globe, the forces of nature were disrupted and rebellious. Though few realised it, the earth was changing. The Ten knew why, and they knew of Eiric and how their knowledge linked with him.
The night was pale purple and the sun hung a bloody globe over the mountains, for it was late summer. In the valleys, cottages were burning as smoking lava smacked against the straw roofs.

Sepiriz, in the leading chariot, saw the villagers running, a confused rabble-like ants whose hills had been scattered. He turned to the blue-armoured man behind him and he smiled almost gaily.

"See them run,** he said. "See them run, brother. Oh, the joy of it-such forces there are at work!"

"Tia good to have woken at this time," his brother agreed, abouting over the rumbling noise of the volcano.

Then the smile left Sepiriz and his eyes narrowed: He lashed at his twin horses with a bull-hide whip, so that blood laced the flanks of the great black steeds and they galloped even faster down the steep mountain.

In the village, one man saw the Ten in the distance. He orieked, voicing his fear in a warning:

"The fire has driven them out of the mountain. Hide-escape t The men from the volcano have awakened-they are coming. The Ten have awakened according to the prophecy-it is the end of the world!" Then the mountain gushed a fresh spewing of hot rock and flaming lava and the man was struck down, screamed as he burned and died. He died needlessly, for the Ten had no interest in him or his fellows.

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Sepiriz and his brothers rode straight through the village, their chariot wheels rattling on the coarse street, the hooves of their horses pounding.

Behind them, the mountain bellowed. "To Nihrainr cried Sepiriz. "Speedily, brethren, for there is much work to do. A blade must be brought from Limbo and a pair of men must befund to carry it to Xanyaw!"

Joy filled him as he saw the earth shuddering about him and heard the gushing of fire and rock behind him. His black body glistened, reflecting the flames of the burning houses.
The horses leaned in their harness, dragging the bucking chariot at wild speed, their hooves blurred movement over the ground so that it often seemed they flew.

Perhaps they did, for the steeds of Nihrain were known to be different from ordinary beasts.

Now they flung themselves along a gorge, now up a mountain path, making their speedy way towards the Chasm of Nihrain, the ancient home of the Ten who had not returned there for two thousand years.

Again, Sepiriz laughed. He and his brothers bore a terrible responsibility, for though they had no loyalty to men or gods, they were Fate's spokesmen and thus bore an awful knowledge within their immortal skulls.

For centuries they had slept in their mountain chamber, dwelling close to the dormant heart of the volcano since extremes of heat and cold bothered them little. Now the spewing rock had awakened them and they knew that their time had come—the time for which they had been waiting for millennia.

This was why Sepriz sang in Joy. At last he and his brothers were to be allowed to perform their ultimate function. And this involved two Melniboneans, the two surviving members of the Royal Line of the Bright Empire.

Sepiriz knew they lived—they had to be alive, for without them Fate's scheme was impossible. But there were thorns upon the earth, Sepiriz knew, who were capable of cheating Fate, so powerful were they. Their minions lay everywhere, particularly among the new race of men, but ghouls and demons were also their tools.

This made his chosen task the harder.

But now—to Nihrain! To the hewn city and there to draw the threads of destiny into a finer net. There was still a little time, but it was running short; and Time the unknown* was master of all...

The pavilions of Queen Yishaoa and her allies were grouped thickly about a series of small, wooded hills. The trees afforded cover from a distance and did not give away their position. Also the sounds of the great army
were as muted as possible. Outriders went to and fro, reporting the enemy's positions and keeping wary eyes open for spies.

But Eiric and his Imrryrians were unchallenged as they rode in, for the albino and his men were easily recognizable and it was well-known that the feared Melnibonean mercenaries had elected to aid Yishana.

Eiric said to Dyvim Slorm: "I had best pay my respects to Queen Yisbana, on account of our old bond, but I do not want her to know of my wife's disappearance-otherwise she may try to hinder me. We shall just say that I have come to aid her, out of friendship."

Dyvim Slorm nodded, and Brie left his cousin to tend to making camp, while he went at once to Yishana's tent where the tall queen waited him impatiently.

The look in her eyes was shielded as he entered. She had a heavy, sensuous face that was beginning to show signs of ageing. Her long hair was black and shone around her head. Her breasts were large and her hips broader than Eiric remembered. She was sitting in a padded chair and the table before her was scattered with battle-maps and writing materials, parchment, ink and quills.

"Good morning, wolf," said she with a half-smile that was at once sardonic and provocative. "My scouts reported that you were riding with your countrymen. This is pleasant Have you forsaken your new wife to return to subtler pleasures?"
"No," he said.

He stripped off his heavy riding cloak and flung it on a bench. "Good morning, Yishana. You do not change. I've half a suspicion that Theleb K'aama gave you a draught of the waters of Eternal Life before I killed him."
"Perhaps he did. How goes your marriage?"
"**WeU," she said as she moved closer and he felt the warmth of her body.

"And now I'm disappointed." she smiled ironically and shrugged. They had been lovers on different occasions, in spite of the fact that Eiric had been partially responsible for her brother's death during the raid on Imrryr. Darmit of Jharkor's death had put her on the throne and, being an ambitious woman, she had not taken the news with too much
sadness. Eiric had no wish to resume the relationship, however.

He turned immediately to the matter of the forthcoming battle.

"I see you're preparing for more man a skirmish," he said. "What forces have you and what are your chances of winning?"

There are my own White Leopards, she told him. "Five hundred picked warriors who run as swiftly as horses, are as strong as mountain cats and as ferocious as blood-mad sharks—they are trained to kin and killing is all they know. Then there are my other troops—infantry and cavalry, some eighty Lords in command. The best cavalry are from Shazar, wild riders but clever fighters and well-disciplined. Tarkesh has sent fewer men since I understand King Hilran needed to defend his southern borders against a heavy attack. However, there are almost a thousand and fifty foot-soldiers and some two hundred mounted men from Tarkesh. In all we can put perhaps six thousand trained warriors on the field. Serfs, slaves and the like are also fighting, but they will of course serve only to meet me initial onslaught and will die in the early part of the battle."

Eiric nodded. These were standard military tactics. "And what of the enemy?"

"We have more numbers—but they have Dcva Riders and hunting tigers. There are also some beasts they keep in cages—but we cannot guess what they are since me cages are covered."

"I heard that me men of Mynhn are flying hither. The import must be great for them to leave their eyries."

"If we lose mis battle," she said gravely, "Chaos could easily engulf the earth and rule over it. Every oracle from here to Shazar says the same thing, that Jagreen Lern is but the tool of less natural masters, that he is aided by the Lords of Chaos. We we not only fighting for our lands, Eiric, we are fighting for me human race!"

"Then let us hope we win," he said.

Eiric stood among the captains as they surveyed the mobilising anny. Tall Dyvim Slonu was by his side, his golden
shirt loose on his slim body and his manner confident, arrogant. Also here were hardened soldiers of many smaller campaigns; short, dark-faced men from Tarkesh with thick armour and black, oiled hair and beards. The half-naked winged men from Myynhn had arrived, with their brooding eyes, hawk-like faces, their great wings folded on their backs, quiet, dignified, seldom speaking. The Shazariao commanders were there also, in jackets of grey, brown and black, in rust-coloured bronze armour. With them stood the captain of Yishana’s White Leopards, a long-legged, thick-bodied man with blond hair tied in a knot at the back of his bull-necked head, silver armour bearing the emblazon of a leopard, albino like Eiric, rampant and snarling.
The time of the battle was drawing close.

Now, in the grey dawn, the two armies advanced upon each other coming from opposite ends of a wide valley. Banked by low, wooded, hills.

The army of Pan Tang and Dhariior moved, a tide of dark metal, up the shallow valley to meet them. Eiric, still unarroured, watched as they approached, his horse stamping on turf. Dyvim Slonn, beside him, pointed and said: "Look mere are the plotters—Sarosto on the left and Jagreen Lern on the right!"

The leaders headed their army, banners of daik silk rustling above their helms. King Sarosto and his thin ally, aquiline Jagreen Lern in glowing scarlet armour that seemed to be red hot and may have been. On his helm was the Mer-man Crest of Pan Tang, for the claimed kinship with the sea-people. Sarosto’s armour was dull, murky yellow, emblazoned with the Star of Dharijor upon which was the Cleft Sword which history said was home by Sarosto’s ancestor Atarn the City-Builder.

Behind them, instantly observable, came the Devil Riders of Pan Tang on their six-legged reptilian mounts, bred by sorcery it was said. Swarthy and with introspective expressions on their sharp faces, they carried long, curved sabres, naked at their belts. Prowling among them came over a hundred hunting tigers, trained like dogs, with tusk-like teeth and claws that could rend a roan to the bone with a single sweep. Beyond the rolling army as it moved towards them, Eiric could just see the tops of the mysterious cage-wagons. What weird beasts did they contain, he wondered.
Then Yishana shouted a command.

The archers' arrows spread a rattling black cloud above them as Eiric led the first wave of infantry down the hill to meet the van of the enemy army. That he should be forced to risk his life embittered him, but if he was ever to discover Zarozmia's whereabouts he had to play out his ordered part and pray that he lived.

The main force of cavalry followed the infantry, flanking it with orders to encircle the enemy if possible. Brightly dad Irorryrians and bronze-armoured Shazarians were to one side. Blue-armoured Tarkeshites with brilliant plumes of red, purple and white, long lances levelled, and gold-armoured Jharkorians, longswords already unscabbarded, galloped on the other side. In the centre of Eiric's advance phalanx loped Yishana's White Leopards and the queen herself rode beneath her banner, behind the first phalanx, leading a battalion of knights.

Down they rushed towards the enemy whose own arrows rose upwards and then swept down to clash against helmets or thud into flesh.

Now the sound of war-shouts smashed through the still dawn as they streaked down the slopes and clashed.

Eiric found himself confronting lean Jagreen Lern. and the snarling Theocrat met Stonnbringer's swing with a flame-red buckler which successfully protected him-proving the shield to be treated against sorcerous weapons.

Jagreen Lena's features wrinkled into a malicious smile as he recognised Eiric. "I was told you'd be here, Whiteface. I know you Eiric and I know your doom!"

"Too many men appear to know my destiny better than I," said the albino. "But perhaps if I slay you, Theocrat, I may force the secret from you before you die?"

"Oh, no! That is not my masters' plan at all."

"Well, mayhap 'tis mine!"

He struck again at Jagreen Lern, but again the blade was turned, screaming its anger. He felt it move in his hand, felt it throb with chagrin, for normally the hell-forged blade could slice through metal however finely tempered.

In Jagreen Lena's gauntleted right hand was a huge war-
axe which he now swung at the unprotected head of Eiric's horse. This was odd since he was in a position to strike at Eiric himself. The albino jerked his steed's head to one side,

avoided the blow and drove again point first at Jagreen Lcro's midriff. The runeblade shrieked as it failed to pierce the armour. The war-axe swung again and Eiric brought up his sword as protection but, in astonishment, was driven back in his saddle by the force of the blow, barely able to control his horse, one foot slipping from the stirrup.

Jagreen Lern struck again and successfully split the skull of Eiric's horse which crumpled to its knees, blood and brains gushing, great eyes rolling as it died.

Flung from the beast, Eiric rose painfully and readied himself for Jagreen Lern's next blow. But to his surprise, the sorcerer-king turned away and moved into the thick of the battle.

"Sadly your life is not mine to take, Whiteface! That is the prerogative of other powers. If you live and we are the victors-I will seek you out, perhaps."

Unable, in his dazed condition, to make sense of this, Eiric looked desperately around for another horse and saw a Dharijorian mount, its head and foreparts well protected by dented black armour, running loose and away from the fight.

Swiftly, he leapt for its harness and caught a dangling rein, steadied the beast, got a foot into a stirrup and swung himself up in the saddle which was uncomfortable for an unarmoured man. Standing in the stirrups, Eiric rode it back into the battle.

He hewed his way through the enemy knights, slaying now a Devil Rider, now a hunting tiger that lashed at him with bared fangs, now a gorgeously armoured Dharijorian commander, now two foot-soldiers who struck at him with halbers. His horse reared like a monster and, desperately, he forced it closer to the standard of Yishana until he could see one of the heralds.

Yishana's army was fighting bravely, but its discipline was lost. It must regroup if it was to be most effective.

"Recall the cavalry!" Eiric yelled. "Recall the cavalry!"
The young herald looked up. He was badly pressed by two Devil Riders. His attention diverted, he was skewered on a Devil Rider's blade and shrieked as the two men butchered him.

Cursing, Eiric rode closer and struck one of the attackers in the side of the head. The man toppled and fell into the churned mud of the field. The other Rider turned, only to meet howling Stormbringer's point, and he died yelling, - the runeblade dranic his soul.

The herald, still mounted, was dead in the saddle, his body a mass of cuts. Eiric leaned forward, tearing toe bloody horn from around the corpse's neck. Placing it to his lips, he sounded the Cavalry Recall and caught a glimpse of horsemen turning. Now he saw the standard itself begin to fan and realised that the standard-bearer was slain. He rose in the saddle and grasped the pole which bore the bright flag of Jharkor and, with this in one band, the horn at his Ups, attempted to rally his forces.

Slowly, the remnants of the battered army gathered around him. Then Eiric, taking control of the battle, did the only thing he could - took the sole course of action which might save the day.

He sounded a long, wailing note on the bom. In response to this, he heard the beating of heavy wings as the men of Myyrrhn rose into the air.

Observing this, the enemy released the traps of the mysterious cages.

Eiric groaned with despair.

A weird hooting preceded the sight of giant owls, thought extinct even in Myyrrhn the land of their origin, circling skyward.

The enemy had prepared against a threat from the air and, by some means, had produced the age-old enemies of the men of Myyrrhn.

Only slightly daunted by this unexpected sight, the men of Myyrrhn, armed with long spears, attacked the great birds. The embattled warriors on the ground were showered with blood and feathers. Corpses of men and birds began to flop
downwards, crushing infantry and cavalry beneath them.

Through this confusion, Eiric and the White Leopards of Yishana cut their way into the enemy to join up with Dyvim Slorm and his Imrryrians, the remnants of the Tarkeshite cavalry and about a hundred Shazarians who had survived. Looking upward, Eiric saw that most of the great owls were destroyed, but only a handful of the men of Myyrrhn had survived the fight in the air. These, having done what they could against the owls, were themselves circling about preparing to leave the battle. Obviously they realised the hopelessness of it all.

Eiric cried to Dyvim Slorm as their forces joined: "The battle's lost-Sarosto and Jagreen Lern rule here now!"

Dyvim Slorm hefted his longsword in his hand and gave Eiric a look of assent "If we're to live to keep our destiny, we'd best make speed away from here!** he cried.

There was little more they could do.

"Zarozinia's life is more important to me than anything else!" Eiric yelled. "Let's look to our own predicament!"

But the weight of the enemy forces was like a vice, crushing Eiric and his men. Blood covered Eiric's face from a blow he had received on the forehead. It clogged his eyes so that he had to keep raising his left hand to his face to get rid of the stuff.

His right arm ached as he lifted Stormbringer again and again, hacking and stabbing about him, desperate now, for although the dreadful blade had a life, almost an intelligence, of its own, even it could not supply the vitality which Eiric needed to remain entirely fresh. In a way he was glad, for he hated the runesword, though he had to depend on the force which flowed from it to him.

Stormbringer more than slew Elric's attackers—it drank (his) souls, and some of that life force was passed on to (his) Melnibonean monarch ...

Now the ranks of the enemy fell back and seemed to open. Through this self-made breech, animals came running. Animals with gleaming eyes and red, fang-filled jaws. Animals with claws.
The hunting tigers of Pan Tang.

Horses screamed as the tigers leapt and rended them, tearing down mount and man and slashing at the throats of their victims. The tigers raised bloody snouts and stared around for a new prey. Terrified, many of Eiric's small force fell back shouting. Most of the Tarkeshite knights broke and fled the field, precipitating the flight of the Jharkorians whose mad-dened horses bore them away and were soon followed by the few remaining Shazarians still mounted. Soon only Eiric, his Imryrians and about forty White Leopards stood against the might of DhariJor and Pan Tang.

Eiric raised his horn and sounded the Retreat, wheeled his black steed about and raced up the valley. Imryrians behind him. But me White Leopards fought on to the last- Yishana had said that they knew nothing but how to kill. Evidently they also knew how to die.

Eiric and Dyvim Slorm led the Imryrians up the valley, half-thankful that the white Leopards covered their retreat. The Melnibonean had seen nothing of Yishana since he had clashed with Jagreen Lera. He wondered what had become of her.

As they turned a bend in the valley, Brie understood the foil battle-plan of Jagreen Lern and his ally-for a strong, fresh force of foot-soldiers and cavalry had assembled at the other end of the valley, for the purpose of cutting off any retreat made by his army.

Scarcely thinking, Eiric urged his horse up the slopes of the hills, his men following, ducking beneath the low branches of the birch trees as the Dharijoriana rushed towards them, spreading out to cut off their escape.

Eiric fumed his horse about and saw that the White Leopards were still fighting around the standard of Jharkor and he headed back in that direction, keeping to the hills. Over the crest of the hills he rode, Dyvim Slorm and a handful of Imryrians with him, and then they were galloping for open countryside while the knights of Dharijor and Pan Tang gave chase. They had obviously recognised Eiric and wished either to kill or to capture him-

Ahead Eiric could see that the Tarkeshites, Shazarians and Jharkorians who had earlier fled had taken the same route out as he had. But they no longer rode together, were scatter-
Eiric and Dyvim Slorm fled westwards across unknown country while the other Imrryrians, to take attention off their leaders, rode to the north east towards Tarkesh and perhaps a few days of safety.

The battle was won. The minions of evil were the victors and an age of terror had settled on the lands of the Young Kingdoms in the west.

Some days later, Eiric, Dyvim Slorm, two Imrryrians, a Tarkeshite commander called Yeda-pad-Juizev, badly wounded in the side, and a Shazarian foot-soldier, Orion, who had taken a horse away from the battle, were temporarily safe from pursuit and were trudging their horses wearily towards a range of slim-peaked mountains which loomed black against the red evening sky.

They had not spoken for some hours. Yedn-pad-Juizev was obviously dying and they could do nothing for him. He knew this also and expected nothing, merely rode with them for company. He was very tall for a Tarkeshite, his scarlet plume still bobbing on his dented blue-metal helmet, his breastplate scarred and smeared with his own blood and others'. His beard was black and shiny with oil, his nose a jutting crag on the rock of his soldier's face, his eyes half-gazed. He was bearing the pain well. Though they were impatient to reach the comparative safety of the mountain range, the others matched their pace to his, half in respect and half in fascination that a man could cling to life for so long.

Night came and a great yellow moon hung in the sky over the mountains. The sky was completely clear of cloud and stars shone brightly. The warriors wished that the night had been dark, storm-covered, for they could have then sought more security in the shadows. As it was the night was lieMed and they could only hope that they reached the mountains soon—before the hunting tigers of Pan Tang discovered their tracks and they died under the rending claws of those dreadful beasts.

Eiric was in a grim and thoughtful mood. For a while the Dharioirian and Pin Tane conurers would be busy consolidating their new-won empire. Perhaps there would be quarrels between them when this was done. perhaps not. But soon, anyway, they would be very powerful and threatening the security of other nations on the Southern and Eastern
Continents-
But all this, however much it overshadowed the fate of the whole world, meant little to Eiric for he still could not clearly see his way to Zarozinia. He remembered the dead creature's prophecy, part of which had now come about. But still it meant little. He felt as if he were being driven constantly westwards, as if he must go further and further into the sparsely-settled lands beyond Jharkor. Was it here his destiny lay? Was it here that Zarozinia's captors were? Beyond the ocean brews a battle; Beyond the battle blood shall fall...

Well, had the blood fallen, or was it yet to fall? What was the twin that Eiric's kinsman, Dyvim Slorm, bore? Who was the one who should not live?

Perhaps the secret lay in the mountains ahead of them? Beneath the moon they rode, and at last came to a gorge.

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Half-way along it they located a cave and lay down inside to rest.

In the morning, Brie was awakened by a sound outside the cave. Instantly he drew Stonnbringer and crept to the mouth of the cave. What he saw caused him to sheathe the blade and call in a soft voice to the battered man who was riding up the gorge towards the cave. "Here, herald! We are friends!"

The man was one of Yishana's heralds. His surcoat was in ribbons, his armour crumpled on his body. He was swordless and without a helmet, a young man with his face made gaunt by weariness and despair. He looked up and relief came when he recognised Eiric.

"My lord Eiric-they said you were slain on the field."

"I'm glad they did, since that makes pursuit less likely. Come inside."

The others were awake now—all but one. Yedn-pad-Juizev had died, sleeping, in the night Orozn yawned and jerked a thumb at the corpse. "If we do not find food soon, I'll be tempted to eat our dead friend."

The man looked at Brie for response to this jest, but seeing the albino's expression he was abashed and retreated to the depths of the cave grumbling and kicking at loose stones.
Eiric leant against the wall of the cave near the opening. "What news have you?" he asked.

"Dark news, my lord. From Shazar to Tarkesh black misery prevails and iron and fire beat across nations like an unholy storm. We are fully conquered. Only small bands of men carry on a hopeless struggle against the enemy. Some of our folk are already talking of turning bandit and preying on each other, so desperate have times become.

Eiric nodded. "Such is what happens when foreign allies are beaten on friendly soil. What of Queen Yishana?"

"She fared ill, my lord. Clad in metal, she battled against a score of men before expiring-her body torn asunder by the force of their attack. Sarosto took her bead for a keepsake and added it to other trophies including the hands of Kamari, his half-brother who opposed him over the Pan Tang alliance, the eyes of Peoik of Nargesser, who raised an army against him in that province. Theocrat Jagreen Lero ordered that all other prisoners be tortured to death and hanged in chains through the lands as warning against insurrection. They are an unholy pair, my lord."

Eiric's mouth grew tight when he heard this. Already he was becoming clear to him that his only route was westwards, for the conquerors would soon search him out if he went back. He turned to Dyvim Slonn. The Imrrryrian's shirt was in raffs and his left arm covered in dried blood.

"Our destiny appears to lie in the west," he said quietly.

"Then let us make speed," said his cousin, "for I am impatient to get it over and at least learn whether we live or perish in this enterprise. We gained nothing by our encounter with the enemy, but wasted time."

"I gained something," Eiric said, remembering his fight with Jagreen Lern. "I gained the knowledge that Jagreen Lern is connected in some way with the kidnapping of my wife-and if he had aught to do with it, I'll claim my vengeance no matter what."

"Now," said Dyvim Slonn. "Let us make haste to the west"
They drove deeper into the mountains that day, avoiding the few hunting parties sent out by the conquerors, but the two Imrryriaas, recognising that their leaders were on a special journey, left to go in another direction. The herald was gone southward to spread his gloomy news so that only Eiric, Dyvim Slorm and Orozn were left. They did not welcome Orozn's company, but bore with it for the meanwhile.

Then, after a day, Orozn disappeared and Eiric and Dyvim Slorm ranged deeper into the black crags, riding through towering, oppressive canyons or along narrow paths.

Snow lay on the mountains, bright white against sharp black, filling gorges, making paths slippery and dangerous. Then one evening they came to a place where the mountains opened out into a wide valley and they rode, with difficulty down the foothills of the mountains, their tracks making great black scars in the snow and their horses steaming, their breath billowing white in the cold air.

They observed a rider coming across the valley floor towards them. One rider they did not fear, so they waited for him to approach. To their surprise it was Orozn, clad in fresh garments of wolfskin and deer hide. He greeted them in a friendly manner.

"I have come seeking you both. You must have taken a more difficult route than mine."

"From where have you come?" Eiric asked; his face was drawn, his cheek-bones emphasised by the sunken skin. He looked more like a wolf than ever with his red eyes gleaming. Zarozinia's fate weighed heavily on his mind.

"There is a settlement nearby. Come, I will take you to it"

They followed Orozn for some way and it was getting near nightfall, the setting sun staining the mountains scarlet, when they reached the opposite side of the valley, dotted with a few birch trees and, further up, a cluster of firs.

Orozn led them into this grove.

They came screaming out of the dark, a dozen swarthy
men. possessed by hatred-and something else. Weapons were raised in mailed hands. By their armour, these men were from Pan Tang. Orozn must have been captured and persuaded to lead Eiric and his cousin into ambush.

Eiric turned his horse, rearing.

"Orozn! You betrayed us!"

But Orozn was riding. He looked back once, his pale face tortured with guilt. Then his eyes darted away from Eiric and Dyvim Slorm and he frowned, rode down the moss-wet hill back into the howling darkness of the night

Eiric lifted Stormbringer from his belt, gripped the hilt, blocked a blow from a brass-studded mace, slid his sword down the handle and sheared off his attacker's fingers. He and Dyvim Slorm were soon surrounded, yet he fought on, Stormbringer shrilling a wild, lawless song of death.

But Eiric and Dyvim Slorm were still weak from the rigours of their past adventures. Not even Stormbringer's evil strength was sufficient fully to revitalise Eiric's deficient veins and he was filled with fear-sot of the attackers, but of the fact that he was doomed to die or be captured. And he had the feeling that these warriors had no knowledge of their master's pan in the matter of the prophecy, did not realise that, perhaps, he was not meant to die at that moment

In fact he decided, as he battled, a great mistake was about to be perpetrated ...

"AriochI" he cried in his fear to the demon-god of Melnibone. "Arioch! Aid me! Blood and souls for thine aidi"

But that intractable entity sent no aid.

Dyvim Slorm's long blade caught a man Just below bis gorget and pierced him through the throat The other Pan Tang horsemen threw themselves at him but were driven back by his sweeping sword. Dyvim Slorm shouted: "Why do we worship such a god when whim decides him so often?"

"Perhaps he thinks our time has come!" Eiric yelled back as his runeblade drank another foe's life-force.

Tiring fast, they fought on until a new sound broke above the clash of arms-the sound of chariots and low, moaning cries.
Then they were sweeping into the melee black men with handsome features and thin, proud mouths, their magnificent bodies half-naked as their cloaks of white fox fur streamed behind them and their javelins were flung with terrible accuracy at the bewildered men of Pan Tang.

Eiric sheathed his sword and remained ready to fight or flee. "This is the one-the white-faced one!" cried a black charioteer as he saw Eiric. The chariots rolled to a halt, tall horses stamping and snorting. Eiric rode up to the leader.

"I am grateful," he said, half falling from his saddle in weariness. He turned the droop of his shoulders into a bow. "You appear to know me-you are the third I've met while on this quest who recognises me without my being able to return the compliment."

The leader tugged the fox cape about his naked chest and smiled with his thin lips. "I'm named Sepiriz and you will know me soon enough. As for you, we have known of you for thousands of years. Eiric are you not-last king of Melnibone?"

"That is true."

"And you," Sepiriz addressed Dyvhn Slorm. "are Eiric's cousin. Together you represent the last of the pure line of Melnibone."

"Aye," Dyvim Slorm agreed, curiosity in his eyes.

"Then we have been waiting for you to pass this way. There was a prophecy..."

"You are the captors of Zarozinia? Eiric reached for his sword.

Sepiriz shook his head. "No, but we can tell you where she is. Calm yourself. Though I realise the agony of mind you must be suffering, I will be better able to explain all I know back in our own domain."

"First tell us who you are," Eiric demanded.

Sepiriz smiled slightly. "You know us. I think-or at least you know of us. There was a certain friendship between your ancestors and our folk in the early years of the Bright Em-
pire." He paused a moment before continuing: "Have you ever heard legends, in Irorryr perhaps, of the Ten from the mountain? The ten who sleep in the mountain of fire?"

"Many times." Eiric drew in his breath. "Now I recognise you by description. But it is said that you sleep for centuries in the mountain of fire. Why are you roaming abroad in this manner?"

"We were driven by an eruption from our volcano home which had been dormant for two thousand years. Such move-

menta of nature have been taking place an over the earth of late. Our time, we knew, had come to awaken again. We were servants of Fate-and our mission is strongly bound up with your destiny. We bear a message for you from Zarozinia's captor-and another from a different source. Would you return now, with us, to the Chasm of Nihrain and learn all we can tell you?"

Eiric pondered for a moment, then he lifted his white face and said: "I am in haste to claim vengeance, Sepiriz. But if what you can tell me will lead me closer to claiming it. I'll come."

•Then come!" The black giant Jerked the reins of his horse and turned the chariot about

It was a journey of a day and a night to the Chasm of Nihrain, a huge gaping fissure high in the mountains, a place avoided by all; it had supernatural significance for those who dwelt near the mountains.

The lordly Nihrain conversed little on the Journey and at last they were above the Chasm, driving their chariots down the steep path which wound into its dark depths.

About half a mile down no light penetrated, but they saw ahead of them flickering torches that illuminated part of the carved outline of an unearthly mural or betrayed a gaping opening in the solid rock. Then, as they guided their horses down further, they saw, in detail, the awe-inspiring city of Nihrain which outsiders had not glimpsed for many centuries. The last of the Nihrain now lived here; ten immortal men of a race older even than that of Memibone which had a history of twenty thousand years.

Huge columns rose above mem, hewn ages before from the
living rock, giant statues and wide balconies, many-tiered. Windows a hundred feet high and sweeping steps cut into the face of the chasm. The Ten drove their yellow chariots through a mighty gate and into the caverns of Nihrain. carved to their entire extent with strange symbols and Uranger murals. Here slaves, wakened from a sleep of centuries to tend their masters, ran forward. Even these did not fully bear resemblance to the men that Eiric knew.

Sepiriz gave the reins to a slave as Eiric and Dyvim Slorm dismounted, staring about them in awe. He said: "Now-to my own chambers and there I'll in-

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form you of what you wish to know-and what you must do."

Led by Sepiriz, the kinsmen stalked impatiently through galleries and into a large chamber full of dark sculpture. A number of fires burned behind this hall, in big grates. Sepiriz folded his great body into a chair and bade them sit in two similar chairs, carved from solid blocks of ebony. When they were all seated before one of the fires, Sepiriz took a long breath, staring around the hall, perhaps remembering its earlier history.

Somewhat angered by this show of casualness, Eiric said impatiently: "Forgive me, Sepiriz-but you promised to pass on your message to us."

"Yes," Sepiriz said, "but so much do I have to tell you that I must pause one moment to collect my thoughts." He settled himself in the chair before continuing.

"We know where your wife, is," he said at last, "and know also that she is safe. She will not be harmed since she is to be bargained for something which you possess."

"Then tell me the whole story," Eiric demanded bleakly.

"We were friendly with your ancestors. Eiric. And we were friendly with those they superseded, the ones who forged that blade you bear."

Eiric was interested in spite of his anxiety. For years he had attempted to rid himself of the runesword, but had never succeeded. All his efforts had failed and he still needed to carry it, although drugs now gave him most of his strength.
"Would you be rid of your sword, Eiric?" Sepiriz said.

"Aye-it's well known."

"Then listen to this tale.

"We know for whom and for what the blade-and its twin-were forged. They were made for a special purpose and for special men. Only Melniboneans may carry them, and of those only the blood of the royal line."

"There is no hint of any special purpose for the swords in Melnibonean history or legend," Eiric said leaning forward.

"Some secrets are best kept fully guarded," Sepiriz said calmly. "Those blades were forged to destroy a group of very powerful beings. Among them are the Dead Gods."

The Dead Gods—but, by their very name, you must know that they perished long ages ago."

"They 'perished' as you say. In human terms they are dead. But they chose to die, chose to rid themselves of material shape and hurled their life-stuff into the blackness of eternity, for in those days they were full of fear."

Eiric had no real conception of what Sepiriz described but he accepted what the Nihrainian said and listened on.

"One of them has returned," Sepiriz said.

•Whyr

"To get, at any cost, two things which endanger him and his fellow gods-wherever they may be they can still be harmed by these things."*

"They are... ?"

They have the earthly appearance of two swords, rune-carved and sorcerous-Moumblade and Stormbringer."

This Eiric touched his blade. "Why should the gods fear this? And the other went to Limbo with my cousin Yyrkoon whom I killed many years ago. It is lost"

"That is not true. We recovered it-that was part of Fate's
purpose for us. We have it here in Nihrain. The blades were forged for your ancestors who drove the Dead Gods away by means of them. They were made by other uohuman smiths who were also enemies of the Dead Gods. These smiths were compelled to combat evil with evil, although they, themselves, were not pledged to Chaos, but to Law. They forged the swords for several reasons—ridding the world of the Dead Gods was but one!"

The other reasons?"

Those you shall learn in times to come—for our relationship will not be ended until the whole destiny has been worked out. We are obliged not to reveal the other reasons until the proper time. You have a dangerous destiny, Eiric, and I do not envy it"

"But what is the message you have?" Eiric said impatiently.

"Due to the disturbance created by Jagreen Lern, one of the Dead Gods has been enabled to return to earth, as I told you. He has gathered acolytes about him. They kidnapped your wife."

Eiric felt a mood of deep despair creep over him. Must he defy such power as this?

"Why...?" he whispered.

"Darnizhaan is aware that Zarozinia is important to you. He wishes to barter her for the two swords. We, in this matter, are merely messengers. We must give up the sword we keep at the request of you or Dyvim Slorm, for they right-

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folly belong to any of the royal line. Damizhaan's terms are simple. He will dispatch Zarozinia to Limbo unless you give him the blades which threaten his existence. Her death, it would not be death as we know it, would be unpleasant and eternal."

"And if I agreed to do that, what would happen?"

"All the Dead Gods would return. Only the power of the swords keeps them from doing so now!"

"And what would happen if the Dead Gods came back?"

"Even without the Dead Gods, Chaos threatens to conquer
the planet, but with them it would be utterly invincible, its effect immediate. Evil would sweep the world. Chaos would plunge this earth into a stinking inferno of terror and destruction. You have already had a taste of what is happening, and Damizhaan has only been back for a short time."

"You mean the defeat of Yishana's armies and the conquest by Sarosto and Jagreeo Lero?"

"Exactly. Jagreen Lem has a pact with Chaos—all the Lords of Chaos, not merely the Dead Gods—for Chaos fears Fate's plan for earth's future and would attempt to tamper with it by gaining domination of our planet. The Lords of Chaos are strong enough without the help of the Dead Gods. Damizhaan must be destroyed."

"I have an impossible choice, Sepiriz. If I give up Stonnbringer I can probably survive on herbs and the like. But if I do give it up for Zarozinia, then Chaos will be unleashed to its full extent and I will have a monstrous crime upon my conscience."

"The choice is yours alone to make."

Eiric deliberated but could think of no way of solving the problem.

"Bring the other Made," he said at last.

Sepiriz rejoined them a while later, with a scabbarded sword that seemed little different from Stormbriager.

"So, Eiric—is the prophecy explained?" he asked, still keeping hold of Moumblade.

"Aye—here is the twin of that I bear. But the last part—where are we to go?"

"I will tell you in a moment. Though the Dead Gods, and the powers of Chaos, are aware that we possess the sister blade, they do not know whom we really serve. Pate, as I told you, is our master, and Fate has wrought a fabric for this earth which would be hard to alter. But it could be altered and we are entrusted to see that Fate is not cheated. You are about to undergo a test. How you fare in it, what your decision is, will decide what we must tell you upon your return to Nihrain."
"You wish me to return here?"
"Yes.**

"Give me Moumblade," Eiric said quickly.
Sepiriz handed him the sword and Eiric stood there with one twin blade in each hand, as if weighing something between them.

Both blades seemed to moan in recognition and their powers swam through his body so that he seemed to be built of steel-hard fire.

"I remember now that I hold them both that their powers are greater than I realise. There is one quality they possess when paired, a quality we may be able to use against this Dead God." He frowned. "But more of that in a moment." He stared sharply at Sepiriz. "Now tell me, where is Damizhaan?"

"The Vale of Xanyaw in Myyrrhn!"

Eiric handed Moumblade to Dyvim Slorm who accepted it gingerly.

"What will your choice be?" Sepiriz asked.
"Who knows?" Eiric said with bitter gaiety. "Perhaps there is a way to beat this Dead God ...

"But I tell you this, Sepiriz—given the opportunity I shall make that God rue his homecoming, for he has done the one thing that can move me to real anger. And the anger of Eiric of Melnibone and his sword Stonnbringer can destroy the world!"

Sepiriz rose from his chair, his eyebrows lifting.
"And gods, Eiric, can it destroy gods?"

Five

Eiric rode like a giant scarecrow, gaunt and rigid on the massive back of the Nihramian steed. His grim face was set fast in a mask that hid emotion and his crimson eyes burned like coals in their sunken socket*. The wind whipped his hair this way and that, but he sat straight, staring ahead, one long-fingered hand gripping Stonnbringer's hilt.

Occasionally Dyvim Slonn, who bore Moumblade both proudly and warily, heard the blade moan to its sister and felt it shudder at his side. Only later did he begin to ask himself
what the blade might make him, what it would give him and
demand of him. After that, he kept his hand away from it as
much as possible.

Close to the borders of Myyrrhn, a pack of Dharijorian
hirelings-native Jharkorians in the livery of their con-
querrors-came upon them. Unsavoury louts they were, who
should have known better than to ride across Éric's path.
They steered their horses towards the pair, grinning. The
black plumes of their helmets nodded, armour straps creaked
and metal clanked. The leader, a squint-eyed bully with an
axe at his belt, pulled his mount short in front of Éric.

At a direction from its master, the albino's horse came to a
stop. His expression unchanged, Éric drew Stonnbringer in
an economic, catlike gesture. Dyvim Slonn copied him, eye-
ing the silently laughing men. He was surprised at how easily
the blade sprang from its scabbard.

Then, with no challenges, Éric began to fight

He fought like an automaton, quickly, efficiently, ex-
pressionlessly, cleaving the leader's shoulder plate in a stroke
that cut through the man from shoulder to stomach in one
raking movement which peeled back armour and flesh, rup-
turing the body so that a great scarlet gash appeared in the
black metal and the leader wept as he slowly died, sprawling
for a moment over his horse before slumping from the
mount one leg high, caught in a stirrup strap.

Stonnbringer let out a great metallic purr of pleasure and
Éric directed arm and blade about him, emotionlessly slaving
the horsemen as if they were unarmed and chained, so little
chance did they have.

Dyvim Slonn unused to the semi-sentient Moumblade,
tried to wield her like an ordinary sword but she moved in
his hand, making cleverer strokes than he. A peculiar sense
of power, at once sensual and cool poured into him and he
heard his voice veiling exultantly, realised what his ancestors
must have been like in war.

The fight was quickly done with and leaving the soul-
drained corpses on the ground behind them, they were soon
in the land of Myyrrhn. Both blades had now been com-
monly blooded.
Eiric was now better able to think and act coherently, but he could spare nothing for Dyvim Slonn while intratemporally asking nothing of his cousin who rode at his side, frustrated in that he was not called upon for his help.

Eiric let his mind drift about in time, encompassing past, present and future and forming it into a whole—a pattern. He was suspicious of pattern, disliking shape, for he did not trust it. To him, life was chaotic, chance-dominated, unpredictable. It was a trick, an illusion of the mind, to be able to see a pattern to it.

He knew a few things, judged nothing.

He knew he bore a sword which physically and psychologically he needed to bear. It was an unalterable admission of a weakness in him, a lack of confidence in either himself or the philosophy of cause and effect. He believed himself a realist.

Through the bleak night they rode, buffeted by a vicious wind.

And as they came closer to the Vale of Xanyaw, the whole sky, the earth, the air became filled with heavy, throbbing music. Melodious, sensual, great chords of sound, on and on it rose and fell, and following it came me white-faced ones.

Each had a black cowl and a sword which split at the end into three curved barbs. Each grinned a fixed grin. The music followed them as they came running like mad things at the two men who reined in their horses, restraining the urge to turn and flee. Eiric had seen horrors in his life, had seen much that would make others insane, but for some reason these shocked him more deeply than any. They were men, ordinary men by the look of them—but men possessed by an unholy spirit.

Prepared to defend themselves, Eiric and Dyvim Slonn drew their blades and waited for the encounter, but none came. The music and the men rushed past them and away beyond them in the direction from which they had come.

Overhead, suddenly, they heard the beat of wings, a shriek from out of the sky and a ghastly wail. Fleeing, two women...
rushed by and Eiric was disturbed to see that the women were from the winged race of Myyrrhn, but were wingless. These, unlike a woman Eiric remembered, had had their wings deliberately hacked off. They paid no attention to the two riders, but disappeared, running into the night, their eyes blank and their faces insane.

"What is happening, Eiric?" cried Dyvim Slorm, resheathing his mneblade, his other hand striving to control the prancing horse.

"I know not What does happen in a place where the Dead Gods' rule has come back?"

All was rushing noise and confusion; the night was full of movement and terror.

"Come!" Eiric slapped his sword against his mount's rump and sent the beast into a jerking gallop, forcing himself and the steed forward into the terrible night.

Then mighty laughter greeted them as they rode between hills into the Vale of Xanyaw. The valley was pitch-black; and alive with menace, the very hills seeming sentient. They slowed their pace as they lost their sense of direction, and Eiric had to call to his unseen cousin, to make sure he was still close. The echoing laughter sounded again, roaring from out of the dark, so that the earth shook. It was as if the whole planet laughed in ironic mirth at their efforts to control their fears and push on through the valley.

Eiric wondered if he had been betrayed and this was a trap set by the Dead Gods. What proof had he that Zarozina was here? Why had he trusted Sepiriz? Something slithered against his leg as it passed him and he put his hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to draw it.

But then, shooting upwards into the dark sky, there arose, seemingly from the very earth, a huge figure which barred their way. Hands on hips, wreathed in golden light, a face of

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an ape, somehow blended with another shape to give it dignity and wild grandeur, its body alive and dancing with colour and light, its lips grinning with delight and knowledge-Damizhaan, the Dead Godt.
"Finer

"Darnizhaan!" cried Eiric fiercely, craning his head to stare up at the Dead God's face. He felt no fear now. "I have come for my wife!"

Around the Dead God's heels appeared acolytes with wide lips and pale, triangular faces, conical caps on their heads and madness in their eyes. They giggled and shrilled and shivered in the light of Damizhaan's grotesque and beautiful body. They gibbered at the two riders and mocked them, but they did not move away from the Dead God's heels.

Eiric sneered. "Degenerate and pitiful minions," he said. If "Not so pitiful as you, Eiric of Melnibon6." laughed the Dead God. "Have you come to bargain, or to give your wife's soul into my custody, so that she may spend eternity dying?"

Eiric did not let his hate show on his face.

"I would destroy you; it is instinctive for me to do so. But..."

The Dead God smiled, almost with pity. "You roust be destroyed, Eiric. You are an anachronism. Your Time is gone."

"Speak for yourself, Darnizhaan!"

"I could destroy you."

"But you will not." Though passionately hating the being, Eric also felt a disturbing sense of comradeship for the Dead God. Both of them represented an age that was gone; neither were really part of the new earth.

Then I will destroy her," the Dead God said. "That I could do with impunity."

"Zarozinia! Where is she?"

Once again Damizhaan's mighty laughter shook the Vale of Xanyaw. "'Oh, what have the old folk come to? There was a time when no man of Melnibon6, particularly of the royal line, would admit to caring for another mortal soul, especially if they belonged to the beast-race, the new race of the age you call that of the Young Kingdoms. What? Are you mating with animals. King of Melnibon6? Where is your blood, your cruel and brilliant blood? Where the glorious malice? Where Ac evil. Eiric..."
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Peculiar emotions stirred in Eiric as he remembered his ancestors, the sorcerer emperors of the Dragon Isle. He realised that the Dead God was deliberately awakening these emotions and, with an effort, he refused to let them dominate him.

*That is past,* he shouted, "a new time has come upon the earth. Our time will soon be gone-and yours is over/**

"No, Eiric. Mark my words, whatever happens. The dawn is over and will soon be swept away like dead leaves before the wind of morning. The earth's history has not even begun. You, your ancestors, these men of the new races even, you are nothing but a prelude to history. You will all be forgotten if the real history of the world begins. But we can avert that-we can survive, conquer the earth and hold it against the Lords of Law, against Fate herself, against the Cosmic Balance—we can continue to live, but you must give me the words!**

"I fail to understand you," Eiric said, his lips thin and his teeth tight in his skull. "I am here to bargain or do battle for my wife."

"You do not understand," the Dead God guffawed, **because we are all of us, gods and men, but shadows playing puppet parts before the true play begins. You would best not fight me—rather side with me, for I know the truth. We share a common destiny. We do not, any of us, exist The old folk are doomed, you, myself and my brothers, unless you give me the swords. We must not fight one another. Share our frightful knowledge—the knowledge that turned us insane. There is nothing. Eiric—no past, present, or future. We do not exist, any of us!"

Eiric shook his head quickly. "I do not understand you. I would not understand you if I could. I desire only the return of my wife—not baffling conundrums!"

Damizhaan laughed again. "No! You shall not have the woman unless we are given control of the swords. You do not realise their properties. They were not only designed to destroy us or exile us—their destiny is to destroy the world as we know it If you retain them, Eiric, you will be responsible for wiping out your own memory for those who come after you."
"I'd welcome that," Eiric said, Dyvim Storm remained silent, not altogether in sympathy

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with Eiric. The Dead God's argument seemed to contain truth.

Damizhaan shook his body so that the golden light danced and its area widened momentarily. "Keep the swords and all of us will be as we had never existed," he said impatiently.

"So be it," Elric's tone was stubborn, "do you think I wish the memory to live on-the memory of evil, ruin and destruction? The memory of a man with deficient blood in his veins-a man called Friendslayer, Woman-slayer and many other such names?"

Damizhaan spoke urgently, almost in terror. "Eiric, you have been duped! Somewhere you have been given a conscience. You must join with us. Only if the Lords of Chaos can establish their reign will we survive. If they fail, we shall be obliterated!"

^ "Goodr

\ "Limbo, Eiric. Limbo! Do you understand what that '<- means?"

•. "I do not care- Where is my wife?"

; Eiric blocked the truth from his mind, blocked out the terror in the meaning of the Dead God's words. He could not afford to listen or fully to comprehend. He must save Zarozinia.

"I have brought the swords," said he, "and wish my wife to be returned to me."

"Very well," the Dead God smiled hugely in his relief. "At least if we keep the blades, in their true shape, beyond the earth, we may be able to retain control of the world. In your hands they could destroy not only us but you, your world, all that you represent. Beasts would rule the earth for millions of years before the age of intelligence began again. And it
would be a duller age than this. We do not wish it to occur. But if you had kept the swords, it would have come about almost inevitably!"

"Oh. be silent!" Eiric cried. "For a god, you talk too much. Take the swords-and give me back my wife!"

At the Dead God's command, some of the acolytes scamp-pered away. Eiric saw their gleaming bodies disappear into the darkness. He waited nervously until they returned, carrying the struggling body of Zarozinia. They set her on the ground and Eiric saw that her face bore the blank look of shock.

"Zarozinia!

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The giri's eyes roamed about before they saw Eiric. She began to move towards him but the acolytes held her back, gig-gling.

Darnizhaan stretched forward two gigantic, glowing hands.

"The swords first."

Biric and Dyvim Slorm put them into his hands. The Dead God straightened up, clutching his prizes and roaring his mirth. Zarozinia was now released and she ran forward to grasp her husband's hand, weeping and trembling. Eiric leant down and stroked her hair, too disturbed to say anything.

Then he turned to Dyvim Slorm, shouting: "Let us see if our plan will work, cousin!"

Eiric stared up at Stormbringer writhing in Darnizhaan's grasp. "Stormbringer! Kerana soliem, o'glara . . . "

Dyvim Slorm also called to Moumblade in the Ancient Tongue of Melnibone, the mystic, sorcerous tongue which had been used for rune-casting and demon-raising all through Melnibone's twenty thousand years of history.

Together, they commanded the blades, as if they were actually wielding them in their hands, so that merely by shouting orders, Eiric and Dyviro Slorm began their work. This was the remembered quality of born blades when paired in a common fight The blades twisted in Darnizhaan's glowing hands. He started backwards, his shape faltering, some-
times manlike, sometimes beastlike, sometimes totally alien. But he was evidently horrified, this god.

Now the swords wrenched themselves from the clutching hands and turned on him. He fought against them, fending them off as they wove about in the air, whining malevolently, triumphantly, attacking him with vicious power. At Eiric's command, Stormbringer slashed at the supernatural being and Dyvim Slorm's Moumblade followed its example. Because the ruaeblades were also supernatural, Darnizhaan was harmed dreadfully whenever they struck his form.

"Eiric!" he raved, "Eiric-you do not know what you are doing! Stop them! Stop them; You should have listened more carefully to what I told you. Stop them!"

But Eiric in his hate and malice urged on the blades, made them plunge into the Dead God's being time after time so that his shape sometimes faltered, faded, the colours of its bright beauty dulling. The acolytes fled upwards into the vale, convinced that their lord was doomed. Their lord, also, was so convinced. He made one lunge towards the mounted men

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and then the fabric of his being began to shred before the blades' attack; wisps of his body-stuff seemed to break away and drift into the air to be swallowed by the black night

Viciously and ferociously, Eiric goaded the blades while Dyvim Slorm's voice blended with his in a cruel joy to see the bright being destroyed.

"Fools! he screamed, "in destroying me, you destroy yourselves!"

But Eiric did not listen and at last there was nothing left of the Dead God and the swords crept back to lie contentedly in their masters' hands.

Quickly, with a sudden shudder, Eiric scabbarded Stormbringer.

He dismounted and helped his girl-wife on to the back of his great stallion and then swung up into the saddle again. It was very quiet in the Vale of Xanyaw.

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Three people, bent in their saddles with weariness, reached
the Chasm of Nihrain days later. They rode down the twist-
ing paths into the black depths of the mountain city and
to there welcomed by Sepiriz whose face was grave.
though his words were encouraging.

"So you were successful, Eiric," he said with a small smile.

Eiric paused while he dismounted and aided Zarozinia
down. He turned to Sepriz. "I am not altogether satisfied with
this adventure," he said grimly, "though I did what I had to
in order to save my wife. I would speak with you privately,
Sepiriz."

The black Nihrainian nodded gravely. "When we have
eaten," he said, "we will talk alone."

They walked wearily through the galleries,, noting that
there was considerably more activity in the city now, but
there was no sign of Sepiriz's nine brothers. He explained
their absence as he led Eiric and his companions towards his
own chamber. "As servants of Fate they have been called to
another plane where they can observe something of the
several different possible futures of the earth and thus keep
me informed of what I must do here."

They entered the chamber and found food ready and,
when they had satisfied their hunger, Dyvim Slonn and Zaro-
zinia left the other two.

The fire from the great hearth blazed. Eiric and Sepiriz sat
together, unspeakiog, hunched in their chairs.

At last, without preamble, Eiric told Sepiriz the story of
what had happened, what he remembered of the Dead God's
words, how they had disturbed him-even struck him as
being true.

When he had finished, Sepiriz nodded. "It is so," he said.
"Darnizhaan spoke the truth- Or, at least, he spoke most of
the truth, as he understood it."

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"You mean we win all soon cease to exist? That it will be
as if we had never breathed, or thought, or fought?"

That is likely."

"But why? It seems unjust."
Eiric smiled, his own suspicions confirmed. "Aye, as I expected, there is no Justice."

"But there fa," Sepiriz said, -Justice of a kind-Justice which must be carved from the chaos of existence. Man was not born to a world of justice. But he can create such a world!**

*Td agree to that," Eiric said, "but what are all our striv- inga for if we are doomed to die and the results of our ac- tions with us?"

"That is not absolutely the case. Something wffl continue. Those who come after us will inherit something from us."

"What is that?"

"An earth free of the major forces of Chaos.**

"You mean a world free of sorcery, I presume ...??**

"Not entirely free of sorcery, but chaos and sorcery wffl not dominate the world of the future as it does this world.**

"Then that is worth striving for, Sepiriz," Eiric said almost with relief. "But what part do the runeblades play in the scheme of things?"

"They have two functions. One, to rid this world of the great dominating sources of evil-**

"But they are evil. themselvesi"

"Just so. It takes a strong evil to battle a strong evfl. The days mat will come will be when the forces of good can over- come those of evil. They are not yet strong enough. That, as I told you, is what we must strive for."

"And what is the other purpose of the blades?"

"That is their final purpose-your destiny. I can ten you now. I must ten you now, or let you live out your destiny un- knowing."

"Then teU me," Eiric said impatiently.

"Their ultimate purpose is to destroy this world!"
Eiric stood up. "Ah, no, Sepiriz. That I cannot believe. ShaH I have such a crime on my conscience?"

"It is not a crime, it is in the nature of wings. The era of the Bright Empire, even that of the Young Kingdoms, is drawing to a close. Chaos formed mis earth and, for aeons, Chaos ruled. Men were created to put an end to that rule."

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"But my ancestors worshipped the powers of Chaos. My patron demon, Arioch, is a Duke of Hell, one of the prime Lords of Chaos!"

"Just so. You, and your ancestors, were not true men at all, but an intermediary type created for a purpose. You understand Chaos as no true men ever could understand it. You can control the forces of Chaos as no true men ever could. And, as a manifestation of the champion Eternal, you can weaken the forces of Chaos— for you know the qualities of Chaos. Weaken them is what you have done. Though worshipping the Lords of Chance, your race were the first to bring some kind of order to the earth. The people of the Young Kingdoms have inherited this from you—and have consolidated it. But, as yet, Chaos is still that much stronger. The runeblades, Stormbringer and Mournblade, this more orderly age, the wisdom your race and mine have gained, all will go towards creating the basis for the true beginnings of Mankind's history. That history will not begin for many thousands of years, the type may take on a lowlier form, become more beastlike before it re-evolves, but when it does, it will re-evolve into a world bereft of the stronger forces of Chaos. It will have a fighting chance. We are all doomed, but they need not be."

"So that is what Damizhaan meant when he said we were just puppets, acting out our parts before the true play began..." Eiric sighed deeply, the weight of his mighty responsibility was heavy on his soul. He did not welcome it; but he accepted it.

Sepiriz said gently: "It is your purpose, Eiric of Melni-bon6. Hitherto, your life has appeared comparatively mean* ingless. All through it you have been searching for some purpose for living, is that not true?"

"Aye,** Eiric agreed with a slight smile, "I've been restless for many a year since my birth; restless the more between the time when Zarozinia was abducted and now."
"It is fitting that you should have been,** Sepiriz said, "for there is SL purpose for you-Fate's purpose. It is this destiny that you have sensed all your mortal days. You, the last of the royal line of Melnibone, must complete your destiny in the times which are to follow closely upon these. The world is darkening-nature revolts and rebels against the abuses to which the Lords of Chaos put it. Oceans seethe and forests sway, hot lava spills from a thousand mountains, winds shriek

their angry torment and the skies are full of awful movement. Upon the face of the earth, warriors are embattled in a struggle which will decide the fate of the world, linked as the struggle is, with greater conflicts among Gods. Women and little children die on a million funeral pyres upon this continent alone. And soon the conflict will spread to me next continent and the next Soon all the men of the earth will have chosen sides and Chaos might easily win. It would win but for one thing: you and your sword Stormbringer."

"Stormbringer. It has brought enough storms for me. Perhaps this time it can calm one. And what if Law should win?"

"And if Law should win-then that, too, will mean the decline and death of this world-we shall all be forgotten. But if Chaos should win-then doom will cloud the very air, agony will sound in the wind and foul misery will dominate a plunging, unsettled world of sorcery and evil hatred. But you, Elric, with your sword and our aid, could stop this. It must be done."

"Then let it be done," Elric said quietly, "and if it must be done-then let it be done well.**

Sepiriz said: "Annies will soon be marshalled to drive against Pan Tang's might These must be our first defence. Thereafter, we shall call upon you to fulfil the rest of your destiny."

"ni play my part, willingly," Elric replied, "for. whatever else, I have a mind to pay the Theocrat back for his insults and the inconvenience he has caused me. Though perhaps he didn't instigate Zarozinia's abduction, he aided those who did, and he shall die slowly for that"

"Go then, speedily, for each moment wasted allows the Theocrat to consolidate further his new-won empire."
"Farewell," said Elric, now more than ever anxious to leave Nihrain and return to familiar lands. "I know well we meet again, Sepiriz, but I pray it be in calmer times than these."

Now the three of them rode eastwards, towards the coast of Tarkesh where they hoped to find a secret ship to take them across the Pale Sea to Luniora and thence to Karlaak by the Weeping Waste. They rode their magical Nihrain horses, careless of danger, through a war-wasted world, strife-ruined and miserable under the heel of the Theocrat.

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Eiric and Zarozima exchanged many glances, but they did not speak much, for they were both moved by a knowledge of something which they could not speak of, which they dared not admit. She knew they would not have much time together even when they returned to Kariaak, she saw that he grieved and she grieved also, unable to understand the change that had come upon her husband, only aware that the black sword at his side would never, now, hang in the armoury again. She felt she had failed him, though this was not the case.

As they topped a hut and saw smoke drifting* black and thick across the plains of Toraunz, once beautiful, now ruined* Dyvim Slorm shouted from behind Eiric and his bride:

"One thing, cousin—whatever happens, we must have vengeance on the Theocrat and his ally."

Eiric pursed his lips.

"Aye,** he said, and glanced again at Zarozima whose 'eyes were downcast.

Now the Western lands from Taikesh to Myyrrfin were sundered by the servitors of Chaos. Was this truly to be the final conflict that would decide whether Law or Chaos would dominate the future? The forces of Law were weak and scattered. Could this possibly be the final paroxysm on earth of the great Lords of Eva? Now, between armies, one part of the world's fate was being decided. The lands groaned in the torment of bloody conflict.

What other forces must Eiric fight before he accomplished his final destiny and destroyed the world he knew. What else before the horn of fate was blown to herald in the night?
Sepiriz, no doubt, would tell him when the time came.

But meanwhile more material scores had to be settled. The lands to the east must be made ready for war. The sealords of the Purple Ports must be approached for aid, the kings of the south marshalled for attack on the western continent. B would take time to do all this.

Part of Eiric's mind welcomed the time it would take.

Part of him was reluctant to continue his heavy destiny. for it would mean the end of the Age of the Young Kingdoms, the death of the memory of the Age of the Bright Empire which his ancestors had dominated for ten thousand years.

The sea was at last in sight, rolling its troubled way

towards the horizon to meet a seething sky. He heard the cry of gulls and smelled the tang of the salt air in his nostrils.

With a wild shout he clapped his steed's flanks and raced down towards the sea...

BOOK TWO

Black Sword's Brothers

In which Moumblade returns to help decide an issue between Eiric and the Lords of Chaos ...

One day there came a gathering of kings, captains, and war-lords to the peaceful city of Karlaak in Ilmiora by the Weeping Waste.

They did not come in great pomp or with grandiose gestures. They came grim-faced and hurriedly to answer the summons of Biric, who dwelt again in Karlaak with his lately-rescued wife Zarozinia. And they gathered in a great chamber which bad once been used by the old rulers of Karlaak for the planning of wars. To this same purpose Eiric now put it

Illuminated by flaring torches, a great coloured map of the world was spread behind the dais on which Eiric stood. It showed the three major continents of the East, West and
South. That of the West, comprising Jharkor, Dharijor, Shazar, Tarkesb, Myyrrha and the Isle of Pan Tang, was shaded black, for all these lands were now the conquered Empire of the Pan Tang-Dharijor alliance which threatened the security of the assembled nobles.

Some of the men who stood armoured before Eiric were exiles from the conquered lands—but there were few. Few also were Eiric’s Imnyrian kinsmen who had fought at the Battle of Sequa and had been defeated with the massed army that had sought to resist the combined might of the evil alliance. At the head of the eldritch Imrryrians stood Dyvim SIonn, Eiric’s cousin. At his belt, encased in a sturdy scabbard, was the runesword Mournblade, twin to the one Eiric wore.

Here also was Montan, Lord of Lormyr, standing with fellow rulers from the Southlands—Jerned of Filkhor, Hozd of Argimiliar, and Koltbak of Pikarayd, adorned in painted iron, velvet, silk and wool.

The Sealords from the Isle of the Purple Towns were less gaudily clad with helms and breastplates of plain bronze, theirkins, bracks and boots of unstained leather and great broadswords at their hips. Their faces were all but hidden by their long shaggy hair and thick, curling beards.

All these, kings and sealords alike, were inclined to stare at Brie suspiciously, since years before he had led their royal predecessors on the raid of Imrryr—though it had left many thrones clear for those who now sat on them.

In another group stood the nobles of that part of the Eastern continent lying to the west of the Sighing Desert and the Weeping Waste. Beyond these two barren stretches of land were the kingdoms of Eshniir, Changshai and Okara. But there was no contact between Eiric’s part of the world and theirs—save for the small, red-headed man beside him—his friend Moonglum of Elwhcr, an Eastern adventurer.

The Regent of Vilmir, uncle of the ten-month-old Icing, headed this last group made up of senators from the city-states comprising Umiors; the red-domed archer Rackhir representing the city of Tanelorn; and various Merchant Princes from towns coming under the indirect rule of VUmir.
as protectorates.

A mighty gathering, representing the massed power of the world.

But would even this be sufficient, Eiric wondered, to wipe out me growing menace from me Westlanda?

His white albino's face was stern, his red eyes troubled - he addressed the men he had caused to come here.

"As you know, my lords, me threat of Pan Taag and Dfaarijor is not likely to remain confined to me Western continent for much longer. Though barely two months have passed since their victory was achieved, they are already marshalling a great fleet aimed at crushing the power of mow kings dependent, largely, on their ships for livelihood and defence.*

He glanced at me Sealords of the Purple Towns and (be kings of the Southern continent.

"We of the East, it seems, are not regarded as so much of a danger to their immediate plans and, if we did not unite now, they would have a greater chance of success by conquering first me Southern sea-power and wen the scattered cities of the East We must form an alliance which can match their strength."

"How do you know mis is their plan, Eiric?"

The voice was that of Hozel of Argimiliar, a proud-faced man inclined it was said to fits of insanity, the inbred offspring of a dozen incestuous unions.

"Spies, refugees-and supernatural sources. They have all reported it**

"Even without these reports, we could be sure that mis is, indeed, their plan," growled Kargan Sharpeyes. spokesman for the Sealords* He looked directly at Hozel with something akin to contempt. "And Jagreen Lem of Pan Tang might also

•eek allies amongst the Southerners. There are some who would rather capitulate to a foreign conqueror than lose their

•oft lives and easily-earned treasure."

Hozel smiled coldly at Kargan. "There are some, too,
whose animal suspicions might cause them to make no move against the Theocrat until it was too late.**

Eiric said hastily, aware of age-old bitternesses between me hardy Sealords and their softer neighbours: "But worst of all they would be best aided by internal feuds in our ranks, brothers. Hozel-take it for granted that I speak truly and mat my information is exact"

Montan, Lord of Lormyr, his face, beard and hair all

•haded grey, said haughtily: "You of the North and Bast are weak. We of the South are strong. Why should we lend you our ships to defend your coasts? I do not agree with your logic, Eiric. It will not be me first time it has led good men astray-to their deaths!**

"I thought we had agreed to bury old disputesrM Eiric said.

•ose to anger, for the guilt of what he had done was still in him.

"Aye,** nodded Kargan. "A man who cant forget the past is a man who cannot plan for the future. I say Eiric's logic is good!-

"You traders were always too reckless with your ships and too guflible when you heard a smooth-tongue. That's why you now envy our riches." Young Jemed of Filkhor smiled in his thin beard, his eyes on the floor.

Kargan fumed. "Too honest, perhaps, is the word yon should have used. Southerner! Belatedly our forefathers learned how the fat Southlands were cheating them. Their forefathers raided your coasts, remember? Maybe we should have continued their practice! Instead, we settled, traded-

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and your bellies swelled from the profits of our sweat! Oodst Fd not trust the word of a Southern-

Eiric leaned forward to interrupt, but was interrupted him-

•elf by Hozel who said impatiently: "The fact is this. The Thocrat is more likely to concentrate his first attacks on the Eart. For these reasons: The Eastlands are weak. The Eastlands are poorly defended. The Eastlanda are closer to hia shores and therefore more accessible. Why should he risk his
recently-united strength on the stronger Southlands, or risk a more hazardous sea-crossing?"

"Because,** Elric said levelly, "his Ships will be magic-aided and distance will not count Because the South is richer and will supply him with metals, food-**

"Ships and menf spat Kargan.

"Sol You think we already plan treachery*** Hozel glanced first at Elric and then at Kargan. "Then why summon us here in the first place?"

"I did not say that,** Elric said hastily. "Kargan spoke hia own thoughts, not mine. Calm yourselves-we must be united-or perish before superior armies and supernatural might!"

"Oh. no!" Hozel turned to the other Southern monarch. "What say you. my peers? Shall we lend them our ships and warriors to protect their shores as well as ours?"

"Not when they are so ungratefully spurned,*' Jerned murmured. "Let Jagreen Lern expend his energies upon them. When he looks toward the South he will be weakened, and we shall be ready for him!"

"You are fools!" Elric cried urgently. "Stand with us or well all perish! The Lords of Chaos are behind the TheocraL If he succeeds in his ambitions it will mean more than con- quest by a human schemer-it will mean that we shaB all be subjected to the horror of total anarchy, on the Earth and above it The human race is threatened!"

Hozel stared hard at Elric and smiled. Then let the hu- man race protect itself and not fight under an uohuman leader. Tis well-known that the men of Melnibone are not true men at all.**

*'Bc that as it may,*" Elric lowered his head and lifted a thin, white hand to point at Hozel. The king shivered and held his ground with obvious effort. "But I know more than that, Hozel of Argimfliar. I know that the men of me Young

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Kingdoms are only the gods* first mouldings-shadow-things who precede the race of real men, even as we preceded you. And I know morel I know that if we do not vanquish both Jagreeea Lern and his supernatural allies, then men will be
swept from me boiling face of a maddened planet, their destiny unfulfilled!"

Hozel swallowed and spoke, his voice trembling.

"I've seen your muttering kind in the market places, Elric. Men who prophesy all kinds of dooms that never take place—mad-eyed men such as you. But we do not let them live in Argimiliar. We fay them slowly, finger by finger, inch by inch until they admit their omens are fallacious! Perhaps well have that opportunity, yet!"

He swung about and half-ran from the hall. For a moment the other Southern Monarchs stood staring irresolutely after him.

Elric said urgently: "Heed him not, my lords. I swear on my life that my words are true!"

Jemed said softly, half to himself: *That could mean little, There are rumours you're immortal."

Moonglum came close to his friend and whispered: "They are unconvinced, Elric. Tis plain they're not our men."

Elric nodded. To the Southern nobles he said: "Know mis:

Though you foolishly reject my offer of an alliance, the day wiH come when you will regret your decision. I have been io-

• attended in my own palace, my friends have been insulted and I curse you for the upstart fools you are. But when the time comes for you to learn the error of this decision I swear that we shall aid you, if it is in our power. Now go!"

Disconcerted, the Southerners straggled from we hall in

• Hence.

Elric turned to Kargaa Sharcyeles. "What have you decided, Sealord?"

"We stand with you,** Kargan said simply. "My brother Smiorgan Baldhead always spoke well of you and I remember his words rather than the rumours which followed his death under your leadership. Moreover," he smiled broadly,

• it is in our nature to believe that whatever a Southern weakling decides must therefore be wrong. You have the Purple Towns as allies—and our ships, though fewer than the combined fleets of the south, are smooth-sailing fighting ships and
well-equipped for war."

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• I must warn you that we stand little chance without Southern aid," Elric said gravely.

"I'm doubtful if they'd have been more than an encumbrance with their guile and squabblings," Kargan replied. "Besides—have you no sorcery to help us in this?"

"I plan to seek some tomorrow," Elric told him. "Moon-gum and myself will be leaving my cousin Dyvim Slorm in charge while we go to Sorcerers' Isle, beyond Melaibone. There, among the hermit practitioners of the White Arts, I might find means of contacting the Lords of Law. I, as you know, am half-sworn to Chaos, though I fight it, and am finding increasingly that my own Demon-God is somewhat loathe to aid me these days. At present, the White Lords are weak, beaten back, just as we are on Earth, by the increasing power of the Dark Ones. It is hard to contact them. The hermits can likely help me."

Kargan nodded. "Twould be a relief to us of the Purple Towns to know that we were not too strongly leagued with dark spirits, I must admit."

Elric frowned. "I agree, of course. But our position is so weak that we must accept any help—be it black or white. I presume that there is dispute among the Masters of Chaos as to how far they should go—that is why some of my own help still comes from Chaoa. This blade that hangs at my side, and the twin which Dyvim Slorm bears, are both evil. Yet they were forged by creatures of Chaos to bring an end, on Earth at least, to the Masters' rule here. Just as my blood-loyalties are divided, so are the swords' loyalties. We have no supernatural allies we can wholly rely upon."

"I feel for you," Kargan said gruffly, and it was obvious that he did. No man could envy Elric's position or Elric's destiny.

Orgon, Kargan's cousin-in-law, said bluntly: "Well to bed now. Has your kinsman your full confidence?"

Elric glanced at Dyvim Slorm and smiled. "My full confidence—he knows as much as I about this business. He shall speak for me since he knows my basic plans."

"Very well. We'll confer with him tomorrow and, if we do
not see you before you leave, do well for us on Sorcerers' Isle."

The Sealords left.
Now, for the first time, the Regent of Vilmir spoke. His

voice was clear and cool. "We, too, have confidence in you
and your kinsman, EIric. Already we know you both for
clever warriors and cunning planners. Vflinir has good cause
to know it from your exploits in Bakshaan and elsewhere
throughout our territories. We, I feel, have the good sense to
bury old scores." He turned to the Merchant Princes for con-
firmation and they nodded their agreement.

"Good," EIric said. He addressed the gaunt-faced archer,
Rackhir, his friend, whose legend almost equalled his own.

"You come as a spokesman of Tanelorn, Rackhir. This will
not be the first time we have fought the Lords of Chaos."

"Tnie." Rackhir nodded. "Most recently we averted a
threat with certain aid from the Grey Lords-but Chaos had
caused the gateways to the Grey Lords to be closed to mor-
tals. We can offer you only our warriors' loyalty."

"We shall be grateful for that" EIric paced the dais. There
was no need to ask the senators of Karlaak and the other cit-
ties of nmiora, for they had agreed to support him, come
what may, long before the other rulers were called.

The same was true of the bleak-faced band who made up
the refugees from the West, headed by Viri-Sek. the winged
youth from Myyrrhn, last of his line since all the other mem-
bers of Ac ruling family had been slain by Jagreen Lem's
minions.

Just beyond the walls of Karlaak was a sea of tents and
pavilions over which the banners of many nations waved
sluggishly in the hot, moist wind. At this moment, EIric
knew, the proud lords of the South were uprooting their stan-
dards and packing their tents, not looking at me war-battered
warriors of Shazar, Jharkor and Tarkesh who stared at them
in puzzlement Sight of those dun-eyed veterans should have
decided the Southern nobles to ally themselves with the East,
but evidently ft bad not.

. EIric sighed and turned his back on me others to contem-
plate the great map of the world with its shaded dark areas.

"Now only a quarter is black," he said softly to Moonglum. "But the dark tide spreads farther and faster and soon we may be engulfed."

"Well dam the flow—or try to—when it comes," Moon-fhim said with attempted jauntiness. "But meanwhile your wife would spend some time with you before we leave. Let's both to bed and trust our dreams are light."

Two

Two nights later they stood on the quayside in the city of Jadmar while a cold wind sliced its way inland.

"There she is," Eiric said, pointing down at the small boat rocking and bumping in the water below.

"A small craft," Moonglum said dubiously. "She scarcely looks sea-worthy."

"She'll stay afloat longer than a larger vessel in a heavy storm," Eiric clambered down the iron steps. "Also, he added, as Moonglum put a cautious foot on the rung above him, "she'll be less noticeable and won't draw the attention of any enemy vessels which might be scouting in these waters."

He jumped and the boat rocked crazily. He leaned over, grasped a rung and steadied the boat so that Moonglum could climb aboard.

The cocky little Eastlaoder pushed a hand through his shock of red hair and stared up at the troubled sky.

"Bad weather for this time of year," he noted. "It's hard to understand. All the way from Karlaak we've had every sort of weather, freak snow-storms, thunder-storms, hail and winds as hot as a furnace blast. Those rumours were disturbing, too—a rain of blood in Bakshaan, balls of fiery metal falling in the West of Vilmir, unprecedented earthquakes in Jadmar a few hours before we arrived. It seems nature has gone insane."

"Not far from the truth," Eiric said grimly, untying the mooring line. "Lift the sail will you, and tack into the wind?"

"What do you mean?" Moonglum began to loosen the sail. It billowed into his face and his voice was muffled. "Jagreen Lern's hordes haven't reached this part of the world yet."
"They haven*! needed to. I told you the forces of nature were being disrupted by Chaos. We have only experienced the backwash of what is going on in the West. If you think these weather conditions are peculiar, you would be horrified"

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by me effect which Chaos has on those parts of the world where its rule is almost totall"

"I wonder if you haven't taken on too much in this fight.** Moonglum adjusted the sail and it filled to send the little boat scudding between the two long harbour walls towards the open sea.

As they passed the beacons, guttering in an cold wind, Eiric gripped the tiller tighter, taking a south-easterly course past the Vilmirian peninsula. Overhead the stars were sometimes obscured by the tattered shreds of Clouds streaming before the cold, unnatural blast of the wind. Spray splashed in his face, stinging it in a thousand places, but he ignored it. He had not answered Moonglum, for he also had doubts about his ability to save the world from Chaos.

Moonglum had learned to judge his friend's moods. For some years before they had travelled the world together and had learned to respect one another. Lately, since Eiric had near-permanent residence in his wife's city of Karlaak, Moonglum had continued to travel and had been in command of a small mercenary army patrolling the Southern marches of PDecarayd, driving back the barbarians inhabiting the hinterland of that country. He had immediately relinquished this command when Eiric's news reached him and now, as the tiny ship bore them towards a hazy and peril-fraught destiny, savoured the familiar mixture of excitement and perturbation which he had felt a dozen times before when their escapades had led them into conflict with the unknown supernatural forces so closely linked with Elric's destiny. He had come to accept as a fact that his destiny was bound to Eiric's and felt, in the deepest places of his being, that when the time came they would both die together in some mighty adventure.

Was this death imminent! he wondered, as he concentrated on the sail and shivered in the blasting wind. Not yet, perhaps, but he felt, fatalistically, that it was not far away, for the time was looming when the only deeds of men would be dark, desperate and great and even these might not serve to
form a bastion against the inrush of the creatures of Chaos.

Eiric, himself, contemplated nothing, kept his mind clear and relaxed as much as he could. His quest for the aid of the White Lords was one which could well prove fruitless, but be

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chose not to dwell on this until he knew for certain whether their help could be invoked or not.

Dawn came swimming over the horizon, showing a heaving waste of grey water with no land in sight. The wind had dropped and the air was warmer. Banks of purple cloud bearing veins of saffron and scarlet poured into the sky line the smoke of some monstrous pyre. Soon they were sweating beneath a moody sun and the wind had dropped so that the sail hardly moved and yet, at the same time, the sea began to heave as if lashed by a storm.

The sea was moving like a living entity thrashing in nightmare-filled sleep. Moonglum glanced at Brie from where he lay sprawled in the prow of the boat. Eiric returned the gaze, shaking his head and releasing his half-conscious grip of the tiller. It was useless to attempt steering the boat in conditions like these. The boat was being swept about by the wild waves, yet no water seemed to enter it, no spray wet them. Everything had become unreal, dream-like and for a while Eiric felt that even if he had wished to speak he would not have been able to do so.

Then, in the distance at first, they heard a towing droning which grew to a whining shriek and suddenly the boat was sent half-flying over the rolling waves and driven down into a trench. Above them the blue and silver water seemed for a moment to be a wall of metal-and men it came crashing down towards them.

His mood broken, Eiric clung to the tiller and yelled) "Hang on to the boat, Moogolm' Hang on or you're lost!**

Tepid water groaned down and they were flattened beneath it as if swatted by a gigantic palm. The boat dropped deeper and deeper until it seemed they would be crushed on the bottom by the surging Mow. Then they were flung upwards again and down and, as he glimpsed the boiling surface, Eiric saw three mountains pushing themselves upwards, gouting flame and lava. The boat wallowed, half-full of water tend
they set to frantically baling it out as the boat was swirled back and forth, being driven nearer and nearer to the new-formed volcanoes.

Eiric dropped his baling pan and flung his weight against me tiller, forcing the boat away from the mountains of fire. It responded sluggishly, but began to drift in me opposite direction.

Eiric saw Moonghnn, pate-faced, attempting to shake out me sodden sail. He glanced upwards to try and get some kind of bearing, but me sun seemed to have swollen and broken so that he saw a million fragments of flame.

"This is the work of Chaos, Moonglum," he shouted, "and only a taste, I fancy, of what it can become!"

*They must know of our plan and seek to stop us!* Moon-glum swept sweat from his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Perhaps-but I mink not" Now he looked up again and me sun seemed almost normal. He took a bearing and found they were many miles off their original course.

He had planned to sail to the South of Melnibone, Isle of the Dragon, and avoid the Dragon Sea lying to me North, for it was well-known that me last great sea-monsters still roamed this stretch. But now it was obvious that they were, in fact, north of Melhubone and being driven further north affl the time-towards Pan Tangt^6

There was no chance of heading for Mebubon^6 itself—he wondered if the Isle of me Dragon had even survived me monstrous upheavals. He would have to make straight for Sorcerers* Isle if he could.

The ocean was calmer now, but me water had almost reached boiling point so that every drop mat fen on his skin •eemed to scald him. Bubbles formed on the surface and it was as if they sailed in a gigantic witch's cauldron. Dead fish and half-reptilian forms drifted about, as thick as sea-weed, threatening to clog me boat's passage. But me wind, though strong, had begun to blow in one direction and Moongtuin grinned in relief as it filled the sail.

Slowly, through me death-thick waters, they managed to steer a north-westerly course towards Sorcerers' Isle as douda of steam formed on me ocean and obscured their view.
Hours later they had left me heated waters behind and were sailing beneath clear skies OB a calm sea. They allowed themselves to doze. In less man a day they would reach Sorcerers' Isle, but now they were overcome by me reaction to their experience and wondered, dazedly, how they had lived through the awful storm.

Eiric jerked his eyes open with a shock. He was certain he had not slept long, yet the sky was dark and a cold drizzle was falling. As the drops touched his head and face, they oozed down it like viscous jelly. Some of it entered his mouth and be lustily spat out the bitter-tasting stuff.

"Moonglum," he called through the gloom, "wfaafs the hour, do you know?*

The Eaatlander's deep-heavy voice answered dazedly. "I know not Fd swear it is not night already!"

Eiric gave the tiller a tentative push-and the boat did not respond. He looked over the side and it seemed they were sailing through the sky itself. A dully luminous gas seemed to swirl about the hull, but he could see no water.

He shuddered. Had they left the confines of the Garth? Were they sailing through some frightful, supernatural sea?

He cursed himself for sleeping, feeling helpless-more helpless than when be had fought the storm. The heavy, gelatinous rain beat down strongly and he pulled the hood of his cloak over his white hair. From his belt pouch he took Bint and tinder and the tiny light was hist sufficient to show him Moonglum*'s half-mad eyes. The little Easuander's face was taut with fear. Eiric had never seen such fear on his friend's face and knew that with a little less self-control his own face would assume a similar expression.

"Our time has ended," Moonglum trembled, "I fear that we're dead, at last, Eiric."

"Don't prattle such emptiness, Moonglum. I have heard of no after-life such as this." But secretly, Eiric wondered if Moonglum's words were true.

The ship seemed to be moving rapidly through the gaseous
sea, being driven or drawn to some unknown destination. Yet Eiric could swear that the Masters of Chaos had no knowledge of his boat.

Faster and faster the little craft moved and then, with relief, they heard the familiar splash of water about its keel and it was surging through the salt-sea again. For a short while longer the viscous rain continued to fall and then even that was past.

Moonglum sighed as the blackness slowly gave way to light and they saw again a normal ocean about them.

"What was it, then?" he ventured, finally.

"Another manifestation of ruptured nature," Eiric said with attempted calmness. "Some warp in the barrier between the realm of men and the realm of Chaos, perhaps? Don't question our luck in surviving it. We are again off-comso STORMBRINGER 79 and, he pointed to the horizon, "a natural storm seems to be brewing yonder."

"A natural storm I can accept, no matter how dangerous," the Eastlander murmured and made swift preparations, furrying the sail as the wind increased and the sea churned.

In a way, Eiric welcomed the storm when it finally struck them. At least it obeyed natural laws and could be fought by natural means and experience of similar storms in the past.

The rain refreshed their faces, the wind swept through their hair and they fought the storm with fierce enjoyment, me plucky boat riding the waves.

But, in spite of this, they were being driven further and further north-east-towards the conquered coasts of Shazar. almost in the opposite direction to their goal.

The healthy storm raged on until at thoughts of destiny and supernatural danger were driven from their minds and their muscles ached and nicy gasped with the shock of cold waves on their drenched bodies.

The boat reeled and rocked, their hands were sore from me tightness of their grip on wood and rope, but it was as if Fate had singled them out to live, or perhaps for a death mat would be less dean, for they continued to ride tile heaving
waters.

Then, with a shock, Eiric saw rocks rearing and Moonglum shouted in recognition:

'The Serpent's Teeth'

The Serpent's Teeth lay close to Shazar and were one of the most feared hazards of the shore-hugging traders of the West. Eiric and Moonglum had seen them before, from a distance, but now the storm was driving them nearer and nearer, and though they struggled to keep the boat away, they seemed bound to be smashed to their deaths on the jagged rocks.

A wave surged under the boat, lifted them and bore them down. Eiric dung to the side of the boat and thought he heard Moonglum's wild shout above the noise of the storm before they were flung towards the Serpent's Teeth.

'FareweOr'

And then were was we terrifying sound of smashing timbers, die feel of sharp rock lacerating his rolling body and he was beneath the waves fighting his way to the surface to gasp in a hingful of air before another wave tossed him and grazed his arm against the rocks.

Desperately, encumbered by the life-giving ranesword at his belt, he attempted to swim for the looming cliffs of Shazar, conscious that even if he lived he had arrived on enemy soil and his chances of reaching the White Inrds were now almost non-existent.

Three

Eiric lay exhausted on the cold Shingle listening to the musical sound that the tide made as it drew back over the stones.

Another sound joined that of the surf, and he recognised it as the crunch of boots. Someone was coming towards him. In Shazar it was most likely to be an enemy. He rolled over and began scrambling to his feet, drawing the last reserves from his worn-out body. His right hand had half-drawn Stormbringer from its scabbard before he realised it was Moonglum, bent with weakness, standing grinning before him.

"Thank me gods, you live!* Moonglum lowered himself to
the shingle and leaned back with his arms supporting him, regard- 
ing the now calm sea and the towering Serpent's Teeth in the distance.

"Aye, we live," Elric said, squatting down moodily. "but for bow long m this ruined land I cannot guess. Somewhere, perhaps, we can find a ship—but it will mean seeking a town or city and we're a marked pair, easily recognised by our physical appearance."

Moonglum shook his head and laughed lightly. "You're till the gloomy one, friend. Be thankful for your life, say I."

"Small mercies are all but useless in this conflict," Eiric said. "Rest, now, Moonglum while I watch, then you can take my place. There was no time to lose when we began this venture and now we've lost days."

Moonglum gave no argument, but allowed himself immediately to sleep and when he awoke, much refreshed though aching horribly, Eiric slept until the moon was high and shining brightly in a dear sky.

They trudged through the night, the sparse grass of the coast region giving way to wet, blackened ground. It was as if a holocaust had raged over the countryside, followed by a rainstorm which had left behind it a marsh of ashes. Remembering the grassy plains of mis part of Shazar, Eiric was hor-

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rifled, unable to ten whether men or the creatures of ChaO* had caused such wanton ruin.

Noon was approaching with a hint of weird disturbances in uie bright-clowded Sky, when they saw a long line of people approaching them. They flattened themselves behind a small rise and peered cautiously over it as the party drew nearer. These were no enemy soldiers, but gaunt women and starvling children* men who staggered in rags and a few battered riders, obviously the remnants of some defeated band of partisans who had held out against Pan Tang.

"I think we*U find friends, of sorts, here,*" Eiric muttered thankfully, "and perhaps some information which will help us."
They arose and walked towards the wretched herd. The riders quickly grouped around the civilians and drew their weapons, but before any challenges could be given, someone cried from the enclosed ranks:

"Eiric of Melnibon\'l Eiric-have you returned with news of rescue?"

Eiric didn't recognise the voice, but he knew his face was legend with its dead white akin and glowing red eyes.

Toa seeking rescue myself, friends, he said with poorly-assumed cheerfulness. "We were shipwrecked on your coasts when on a journey which we hoped would help us lift the yoke of Jagreen Lem from off the Westlands, but unless we find another ship our chances are scant"

"Which way did you sail, Eiric?" said the unseen spokesman.

"We sailed to Sorcerers' Isle in the south-west, mere to invoke the aid, if we could, of the White Lords," Moonglum replied.

"Then you were going in the wrong direction."

Eiric straightened his back and tried to peer into the throng.

"Who are you to tell us that?"

There was a disturbance in the crowd and a bent, middle-aged man leaning on a staff with long curling moustachios adorning his fair-skinned face broke from the ranks and stood mere. The riders drew back their horses so that Eiric could see him properly.

"I am named Ohada the Seer, once famous to Dioperda as a predictor of events. But Dioperda was razed in the sack of STORMBRINGER

Sbazar and I was lucky enough to escape with these few people who are all from Dioperda, one of the last cities to fall before Pan Tang\'s sorcerous might I have a message of great import for you, Eiric. It is for your ears only and I received it from one you know-one who may help you and, indirectly, us."

"You have piqued my curiosity and raised my hopes," Eiric beckoned with his band. "Come, seer, tell me your news
and let's all trust it is as good as you hint"

Moonglum took a step back as the seer approached. Both he and the Dioperdans watched with curiosity as Ohada whispered to Eiric.

Eiric himself had to strain to catch the words.
"I bear a message from a being called Sepiriz, He says mat what you have failed to do, he has done, but there is something which you must do that he cannot He says to go to the carved city and there he will enlighten you further."
"Sepiriz! How did he contact you?"
"I am clairvoyant. He came to me in a dream."

**Your words could be treacherous, designed to lead me into Jagreen Lem's hands.**

"Sepiriz added one thing to me-he told me that we should meet on this very spot Could Jagreen Lem know that?"

"Unlikely-but, by the same reckoning, could anyone know that?**

Then Eiric remembered that Sepiriz and his brothers, who had helped him earlier, were the servitors of Fate. And Fate had already played an important part in this. He nodded.
"Thanks, seer."

Then he shouted to the riders.
"We need a pair of horses-the best you have!"
"Our horses are valuable to us. They are all we have."

"My companion and I need to move swiftly if we are to save your land. Come, risk a pair of horses against the possibility of vengeance on your conquerors."

The knight dismounted and so did the man beside him. They led their steeds up to Eiric and Moonglum.
"Use them wel. Eiric."

Eiric took the reins and swung himself into the saddle. "I will," said he. "What are your plans now?"
"Well fight on as best we can."

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"Would it not be wiser to hide in the mountains or the Marshes of the Mist?"
"If you had witnessed the depravity and terror of Jagreen Lera's filthy rule, you would not make men an enquiry," the knight said hollowly. Though we cannot hope to win against a man whose servants can command the very earth to heave like the ocean, pull down floods of salt water from the sky and send green clouds scudding down to destroy helpless children in nameless ways, we shall take what vengeance we can. This part of the continent is calm compared to what is going on elsewhere. Dreadful geological changes are taking place everywhere. You would not recognise a hill or forest ten miles north. And those that you passed one day might well have changed or disappeared on the next."

"We have witnessed something of the like on our sea journey," Eiric nodded. "I wish you a long life of revenge, friend. I myself have scores to settle with Jagreen Lern and his accomplice."

"His accomplice? You mean King Sarosto of Dharijor?" A thin smile crossed the knight's haggard face. "You'll take no vengeance on Sarosto-he was assassinated soon after our forces were vanquished at the battle of Sequa. Though nothing was proved, it is common knowledge that he was killed at me orders of me Theocrat who now rule* the entire continent." The knight signed. "And who can stand for long against such captains as Jagreen Lern commands?"

"Who are these captains?"

"Why, he has summoned an me Dukes of Hen to ban. Whether they will accept his mastery much longer, I do not know. It is our belief that Jagreen Lern win be the next to die-and Hell, unchecked, will rule in his place!"

"I hope not," Eiric said softly, "for I wont be cheated of my vengeance,"

The knight shrugged. "With the Dukes of Hell as his allies, Jagreen Urn will soon rule me world."

"Let us hope I can find a means of disposing of mat dark aristocracy, and keeping my vow to slay Jagreen Lern," Eiric said and, with a wave of thanks to the seer and the two knights, turned his horse towards the mountains of Jharkor, Moonglum in his wake.

They got little rest on their perilous ride to me mountain
home of Sepfriz for, as the knight had told mem, the ground itself seemed alive and anarchy ruled everywhere.

Afterwards, Eiric remembered little save a feeling of utter horror and the noise of unholy screechings in his ear, dark colours, gold, reds, blue, black and me flaring orange that was everywhere, me sign of Chaos on Earth.

But on the way he managed to inform Moonglum of his previous encounter with Sepiriz and told him something of what me Lord of Nihrain had mentioned of his destiny, how the last of me royal line of old Melnibooe, Eiric and Dyvim Slorm bore blades of Chaos-make which were destined to destroy me rule of Chaos on me planet and prepare me world for its death and rebirth as an era where Law would dominate.

Moonglum had not replied, had, instead, resolved to stand vim Eiric when the final day came whether they won or lost the war against Chaos.

In the mountain regions close to Nihrain they saw evidence that me rule of Chaos was not so complete as in other parts nearby. This proved that Sepiriz and his nine black brothers, last of me Nihrain, were exerting at least some control against me forces threatening to engulf them.

Through steep gorges of towering black rock, along treacherous mountain paths, down slopes that rattled with loose stones and seemed likely to start an avalanche, they pressed deeper and deeper into the heart of me ancient mountains. These were me oldest mountains in me world, and they held one of me Earth's most ancient secrets—the domain of me immortal Nihrain who had ruled for centuries even before me coming of me Melnibooeann whose Bright Empire had lasted ten thousand years.

And men, at last, they came to the Hewn City of Nihrain, Its towering palaces, temples and fortresses cut into the living black granite, hidden in the depths of a gorge that might have been bottomless. Virtually cut off from all but me faintest filterings of sunlight, it had brooded here since earliest times.

Down the narrow paths they guided their reluctant steeds until they had reached a huge gateway which was carved with the figures of titans and half-men looming above them, 80 mat Moonglum gasped and immediately fell silent,
overawed by the genius which could accomplish the twin feats of gigantic engineering and powerful art

In the caverns of Nihrain, also carved to represent scenes from the legends of the Nihrain, Sepiriz awaited them, a welcoming smile on his thin-lipped ebony face.

"Greetings, Sepiriz," Eiric dismounted and allowed slaves to lead his horse away. Moonglum did likewise, a trifle warily.

"I was informed correctly." Sepiriz clasped Eiric's shoulders in his hands. "I am glad for I learned you were bound to Sorcerers' Isle to seek the White Lords' help."

*Truc. Is their help, then, unobtainable?*

**Not yet We ourselves are trying to contact them, with me aid of the hermit magicians of me islands, but so far Chaos has blocked our attempts. But there is work for you and your sword nearer to home. Come to my chamber and refresh yourselves. We have some wine which will revitalise you and when you have drunk your fill 111 tell you what task Fate has decided for you now."

Eiric put down his cup and breathed in deeply, feeling relaxed and invigorated. He pointed at me wine-jar and said:

"A man might easily become addicted to such a brew!"

"I'm addicted already,*' Moonglum grinned, pouring fainnelf another cup.

Sepiriz shook his head. "It has a strange quality, our Nihrain wine. It tastes pleasant and refreshes the weary, yet once his strength is regained me man who drinks it then is nauseated. That is why we still have some in our cellars. But our stocks are low-the vines from which it was made have long since passed from the Earth."

"A magic potion," Moonglum said, replacing his cup on the table.

"If you like to so designate it Eiric and I are of an earlier age when magic was normal and Chaos ruled, if more quietly than now. You men of the Young Kingdoms are perhaps
right to loathe it as you do, for we hope to ready me world for Law soon and then, perhaps, you find similar brews by
more painstaking methods, methods they can understand better."

"I doubt it," Moonglum laughed.
Eiric sighed. "If we are not ladder man we have been,
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we see Chaos unleashed on me globe and Law forever vanquished," he said gloomily.

"And no luck for us if Law is triumphant, eh?" Sepiriz poured himself a cup of the wine, showing that be, also, must be weary with his own efforts.

"What do you mean?" Moonglum asked curiously.

Sepiriz told him that he and Eiric, though fighting Chaos, were actually fitted to a world where Chaos, to a great extent, was dominant. In the world they hoped for, where Law ruled, there would be no place for their like.

Moonglum looked sharpenly at Eiric, understanding that much more of his friend's unenviable predicament.

"You said there was work for me and my sword, Sepiriz." Buic leaned forward. "What's its nature?"

"You have no doubt already learned that Jagreen Lem has summoned the Dukes of Hell to captain his men and keep his conquered lands under control?"

"Yes."

"You understand the import of this. Jagreen Lem has succeeded in making a sizeable breach in the Law-constructed barrier which has hitherto kept me creatures of Chaos from wholly ruling the planet. He is forever widening this breach as his power increases. This explains how he could summon such a mighty assembly of Hell's nobility where, in the past it was hard to bring one to our plain. Arioch is among them..."

4 "Arioch" Arioch was Euic's patron, the principle god worshipped by his ancestors. "Then I am now a total outcast un-
\" protected either by Law or by Chaos.\"
"Your only dose supernatural ally is your sword," Sepiriz said grimly. "And, perhaps, its brothers."

"What brothers? There is only me sister-sword Moumblade which Dyvim Slorm has!' I

"Do you remember that I told you how the twin swords were actually only an earthly manifestation of their supernatural selves?" Sepiriz said calmly.

"Yes.-

"Well. I can tell you now that Stonnbrmger's 'real' being is related to other supernatural force* on another plane. I know how to summon them, but these relations are also creatures of Chaos and therefore, as far as you're concerned, somewhat hard to control. They could well get out of hand in some way—perhaps even turn against you. Stormbringer, as you have discovered in the past, is bound to you by ties even stronger than those which bind it to its brothers, but its brothers outnumber it and Stormbringer might not be able to protect you against them.**

"Why have I never known this?"

"You have known it, in a way. Do you remember times when you have called for help and help has come?"

"Yes. You mean that this help has been supplied by Stormbringer's brethren?"

"I do. Already they are used to coming to your help. They are not what you and I would call 'intelligent,' though sentient, and are therefore not so strongly bound to Chaos as its reasoning servants. They can be controlled, to a degree, by anyone who has power such as you have over one of their brothers. If you need their help, you will need to remember a rune which I shall tell you later."

"And what is my task?"

*To destroy me Dukes of Heu.**

"But that's impossible. They are one of me mightiest groups ifl the entire domain of Chaos!**
True. But you control one of the mightiest weapons. That is your task. Already mere are hints that the Demon Dukes have taken some of Jagreen Lem's power from him. The fool. He still refuses to realise that he is a puppet of Chaos and thinks he can rule over such supernatural might as the Dukes represent. But it is a certainty that with these friends Jagreen Lem can defeat the Southlands with a minimum of expenditure in arms and men. Without them he could do... but it would take more time and effort and therefore give us a slight advantage to prepare against him while he subdues the Southlands,

Eiric did not bother to ask Sepiriz how he knew of the Southerners' decision to fight Jagreen Lem alone. Sepiriz obviously had many powers as was proved by his ability to contact Brie through the seer.

"I have sworn to help the Southlands in spite of their refusal to side with us against me Theocraf" he said calmly.

"And you'll keep your oath by destroying the Dukes if you can."

"Destroying Arioch, and Balaa and Maluk..." Eiric

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whispered the names, fearful that even here he might invoke them.

"Arioch has always been an intractable demon," Moon-glim pointed out "Many's the time in the past he has refused to aid you, Eiric."

"Because," Sepiriz said, "he already had some knowledge that you and he were to fight in the future."

Though the wine had refreshed his body, Eiric began to ache in different ways. The strain on his soul was almost at breaking point. To fight the demon-god his ancestors had worshipped for millennia... The old blood was still strong in him, the old loyalties still present.

Sepiriz rose and gripped Eiric's shoulder, staring with black eyes into the dazed and smouldering red.

"You have pledged yourself to this mission, remember."

Eiric drew himself upright, nodded vaguely. "Aye. And
even had I been given this knowledge before I made the
pledge, I would still have made it But.. ●

"What?"

"Do not place too much faith in my ability to fulfil this
part, Sepiriz.*
The black Nihrain said nothing.

Later he left Eiric brooding and returned with a white tab-
let on which Old nines were engraved.

He handed it to the albino who received it wordlessly.

"Memoriae the spell," Sepiriz said softly, "and then destroy
fee tablet But remember, only use it in an extreme
emergency for, as I warned you, Stormbringer's brethren may
refuse to aid you.**

Eiric made an effort and controlled his emotion. For a long
time, long after Moonglum had gone to rest, he studied the
rune, learning not only how to verbalise it but also me twists
of logic which he would have to understand, and the state of
mind into which he must put himself if h were to be effeo*
five.

When both he and Sepiriz were satisfied, Eiric allowed a
slave to take him to his sleeping chamber, but slumber came
hard to him and he spent the night in restless torment until a
slave came to wake him the next morning and found him
fully dressed and ready to ride for Pan Tang where the
Dukes of Hell were assembled.

Four

Through the stricken lands of the west rode BIRic and Moon-
ghim, astride sturdy Nihrain steeds that seemed to need no
rest and contained no fear. The Nihrain horses were a special
gift, for they had certain additional powers to their unnatural
strength and endurance. Sepiriz had told them how, in fact,
the steeds did not have full existence on the earthly plane and
that their hooves did not touch the ground in the strict sense,
but touched the stuff of their other plane. This gave them the
ability to appear to gallop on air-or water.

Scenes of terror were everywhere to be found. At one time
they saw in the distance a frightful sight, a wild and hellish
mob destroying a village built around a castle. The castle it-
self was in flames and on the horizon a mountain gouted
smoke and fire. Though the looters had human shape, they were degenerate creatures, spilling blood and drinking it with equal abandon. And directing them without joining their orgy Eiric and Moonglum saw what seemed to be a corpse astride me living skeleton of a horse, bedecked in bright trappmgs, a naming sword in its band and a golden helm on its head.

They skirited the scene and rode fast away from it, through mists that looked and smelt like blood, over rivers dammed with death, past rustling forests that seemed to follow them, beneath skies often filled with ghastly winged shapes bearing even ghastlier burdens.

At other times they met groups of warriors, many of them in the armour and trappings of the conquered nations, but depraved and obviously sold to Cfaao*.

These they fought or avoided, depending on me circumstance and, when at last they reached die cliffs of Jharkor and saw the sea which would take them to the Isle of Pan Tang, they knew they had ridden through a land which had become, literally, a hell on earth.

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Scarcely stopping, Eiric and Moonglum rode their horses over the water towards the evil-heavy island of Pan Tang where Jagreen Lem and his terrible allies prepared to sail with their giant fleet and smash the seapower of me south before conquering the Southlands themselves.

"Eirici" Moonglum called above the whining wind, "ahould we not proceed with more caution?"

"Caution? What need of that when me Dukes of Heu must surely know their turncoat servant comes to fight them!"

Moonglum pursed his long lips, disturbed, for Eiric was in a wild, maddened mood. He got little comfort, also, from the knowledge that Sepiriz had charmed his short-aword and his sabre both, with one of the few white spells be had at his command.

Now the bleak cliffs of Pan Tang were in sight, apray-lashed and ominous, the sea moaning about them as if in some special torment which Chaos could inflict on nature itself.
And also around the island a peculiar darkness hovered, shifting and changing.

They entered the darkness as the Nihrain steeds pounded up the steep, rocky beach of Pan Tang, a place that had always been ruled by its black priesthood, a grim theocracy that had sought to emulate the legendary sorcerer-kings of the Bright Empire of Mcnibone. But Eiric, last of those kings, and landless now with few subjects, knew that me dark arts had been natural and lawful to his ancestors, whereas these human-beings had perverted themselves to worship an unholy hierarchy they barely understood.

Sepiriz had given them their route and they galloped across the turbulent land towards the capital-Hwamgaarl, City of Screaming Statues.

Pan Tang was an island of green, shiny, obsidian rock that gave off bizarre reflections; rock that seemed alive.

Soon they could see the looming walls of Hwamgaarl in the distance. As they drew nearer, an army of black-cowied swordsmen, chanting a particularly horrible litany, seemed to rise from the ground ahead.

Eiric had no time to spare for these, recogniseable as a detachment of Jagreen Lero's warrior-priests.

"Up, steedl" be cried and the Nihrain horse leapt skywards, passing over the disconcerted priests with a fantastic bound. Moonglum did likewise, his laughter mocking them as he and his friend thundered on towards Hwamgaarl.

Their way was dear for some distance, since Jagrcca Lern had evidently expected the detachment to hold the pair at least for some time.

But when the City of Screaming Statues was barcly a mile away, die ground began to grumble and gaping cracks split its surface. This did not overly disturb them, for the Nihrain horses had no use for earthly tenam in any case.

The sky above seemed to heave and shake itself, the darknftss became flushed with streaks of *"i#1* ebony, and from the fissures m the ground, monstrous shapes fpraag up!

Vulture-headed lions, fifteen feet high, prowled in hungry
anticipation towards them, their feathered maaes rustling as they approached.

To Moonglum's frightened astonishment, Eiric laughed and the Eastlander knew his friend had gone mad.

But Eiric was familiar with this ghoulish pack since his own ancestors had formed it for their own purposes a dozen centuries before.

Evidently, Jagreea Lcrn had discovered the pack nuking on the bordera between Chaos and Earth and had utilised it without being aware of how it had been created.

Old words formed on Eiric's pale lips and he spoke affectionately to the towering bird-beasts.

They ceased their progress toward him and glanced uncertainly around them, their loyalties evidently divided.

Feathered tails lashed, daw worked in and out of pads, scraping great gashes ia the rock.

And, taking advantage of this, Eiric and Moonglum walked their horses through mab and emerged just as a droning but angry voice rapped from the heavens, ordering, in the High Tongue of Mehubone; "Destroy them!"

One lion-vulture bounded uncertainly towards them. Another followed it and another, till the whole pack raced to catch them.

"Faster!" Eiric whispered to the Nihrain horse, but the steed could hardly keep the distance separating them.

There was nothing for it but to turn. Deep in the recesses of his memory he recalled there was a certain spell he had teamed as a child. Au the old spells of Memibone had been passed on to him by his father with the warning that, in these times, many of them were virtually useless. But there had been one-the spell for calling the vulture-headed Uons and another spell...

Now he remembered it! The spell for sending them back to the domain of Chaos. Would it work? he approached.

He adjusted his mind, sought the words he needed as the beasts plunged on towards him.
Creatures! Matik of Melnibone made thee
From stuff of unformed madness!
If thou wouldst live as thou art now.
Get hence, or Afatik's brew again shall bet

The creatures paused and, desperately, Eiric repeated Ac
spell, afraid that he had made a small mistake, either within
his mind or in the words.

Moonglum, who had drawn his horse up beside Eiric, did
not dare speak his fears, for he knew the albino sorcerer must
not be hindered while spell-making. He watched in trepidation
as the leading beast gave voice to a cawing roar.

But Eiric heard the sound with relief, for it meant the
beasts had understood his threat and were still bound to obey
the spell.

Slowly, half-reluctantly, they crawled down into the fissures
and vanished.

Sweating, Eiric said triumphantly: "Luck is with us so far
JagrccD Lern either under-estimated my powers or else this is
all he could summon with his own! More proof, perhaps, that
Chaos uses him and not the other way about!"

"Tempt not such luck by speaking of it," Moonglum said
warningly. "From what you'd told me, these are puny things
compared with that which we must soon face!"

Eiric shot an angry look at his friend and nodded briefly.
He did not like to think of his coming task.

Now they neared the huge walls of Hwamgaarl. At inter-
vals along the walls, which slanted outwards at an angle to
encumber potential besiegers, they saw the screaming stat-
ues-once men and women whom Tagreen Lern and his fore-
 fathers had turned to rock but allowed them to retain then-
life and ability to speak. They spoke little, but screamed
much, their ghastly shouts rolling over the disgusting city like
the tormented voices of the damned-and damned they were.

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These sobbing waves of sound were horrifying even to El-
ric's ears, familiar with such sounds as they were.

Then another noise blended with them as the mighty port-
cullis of Hwamgaarl's main gate squealed upwards and from
it poured a host of well-aimed men.

"Evidently. Jagreen Lem's powers of sorcery have been exhausted for the meantime and the Dukes of Hell disdain to join him in a fight against a pair of mere mortals!" Eiric said, reaching with his right hand for the hilt of his black runesword hanging at his left hip.

Moonglum was beyond speech. Wordlessly he drew both his own charmed blades, knowing he must fight and vanquish his own fear before he could encounter the men who ran at him.

With a wild howl that drowned out the screams from the statues, Stormbringer climbed from the scabbard and stood in Eric's hand, waiting in anticipation for the new souls it might drink, for the life-stuff which it could pass on to Eiric and fill him with dark and stolen vitality.

Eiric half-cringed at the feel of his blade in his damp hand.

But he shouted to the advancing soldiers: "See jackals! See the sword! Forged by Chaw to vanquish Chaoal Come, let it drink your souls and spill your blood! We are ready for you!"

He did not wait but, with Moonglumo behind him, spurred the Nihrain horse into the ranks, hewing about him with something of the old delight.

Now, so symbiotically linked with the hell-blade was he, that a hungry joy of killing swept through him, the joy of soul-stealing which drew a surging, unholy vitality into his deficient veins.

Though there were over a hundred warriors blocking his path to the still-open gate, he smashed a bloody path through them and Moonglum, seized by something akin to his friend's mood, was equally successful in dispatching all who came against him.

Familiar with horror as they were, the soldiers soon became loath to approach the screaming runesword as it shone with a peculiarly brilliant light—a black light that pierced the blackness itself.

Laughing in his half-insane triumph, Eiric felt the callous joy that his ancestors must have felt long ago when they conquered the world and made it kneel to the Bright Empire.
Chaos was, indeed, fighting Chaos-but Chaos of an older, cleaner sort come to destroy me perverted upstarts who thought themselves as mighty as the Dragon Lords of Melni-bonet

A bloody trench had formed in the enemy's ranks and through this the pair plunged until the gateway gaped like a monster's maw before them.

Without pausing, Eiric rode laughing through H and people scuttled to hiding as he entered, in bizarre triumph, the City of Screaming Statues.

"Where now?" gasped Moonglum, all fear driven from him.

To the Theocrafs Temple-palace, of courae. There Arioch and his fellow duke no doubt await us"

Through the echoing streets of me city they rode, proud and terrible, as if with an army at their backs. Dark buildings towered above them but not a face dared peep from a window. Pan Tang had planned to rule the world-and it might yet-but for the moment its denizens were fully demoralised by me sight of two men taking their huge city by storm.

They pulled their horses to a halt as they reached the wide plaza and saw the huge bronze sepulchre swinging on its chains in the centre. Beyond it rose Jagreen Lem's palace, all columns and towers* ominously quiet

Even the statues had ceased to scream and the horses' hooves made no sound as Eiric and Moonghun approached the sepulchre. The blood-reddened runesword was still in Elric's hand and with it he took a mighty sweep at the Chains supporting the sepulchre-the holiest vessel of this unholy place. The supernatural blade bit into toe metal and severed the links.

The crash as the sepulchre dropped and smashed was magnified a thousand times by me silence. The noise echoed throughout Hwamgaarl and every inhabitant left alive knew what it aignified.

Thus I challenge thee, Jagreen LornF Eiric shouted, aware that these words would also be heard by everyone. "I have come to pay UK debt I promisedl Come, puppetl" be paused, even his triumph not sufficient to fully quench his nervousness at what be must say now. "Cornel Bring Hell's
Moonglum swallowed, his eyes rolling as he studied Eiric's twisted face. The albino continued:

"Bring Arioch, and Balao, and Maluk! Bring the proud princes of Chaos with you for I have come to send them back to their own realm forever!"

The silence again enfolded his high-chaDenge and he heard its echoes die away in the far places of die city.

Then, from somewhere inside die palace, he heard a movement. His heart pounded against his rib-cage threatening to break through the bones and hang throbbing on his chest as proof of his mortality.

He heard a sound like die clopping of monstrous hooves and ahead of it the measured' steps that must be those of a man.

His eyes fixed themselves on die great golden doors of die palace, half-hidden in UK shadows that die columns threw.

The doors began to open slowly.

Then a figure, dwarfed by the size of the doors, stepped forth and stood mere regarding Eiric with a horrible anger smouldering in its eyes.

On its body scarlet armour glowed as if red-hot. On its left arm was a shield of the same stuff and in its hand a steel sword.

Jagreen Lern, said in a voice that trembled with rage:

"So, King Eiric, you have kept part of your word, after an."

"And I plan to keep die rest of it," Eiric said with sudden calm. "Step forward, dieocrat 1*11 meet you fairly in single combat**

Jagreen Lern gave a sneering, hollow laugh.

* Tairiy? Widi that blade in your hand? Once I met it and did not perish, but now it bums with die blood and souls of a score of my best warrior-priests. I would not be so foolish.
No-let dieose you have challenged meet you."

He stepped to one side.

The doors gaped wider and if Eiric expected giant figures to emerge, he was disappointed. The dukes had assumed die forms of men.

But there was a power about diem mat filled die air as diey moved to stand, disdainful of Jagreen Lern, upon die topmost step of die palace.

Eiric glimpsed their beautiful, smiling faces and shuddered

again, for dieere was a kind of love on dieir faces, a kind of pride-a kind of confidence so that, for a moment, he was filled widi die wish to jump from his horse and fling himself I dieir feet to plead forgiveness for what he had become.

"Well. Eiric," said Arioch. the leader, softy. "Would you repeat and return to us?" The voice was silvery in its beauty and Eiric half-made to dismount.

But then be clapped bis hands to his ears, die runesword hanging by its wrist-throng, and cried:

"No! No! I must do what I must! Your time, like mine, is overt"

"Do not speak dius, Eiric," Balan said persuasively, bis words passing Eiric's hands and whispering in his skutl. **Chaos has never been dus powerful on Earth-not even in earliest days. We shall make you great-we shall make you a Lord of Chaos, equal to ourselves! We give you immortality, Eiric. If you behave so foolishly as you behave now, you will bring yourself only death and none shall remember you."

"I know diat! I would not wish to be remembered in a world ruled by Law!"

Maluk laughed sofdy.

That will never come to pass. We block every move diat Law makes to try to bring help to Earth."

**And this is why you must be destroyed!* Eiric cried.

"We are immortal-we can never be slain!" Arioch said,
and there was a tinge of impatience in his voice.

"Then I shall send you back to Chaos in such a way that you shall never have power on the Earth again!"

Eiric swung his runeblade into his hand and it trembled. moaning quietly as if unsure of itself, just as he was.

"See!" Balan walked part-way down the steps. "See—even your trusted sword knows that we speak truth."

"You speak a sort of twidi." Moooglum said in a quavering tone, astonished at his own bravery. "But I remember something of a greater truth—a law that should bind both Chaos and Law—the Law of the Balance. The Supreme Spirit holds that balance over the earth and it should be that Chaos and Law war to keep that balance straight. Sometimes the balance tips one way, sometimes another—and thus are the ages of the Earth created. But an unequal balance of this magnitude is wrong. In your struggling you of Chaos may have forgotten this!"

"We have forgotten it for good reason, mortal. The balance has tipped to such an extent in our favour that it is no longer adjustable. We triumph!"

Eiric used this pause to collect himself. Sensing his renewed strength, Stormbringer responded with a confident purr.

The dukes also sensed it and glanced at one another.

Arioch's beautiful face seemed to flare with anger and his pseudo-body glided down the steps towards EJric, his fellow dukes following.

Eiric's steed backed away a few paces.

A blot of living fire seemed to appear in Arioch's hand and it shot towards me albino. He felt cold pain in his chest and he staggered in saddle.

"Your body is unimportant, Eiric. But think of a similar blow to your soul!" Arioch screamed, the facade of patience dropping from him.

Eiric flung back his head and laughed. Arioch had be-
trayed himself. If he had remained calm he would have had a
greater advantage, but now he showed himself perturbed,
whatever he had said to the contrary.

"Arioch-you aided me in the past. You will regret that!"

There's still time to undo my folly, upstart mortal!" Another
bolt came streaking towards him but Eiric passed
Stormbringer before it and observed, in relief, that it deflect-
ed the unholy weapon.

But, against such might, they were surely doomed, unless
they could invoke some supernatural aid. But Eiric dared not
risk summoning his namesword's brothers. Not yet He must
think of some other means.

As he retreated towards the searing bolts, Moonglum be-
hind him whispering almost impotent charms, he thought of
Ac vulture-lions he had sent back to Chaos. Perhaps he could
recall them—for a different purpose.

The spell was fresh in his mind, requiring a slightly
changed mental state and scarcely changed wording.

Calmly, working mechanically to deflect the bolts of the
dukes whose features had changed hideously to retain their
previous beauty but take on an increasingly malevolent ap-
pearance, he uttered the spell.

Creatures! Matik of MeJnibone made thee
From stuff of unformed madness!

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// thou wouldst live, then aid me now,
Come hither, or Matik's brew again shall be!

From out of the rolling darks of the plaza, the beaked
beasts appeared, prowling.

Eiric yelled at the dukes. "Mortal weapons cannot harm
you! But these are beasts of your own plane-sample their
ferocity." He ordered the vulture-lions upon the dukes.

Obviously put out by this. Arioch and his fellows backed
towards the steps again, calling their own commands to the
giant animals, but the things advanced, gathering speed.

Eiric saw Arioch shout, rave and then his body seemed to
split asunder and rise in a new, less recognisable shape as the
beasts attacked. AH was suddenly ragged colour, sound and
disordered matter.

Behind the embattled demons, Eiric saw Jagreen Lem running back into his palace. Hoping that the creatures he had summoned would hold the dukes, Eiric rode his horse around the boiling mass and galloped up the steps.

Through the doors the two men rode, catching a glimpse of the terrified theocrat running before them.

"Your allies were not so strong as you believed, Jagreen Lem!" Eiric yelled as he bore down upon his enemy. "Why, you foolish latecomer, did you think your knowledge matched that of a Melnibonean!"

Jagreen Lem began to climb a winding staircase, labouring up the steps, too afraid even to look back.

Eiric laughed again and pulled his horse to a stop, watching the running man:

"Dukes! Dukes!" sobbed Jagreen Lem as he climbed. "Do not desert me now!"

Moonglum whispered. "Surely those creatures will not defeat the aristocracy of hell?**

Eiric shook his head. "I do not expect them to, but if I finish Jagreen Lem, at least it could put an end to his conquests and demon-summoning." He spurred the Nihrain steed up the steps after the theocrat who heard him coming and flung himself into a room. Eiric heard a bar fall and bolts squeal.

When he reached the door it fell in at a blow of his sword and he was in a small chamber. Jagreen Lem had disappeared.

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Dismounting, Etric went to a small door in the farthest corner of the room and again demolished it A narrow stair led upwards, obviously into a tower.

Now he could take his vengeance, he thought, as he reached yet another door at the top of the stair and-drew back his sword to smite it. The blow fell, but the door held.

"Curse the thing, it is protected by charms!" he swore.

He was just about to aim another blow, when he heard Moonglum's urgent calling from below.
"Eirici Eiric-they've defeated the creatures. They are returning to the palace."

He would have to leave Jagreen Lern for the meantime. He sprang down the steps, into the chamber and out on to the stair. In the hall he saw the flowing shapes of the unholy trinity. Half-way up the stair, Moonglum was quaking.

"Stormbringer," said Eiric, "it is time to summon your brothers."

The sword twisted in his hand, as if in assent.

Eiric began to chant the mind-torturing, throat-torturing rune that Sepiriz had taught him.

Stormbringer moaned a counterpoint chorus to the dirge as the battle-worn dukes assumed different shapes and began to rise menacingly towards Eiric.

Then, in the air all about him, he saw shapes appear, shadowy shapes half on his own plane, half on the plane of Chaos. He saw them stir and suddenly it seemed as if the air was filled with a million swords, each a twin to Stonnbringer!

Acting on instinct, Eiric released his grip on his blade and flung it towards the rest. It hung in the air before them and they seemed to acknowledge it "Lead them, Stonnbrmgert Lead them against the dukes-or your master perishes and you'll not drink another human soul again!"

The sea of swords rustled and a dreadful moaning emanated from them. The dukes flung themselves upwards towards the albino and he recoiled before the evil hatred that poured from the twisting shapes.

Glancing down he saw Moonglum slumped in his saddle and did not know if he had perished or fainted.

Then the swords rushed upon the reaching dukes and Eiric's head swam with the sight of a million blades plunging into the stuff of their beings.

The unholy noise of the battle filled his ears, the dreadful sight of (he toiling conflict clouded his vision. Without Stormbringer's vitality he felt weak and limp. He felt his knees shake and crumple and he could do nothing to aid the
black sword's brothers as they clashed with the Dukes of Hell.

He collapsed, aware that if he witnessed such horror much longer he would become totally insane. Thankfully, he felt his mind go blank and then, at last, he was unconscious, unable to know which would win.

Five

His body itched. His arms and bade ached. His wrists pounced with agony. Eiric opened his eyes.

Immediately opposite him, spreadeagled in chains against the wall he saw Moonglum. Dull flame nickered in the centre of the place and he felt pain cm his naked knee, looked down and saw Jagreen Lern.

The Theocrat spat at him.


Jagreen Lem did not look triumphant. Rage still burned in his eyes.

"Oh, how shall I punish you," he said.

"Punish me? Then-?" Elric*s heartbeat increased.

"Your final spell succeeded," the Theocrat said dully, turning away to contemplate the brazier. "Both your allies and mine vanished and all my attempts to contact the dukes have proved fruitless. You achieved your threat-or your minions did-you sent them back to Chaos foreveri"

"My sword-what of that?"

The Theocrat smiled bitterly. "That's my only pleasure. Your sword vanished with its brothers. You are weak and helpless now, Ebiric. You are mine to maim and torture until the end of my life."

Eiric was dumbfounded by the news. Part of him rejoiced that the dukes had been beaten. Part of him lamented the loss of his sword. As Jagreen Lem had emphasised, without the blade he was less than half a man, for his albinism weakened him. Already bis eye-sight was dimmer and he felt no response in his limbs.

Jagreen Lem looked up at him.
"Enjoy the comparatively painless days left you, Eiric, but I leave you to anticipate what I have in store for you. I must away and instruct my men in the final preparations for the war-fleet soon to sail against the South. I won't waste time with crude torture now. for all the while I shall be scheming the most exquisite tortures conceivable. You shall take long years to die. I swear!"

He left the cell and as the door slammed he heard Jagreen Lem instructing the guard.

"Keep the brazier at full blast. Let them sweat like damned souls in hell. Feed them enough to keep them alive once every three days. They will soon be crying for water. Give them only sufficient to sustain their lives. They deserve far worse than this and they'll get their desserts when my mind has had time to work on the problem."

A day later, the real agony began. Their bodies gave out the last of their sweat. Their tongues were swollen in their heads and all the time as they groaned in their torment, they were aware that this terrible torture would be nothing compared to what they might expect Eiric's weakened body would not respond to his desperate struggling and at length his mind dulled, the agony became constant and familiar, and time was non-existent.

Finally, through a pain-thick daze, be recognised a voice. The hate-filled voice of Jagreen Lem.

Others were in the chamber. He felt their bands seize him and his body was suddenly light as he was borne, moaning from the cell.

Though he heard disjointed phrases he could make no sense of Jagreen Lern's words.

He was taken to a dark place that rolled about, hurting his scorched chest.

Later, be heard Moonglum's voice and strained to hear the words.

"Eirici What's happening? We're aboard a ship at sea, Fđ awearr
But Eiric mumbled disinterestedly. Gradually his deficient body was weakening, faster than would a normal man's. He thought of Zarozinia, whom he would never see again. He knew he would not live to know whether Law or Chaos finally won, or even if the Southlands would stand against the theocrat.

And these problems were fading in his mind again.

Then the food started to come and the water and it revived turn somewhat. At some stage, he opened his eyes and stared upwards into the thinly smiling face of Jagreen Lern.

"Thank the gods," said the Theocrat "I feared we'd lost you. You're a delicate case to be sure, my friend. You must stay alive longer than this. To begin my entertainment, I have arranged for you to sail on my own flagship. We are now crossing the Dragon Sea, our fleet well-protected by charms against the monsters roaming these parts." He frowned.

"Thanks to you, we haven't the same call for the charms which would have borne us safely through me chaos-torn waters. They are almost normal for the moment. But that will soon be changed."

Eiric's old spirit returned for a moment and he glared at his enemy, too weak to voice the loathing he felt.

Jagreen Lern laughed softly and stirred Eiric's gaunt white head with the toe of his boot "I think I can brew a drug which will give you a little more vitality."

The food was foul-tasting and had to be forced between Eiric's mumbling lips, but after a while he was able to sit up and observe the huddled body of Moonglum. Evidently the little man had totally succumbed to his torture. To his surprise, Eiric discovered he was unfettered and he crawled the agonising distance between himself and the Eastlander, shaking Moonglum's shoulder. He groaned but did not respond.

A shaft of dim light appeared and Eiric looked up to see that the hatch-cover had been prised aside and Jagreen Lern stared down at him.

"I see the brew had its effect. Come, Eiric, smell the invigorating sea and feel the warm sun on your body. We are not many infles from the coasts of Argimiliar and our scout-ships report quite a sizeable fleet sailing hence."
Elric cursed. "By Arioch, I hope they send you all to the bottom!"

Jagreen Lern pursed his lips mockingly. "By whom? Arioch? Do you not remember what ensued in my own palace? Arioch cannot be invoked. Not by you—not by me. Your stinking spells saw to that!"

He turned to an invisible lieutenant "Bind him and bring him on deck. You know what to do with him."

Two warriors dropped into me hold and grasped the still-weak Elric, tying his arms and legs and manhandling himf on to the deck. He gasped as the sun's glare struck his eyes.

"Prop him up so be may see all," Jagreen Lern ordered.

The warriors obeyed and Elric was lifted to a sending position, seeing Jagreen Lern's huge, black flagship with its silken deck canopies flapping in a steady westerly breeze, its three banks of straining oarsmen and its tall ebony mast bearing a sail of dark red.

Beyond the ship's rails, Elric saw a massive fleet surging in the flagship's wake. As well as the vessels of Pan Tang and Dharijor there were many from Jharkor, Shazar and Tarkesh but on every scarlet sail the Merman blazon of Pan Tang was painted.

Depression filled Elric, for he knew that the Southlands, however strong, could not match a fleet like this.

"We have been at sea for only three days," said Jagreen Lern, "but thanks to a witch-wind, we're almost at our destination. A scout ship has recently reported that the Lor-myrarian navy, hearing rumours of our superior sea-power, is sailing to join with us. A wise move of King Montan—for the moment, at any rate. Ill make use of him for the time being and, when his usefulness is over, H1 have him killed for the treacherous turncoat he is."

"Why do you tell me all this?" Elric whispered, his teeth gritted against the pain that came with any slight movement of his face or body.

"Because I want you to witness for yourself thee defeat of the South. I want you to know that what you sought to avert
wfill come to pass. After we have subdued the South and sucked her of her treasures, we*M vanquish the Isle of tee Purple Towns and press forward to sack Vilmir and flmion, That wfill be an easy matter don't you agree?"

When Elric did not reply, Jagreen Lem gestured impatiently to his men.

"Tie him to me mast so that he may get a good view of the battle. HI put a protective charm around his body, for I do not want him to be killed by a stray arrow and cheat me of my full vengeance.**

Elric was borne up and roped to the mast, but he was scarcely aware of it, for his head lolled on his right shoulder, only semi-conscious.

The massive fleet plunged onwards, certain of victory.

By mia-afternoon Elric was aroused from his stupor by the shout of the helmsman.
"Sad to the south-east! Lormyrian fleet approaches.**

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With impotent anger, Eiric saw the fifty two-masted ships, their sails bright against the sombre scarlet of Jagreen Lem's vessels, come into line with the others.

Lormyr, though a smaller power than Argimiliar, had a larger navy. Eiric judged that King Mootan's treachery had cost the south more than a quarter of its strength.

Now he knew there was absolutely no hope for the south and that Jagreen Lem's certainty of victory was well-founded.

Night fell and the huge fleet lay at anchor. A guard came to feed Eiric a mushy porridge containing another dose of the revitalising drug. As he revived, his anger increased, and Jagreen Lern paused by the mast on two occasions, taunting him savagely.

"Soon after dawn we shall meet the southern fleet," Jagreen Lem smiled, "and by noon what is left of it will float as bloody driftwood behind us as we press on to establish our reign over those nations who so foolishly relied on their sea-power as defence."

Eiric remembered how he had warned the Icings of the Southlands that this was likely to happen if they stood alone
against the theocrat. But he wished that he had been wrong. With the defeat of the south, the conquest of the east seemed bound to follow and, when Jagreen Lera ruled the world, Chaos would dominate and the earth revert to the sniff from which it had been formed millions of years before.

AU through that moonless night he brooded, pulling his thoughts together, summoning all his strength for a plan that was, as yet, only a shadow in the back of his mind.

Six

The rattle of anchors woke him.

Shaking in the light of the watery sun. he saw the southern fleet on the horizon, riding gracefully in hollow pomp towards the ships of Jagreen Lem.

Either, he thought, the southern kings were very brave or else they did not understand the strength of their enemies.

Beneath him, on Jagreen Lem's foredeck, a great catapult rested, and slaves had already filled its cup with a large hall of flaming pitch. Normally. Eiric knew, such catapults were an encumbrance, since when they reached that size they were difficult to rewind and gave lighter war-machines the advantage. Yet obviously Jagreen Lem's engineers were not fools. Eiric noted extra mechanisms on the big catapult and realised they were equipped to rewind rapidly.

The wind had dropped and five hundred pairs of muscles alone strove to row Jagreen Lem's galley along. On the deck, in disciplined order, his warriors took their posts beside the great boarding platforms that would drop down on to opponent ships and grapple them at the same time as they formed a bridge between the vessels.

Eiric was forced to admit that Jagreen Lern had used foremost. He had not relied wholly on supernatural aid. His ships were the best equipped he had ever seen.

The southern fleet, Eiric decided, was doomed. To fight Jagreen Lem was not bravery-it was insanity.

But Jagreen Lern had made one mistake. He had, in his gnawing desire for vengeance, ensured that Ekic's vitality was restored for a few hours and this vitality extended to his mind as well as his body.

Stormbringer had vanished. With the sword he was. among
men. all but invincible. Without it, he was helpless. These were facts. Therefore he must somehow regain the blade. But how? It had returned to the plane of Chaos with its brothers, presumably drawn back there by the overwhelming force of me rest He must contact it He dare not summon me entire horde of blades with spell, that would be tempting providence too far.

He heard the sudden thwack and roar as the giant catapult discharged its first shot. The flame-shrouded pitch went arching over the ocean and landed short, boiling me sea around it as it guttered and sank. Swiftly the war-engine was rewound and he marvelled at the speed as another ball of flaring pitch was forked into its cup. Jagreen Lcm looked up at him and laughed.

"My pleasure will be short—mere are not enough of them to put up a decent fight Watch them perish, Eiric!"

Brie said nothing, pretended to be dazed and frightened.

The next fireball struck one of the leading ships directly and Eiric saw tiny figures scampering about, striving desperately to quench the spreading pitch, but within a minute the whole ship was ablaze, a gouting mass of flame as me figures now jumped overboard, unable to save their vessel.

Now the air around him sounded to the rushing heat of the fireballs and within range now, the southerners retaliated with their lighter machines until it seemed the sky was filled with a thousand comets and the heat almost equalled that which Eiric had experienced in the torture chamber.

Mack smoke began to drift as the brass beaks of the ships* rams ground through timbers, impaling ships like skewered fish. The hoarse yells of fighting men began to sound and Eiric heard the dash of iron as the first few opposing warriors met

But now be only vaguely heard me sounds, for he was concentrating.

At last he was ready and, aware that his voice would prob-
ably not be heard by human ears above the noise of war,
called in a desperate and agonising voice: "Stormbringer!"

His straining mind echoed the shout and he seemed to look
beyond the turbulent battle, beyond the ocean, beyond the
very earth to a place of shadows and terror. Something
moved there. Many things moved there.

"Stormbringer!"

He heard a curse from beneath him and saw Jagreen Lem
pointing up at him.

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"Gag the whitefaced sorcerer." Jagreen Lcrn's eyes met El-
ric's and the theocrat sucked in his tips, deliberating a bare
moment before adding: "And if that doesn't put an end to
his babbling-slay him!"

The lieutenant began to climb the mast towards Eiric.

**Stormbringerl Your master perishesi"

He struggled in the biting ropes but could hardly move.

"Stormbringer!**

All his life he had hated the sword he relied so much upon.
Now he called for it as a lover calls for his betrothed.

The warrior grasped his foot and shook it "Silence! You
beard my master."

With insane eyes, Eiric looked down at the warrior who
shuddered and drew his sword, hanging to the mast with one
hand and readying himself to make a stab at Eiric's vitals.

*Stormbringeri" Eiric sobbed the name. He must Kve.
Without him. Chaos would surely nde the world.

The man hinged at Elric*s body-yet the blade did not
reach the albino. Then Eiric remembered, with sudden hu-
mour, that Jagreen Lcrn had placed a protective spell about
him! The Thcocrat's own magic had saved his enernyl

**Stormbringererr

Now the warrior gasped and the sword dropped from hia
fingers. He seemed to grapple with something invisible at his
throat and Eiric saw me man's fingers sliced off and blood
sport from the stumps. Then, slowly, a shape materialised
and, with bounding relief, the albino saw that it was a
word-bis own runesword impaling the warrior and sucking
out his soul

The warrior dropped, but Stormbringer hung in the air and
men turned to slash the ropes restraining Eiric's hands and
men nestled firmly, with horrid affection, in its master's right
fist

At once the stolen life-stuff of the warrior began to pour
through Eiric's being and the pain of his body vanished.
Quickly be grasped a piece of man sail's rigging and cut away
the rest of bis bonds until he was swinging by one hand on
tile rope.

"Now, Jagreen Lem. well sec who takes vengeance, fi-
finally."

He wrenched up (he hatch-cover and stared down at the
pitiful figure of his friend. Evidently he had been left to
starve to death. A rat scuttled away as the light shone down.

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Eiric jumped into the hold and saw, with horror, that part
of Moonglum's right arm had been gnawed already. He
heaved the body on to his shoulder, aware that the heart still
beat, though faintly, and clambered back on to the deck.

How to ensure his friend's safety and still take vengeance
on Jagreen Lem was a problem. But Eiric moved towards the
boarding platform which he guessed the theocrat to have
crossed. As he did so, three warriors leapt towards him. One
of them cried:

"The albino! The reaver has escaped F*

Eiric struck him down with a blow that required only a
flick of his wrist. The black sword did the rest The others re-
treated, remembering how Eiric had entered Hwamgaari.

New energy flowed through him. For every corpse he
killed, his strength increased-a stolen strength, but accessary
if he was to survive and win the day for Law.

He ran, untroubled by his burden, over the boarding plat-
form and on to the deck of the southern ship. Up ahead he
saw the standard of Argimiliar and a little group of men around it, headed by King Hozel himself, his face gaunt as he stared at the knowledge of his own death. A deserved death, thought Eiric grimly, but nonetheless when Hozel died it would mean another victory for Chaos.

Then he heard a shout of a different quality, thought for a moment he had been observed, but one of Hozel's men was pointing to the North and mouthing something.

Eiric looked in the direction and saw, with mixed emotions, the brave sails of the Purple Towns. They were brightly painted and gay, some even embroidered, for the only rich decoration the Sealords allowed themselves was upon their sails.

But they had arrived belatedly. Even if they had sailed with the other southern vessels it would have been unlikely that they could have turned the day against Pan Tang.

At that moment, staring around him, Jagreen Lem saw Eiric and bellowed at his men who moved forward warily and reluctantly, approaching the albino in a wide semi-circle.

Eiric cursed the brave Sealords who had added a further factor to his indecision.

Menacingly he swung the moaning runeblade about him and advanced to meet the half-terrified Pan Tang warriors.

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They dropped back, BOOM of them groaning as the blade touched them. The way was now dear to Jagreen Lem.

But the ships of the Purple Towns were drawing closer, almost within catapult range.

Eiric looked directly into Jagreen Lem's frightened face and snarled: "I doubt if my blade has the strength to pierce your burning armour with one blow, and one blow is all I have time for. I leave you now, theocrat, but remember that even if you conquer all the world including the unknown lands of the East, I will have my sword drink your black soul at length."

With that he dropped Moonglum's unconscious body overboard and dived after it into the choppy sea.

Resuming his hold on his friend's body, he began to swim
with superhuman strokes towards the leading vessel of the Sealords. Karkan's ship.

Now, behind him, Jagreen Lem and his men saw their own flagship blazing. Eiric had done his work well.

That, too, would serve to divert attention from Karkan's fleet.

Trusting to me sealords* famed seamanship he swam directly in the path of the leading galleon, shouting Karkan*s name.

The ship veered slightly and he saw bearded faces at the rail, saw ropes flicker towards him and grasped one, letting them haul him upwards with his burden until he was pulled over the side.

Karkan stared at him with shocked eyes.

"Eli-ici We thought you dead-and now I see you have been, or worse!"

Eiric spat salt-water from his mouth and said urgently:

Turn your fleet, Karkan! Turn it back the way it has come, there is no hope of saving the Southblandera-they are doomed. We must preserve our forces for a later struggle."

Hesitating momentarily, Karkan gave the order which was swiftly relayed to the rest of his sixty strong fleet.

As me ships turned away, Eiric noted that hardly a Southern ship remained afloat For more than a mile the water burned and the spluttering of the flaming, sinking ships was blended with the screams of the maimed and drowning.

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"With the Southern sea-power crushed so decisively," Karkan said, watching the physician who was tending to Moooglura, "the lands will not last long before Pan Tang's marching hordes. Like us, the South relied too much on its ships. It has taught me that we must strengthen our land defences if we are to have any chance at all."

"From now on well use your island as our main headquarters," Eiric said. "Well fortify the whole place and from there keep in close touch with what is happening in the south. How is my friend, physician?"
The physician looked up. These are no battle-made wounds. He's been hurt sorely, but hell live. He should recover to perfect fitness given a month or so of rest."

"He*H have it," Eiric promised. He gripped the nmesword at his belt and wondered what other tasks lay in store for mem before the last great battle between Law and Chaos was joined.

Chaos would soon rule more than half me worid, in spite of the powerful blow he had dealt it in forever sentencing the Dukes of Hell to their own plane; the more power that Jagreen Lem gathered, the more the threat from Chaos would increase.

He sighed and looked Northwards.

Two days later they returned to the Isle of the Purple Towns, the fleet remaining in the largest harbour of Utkel since it was thought wise to have it at hand and not disperse ft.

All that following night, Eiric talked with the Sealords, ordered messengers to Vilmir and Ilmiora and, towards morning, there came a polite knock on the door of the room.

Kargan got up to open it and stared in astonishment at the tall, black-faced man who stood there.

"Sepiriz!" Eiric cried. "How did you come here?"

"On horseback," smiled the giant, "and you know me power of the Nihrain steeds. I had come to warn you. We have, at last, managed to contact the White Lords but they can do little as yet Somehow a path to their plane must be made through the barricades which Chaos has constructed against them. Jagreen Lem's ships have vomited their contents on the southern shores and his warriors swarm inland. There is nothing we can do now to stop his conquests there.

Once consolidated, his Earthly power increased, he win be able to summon more and more allies from Chaos."

Then where does my next task lie?" Eiric asked softly.

"I am not sure yet. But that is not what I came for. Your blade's sojourn with its brothers has strengthened it. You may have noticed how swiftly it pours power into your body
now?"

Eiric nodded.

That power is evilly-gained and is evil in itself. The blade's strength will continue to increase and yours will, also. But, as Chaos-begotten power fills your being, you will have to fight, yet more strongly, to control the force within you."

Eiric sighed and grasped Sepinz's arm.

Thanks for the warning, friend, but when I beat the Dukes of Hell, to whom I formerly pledged allegiance, I did not expect to escape with a mere scratch or a flesh-wound. Know this, Sepiriz," he turned to the watching sealords, "and know this all of you."

He drew the groaning runeblade from its scabbard and held it aloft so that it shone and flared in its awful power.

This blade was forged by Chaos to conquer Chaos and mat is my destiny, too. Though the world transmutes to boiling gas I shall live. now. I swear by the Balance of the Cosmos that Law shall triumph and New Age come to the Earth."

Taken aback by this grim vow, the sealords glanced at one another and Sepiriz smiled.

"Let us hope so, Eiric," he said. "Let us hope so."

BOOK THREE

Sad Giant's Shield

Thirteen times thirteen, the steps to the sad giants lair:

And the Chaos Shield lies there.
Seven time seven are the elder trees
Twelve times twelve warriors he sees
But the Chaos Shield lies there.
And the hero fair will the sad giant dare
And a red sword wield for the sad giant's shield
On a mournful victory day.

-The Chronicle of the Black Sword

One

Across the world the shadow of anarchy had fallen. Neither god, nor man, nor that which ruled both could clearly read
the future and see the fate of Earth as the Forces of Chaos increased their strength through the machinations of their human minions.

From Westland mountain, over the agitated ocean to Southland plain. Chaos now held its monstrous sway. Tormented, miserable, unable to hope any longer for liberation from the corroding, warping influence of Chaos, the remnants of races fled over the two continents already fallen to the human minions of Disorder, led by their warped Theocrat Jagreen Lem of Pan Tang, aquiline, high-shouldered and greedy for power, in his glowing scarlet armour, controlling human vultures and supernatural creatures alike as he widened his black boundaries.

Upon the face of the Earth all was disruption and roaring anguish* save for the thinly populated, already threatened Eastern continent and the Isle of the Purple Towns, which now readied itself to withstand Jagreen Lem's initial onslaught. The on-rushing tide of Chaos must soon sweep the world unless some great force could be summoned to halt it.

Bleakly, bitterly, the few who still resisted Jagreen Lem, under the command of Eiric of Melnibone, talked of strategy and tactics in the full knowledge that more than these were needed to beat back Jagreen Lem's unholy horde.

Desperately, Eiric attempted to utilise the ancient sorcery of his emperor forefathers to contact the White Lords of Law; but he was unused to seeking such aid and, as well, the forces of Chaos were now so strong, that those of Law could no longer gain easy access to the Earth as they had contrived to do in earlier times.

As they prepared for the coming fight, Eiric and his allies

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wart about the preparation with heavy Routs and a sense of die futility of such action. And, in the back of EIríc's mind, was the constant knowledge that even if he won against Chaos, the very act of winning would destroy the world be knew and leave it ripe for the forces of Law to rule-and there would be no place in such a world for the wild albino sorcerer.

Beyond the earthly plane, in their bordering realms, the
Lords of Chaos and of Law, watched the struggle and even they did not realise Elric's entire destiny.

Chaos triumphed. Chaos blocked the efforts of Law on each occasion they tried to pass through the domain of Chaos, now the only road to Earth. And the Lords of Law shared Elric's frustration.

And, if Chaos and Law were observing the Earth and her struggle, who watched these? For Chaos and Law were but the twin weights in a balance and the hand that held the balance, though it rarely deigned to interfere in their struggle, still less in the affairs of men, had reached the rare state of a decision to alter the status quo. Which weight would drop? Which rise? Could men decide? Could the Lords decide? Or could only the Cosmic Hand remould the pattern of the Earth, reforming her stuff, changing her spiritual constituents and placing her on a different path, a fresh course of destiny?

Perhaps all would play some part before the outcome was decided.

The great zodiac influencing the universe and its Ages, had completed its twelve cycles and the cycles would soon begin again. The wheel would spin and, when it stopped its spinning, which symbol would dominate, how changed would it be?

Great movements, on the Earth and beyond it; great destinies were being shaped, great deeds were being planned and, marvellously, could it just be possible that in spite of the Lords of the Higher Worlds, in spite of the Cosmic Hand, in spite of the myriad supernatural denizens that swarmed the universe, that Man might decide the issue?

Even-one man?

One man, one sword, one destiny?

Elric of Melnibone sat hunched in his saddle, watching the warriors bustle to and fro around him in the city square of Bakshaan. Here, years before* he had conducted a siege against the city's leading merchant, tricked others and left rich, but such scores that they held against him were now forgotten, pushed from their minds by the threat of war and the knowledge that if Elric's command could not save them, nothing could. The walls of the city were being widened and
heightened, warriors being trained in the use of unfamiliar war-engines. From being a lazy merchant city, Bakshaan had become a functional place, ready for battle when it came.

For a month, Eiric had been riding the length and breadth of the eastern kingdoms of Ilmiora and Vihnir, overseeing preparations, building the strength of the two nations into an efficient war machine.

Now he studied parchments handed him by his lieutenants and, recalling all the old tactical skill of his ancestors, gave them his decisions.

The sun set and heavy black clouds hung against a sharp, metallic blue sky, stretching over the horizon. Eiric loosened his cloak strings and allowed the folds of the garment to enclose him, for a chill had come.

Then, as he silently regarded the sky to the west, he frowned as he noticed something like a flashing golden star appear, moving swiftly towards him.

Ever wary for signs of the coming of Chaos, he turned in his saddle shouting:

"Every man to his position! Ware the golden globe!"

The thing approached rapidly until soon, it was hanging over the city, all men looking up at it in astonishment, their hands on their weapons. As black night fell, the clouds admitting no moonlight, the globe began to fall towards the spires of Bakshaan, a strange luminescence pulsing from it. Eiric tugged Stormbringer from its scabbard and black fire nicked along the blade as it gave out a low moaning sound. The globe touched the cobbles of the city-square, broke into a million fragments that glowed for a moment before vanishing.

Eiric laughed in relief, resheathing Stormbringer as he saw who now stood in the place of the golden globe.

"Sepiriz, my friend. You choose strange means of transport to carry you from the Gorge of Nihrain."

The tall, black-faced seer smiled, his white pointed -teem |faM««"E "I have so few carriages of dial type dial I must only use diem when pressed. I come with news for you-much news."
"I hope it is good, for we have enough bad to last us forever."

"It is mixed. Where can we converse in private?"
"My headquarters are in yonder mansion," Eiric pointed at a richly decorated house on the far side of the square.

Inside, Eiric poured yellow wine for his guest Kelos the merchant, whose house this was, had not accepted the requisitioning altogether willingly and, partly because of this, Eiric maliciously made free with all Kelos's best

Sepiriz took: the goblet and sipped the strong wine.

"Have you succeeded in contacting the White Lords yet, Sepiriz?" Eiric asked.

"We have."

*Thank the gods. Are they willing to give their aid to us?*

"They have always been so willing—but they have not yet made a sufficient breach in the protection that Chaos has set up around the planet However, me fact that I have at last managed to contact them is a better sign than any we've had these past months."

"So—the news is good." Eiric said cheerfully.

"Not altogether. Jagreen Lern's fleet has set sail again—and they beed towards the eastern continent, with thousands of ships—and supernatural allies, too."

"It was only what I expected, Sepiriz. My work's done here, anyway, ni ride for me Isle of the Purple Towns at once, for I must lead the fleet against Jagreen Lern."

"Your chances of winning will be all but non-existent. El-ric." Sepiriz wamed him gravely. "Have you heard of the ShysofHeUr"

"I've heard of them—do they not sail the depths of the ea, taking on board dead mariners as crews?*

"They do—they're things of Chaos and far larger man even the largest mortal warship. You'd never withstand teem, even if you did not have the theocrafs fleet to fight as well."
I'm aware me fight will be hard, Sepiriz—but what else can we do? I have a weapon against Chaoa in my blade here.-

"Not enough, mat bodkin—you still have no protection against Chaos. That is what I have to tell you about—a personal armament for yourself to help you in your struggle, though you'll have to win it from its present possessor."

"Who possesses it?"

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"A giant who broods in eternal misery in a great castle on the edge of the world, beyond the Sighing Desert. His name is Mordaga who was once a god but is now made mortal for the sins he committed against his fellow gods long ages ago."

"Mortal? Yet he has lived so long?"

"Aye. Mordaga is mortal—though his life-span is considerably longer than an ordinary man's. He is obsessed with the knowledge that he must one day die. This is what saddens him."

"And the weapon?"

"Not a weapon exactly—but a shield. A shield with a purpose—one that Mordaga had made for himself when he raised a rebellion in the domain of the gods and sought to make himself greatest of the gods and even wrest the Eternal Balance from the One Who Holds It. For this he was banished to Earth and informed that he would one day die—slain by a mortal blade. The shield, as you might guess, is proof against the workings of Chaos."

"How does it do this?" Eiric asked curiously.

The chaotic forces, if powerful enough, can disrupt any defence made of lawful matter; no construction based on the principles of order can withstand for long the ravages of beer chaos, as we know.

"Stormbringer has shown you that the only weapon effective against Chaos is something of Chaos-manufacture. The same can be said for the Chaos Shield. This itself is chaotic in nature and therefore there is nothing organised in it on which the random forces can act and destroy. It meets Chaos with Chaos, and so the hostile powers are subverted."
"I see. If I had only had such a shield of late, things might have gone better for us all."

"I could not tell you of it. As I have mentioned, I am merely the servant of Fate and cannot act unless it is sanctioned by my masters. Perhaps as I have guessed they are willing to see Chaos sweep the world before it is defeated—if it is ever defeated—so that it can completely change the nature of our planet before the new cycle begins. Change it will—but whether it will be ruled in the future primarily by Law or Chaos—that is in your bands, Eirici."

"I'm becoming used to me burden my friend. How would I recognise this shield?"

"By the eight-arrowed Sign of Chaos which radiates from its boss. It is a heavy, round shield, made as a buckler for a giant. But, with the vitality you receive from that runesword there, you will have the strength to carry it, have no fear. But first you must have the courage to win it from its current holder. Mordaga is aware of the prophecy, told him by his fellow gods before they cast him forth."

"Are you, too, aware of it?"

"I am. In our language it forms a simple rhyme:

"Mordaga's pride; Mordaga's doom,
Mordaga's fate shall be
To die as men when slain by men,
Four men of destiny."

"Four men? Who are the other three?"

"Those you will know of when the time comes for you to seek the Chaos Shield. Which will you do? Go to the Purple Towns—or will you go to find the shield?"

"I wish that I had the time to embark on a quest of that kind, but I have not. I must go to rally my men, shield or no."

"You will be defeated."

"We shall see. Sepuiz."

"Very well, Eiric. Since so little of your destiny is in your
own bands, we should allow you to take just one decision at times. **Sepiriz smiled sympathetically.**

"Fate is kind," Eiric commented ironically. He rose from his seal "I'll begin the Journey straightway, for there's no time to lose."

Two

With his milk-white hair streaming behind him and his red eyes blazing with purpose, Eiric lashed his stallion through the cold darkness of the night, through a disturbed land which awaited Jagreen Lem's attack in trepidation, for it could mean not only their deaths, but the drawing of their souls into the servitude of Chaos.

Already the standards of a dozen Western and Southern monarchs fluttered with Jagreea Lem's as the kings of the conquered lands chose his command rather than death-and placed their peoples under bis dominance so that they became marching, blank-faced creatures with enslaved souls, their wives and children dead, tormented or feeding the blood-washed altars of Pan Tang where the priests send up invocations to the Chaos Lords, and, ever-willing to further their power on Earth, the Lords answered with support.

And not only the entities themselves, but the stuff of their own weird cosmos was entering the Earth, so that where their power was, me land heaved like the sea, or the sea flowed like lava, mountains changed shape and trees sprouted ghastly blossoms never seen OD Earth before.

Wherever Jagreen Lern conquered, the warping influence of Chaos was manifest. The very spirits of nature were tortured into becoming what they should not be-air, fire, water and earth, all became unstable, for Jagreen Lem and bis allies were tampering not only with the lives and souls of men, but the very constituents of the planet itself. And there were none of sufficient power to punish them for these crimes. None.

With this knowledge within him, Eiric's progress was swift and wild, as he strove to reach the Isle of the Purple Towns before his pitifully inadequate fleet sailed to do battle with Chaos.

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Two days later he arrived in the port of Uhaio, at the tip of the smallest of the three Vilmirian peninsulas, and took ship at once to the Isle of the Purple Towns, where he disembarked and rode into the interior towards the ancient fortress Ma-ha-kil-agreu which had withstood every siege ever made against it* and was regarded as the most impregnable construction in the whole of the lands still free from Chaos. Its name was in an older language than any known to those who lived in the current Age of the Young Kingdoms. Only Eiric knew what the name signified. The fortress had been there long before the present races came to dominance, even before Elite's ancestors had begun their conquerings. Ma-ha-kU-agra-me Fort of Evening, where long ago, a lonely race had come to die.

As he arrived in the courtyard, Moonglum, the Easflander, came rushing from the entrance of a tower.

"Eirict We have been awaiting your arrival, for time grows acarce before we must embark against the enemy. We have Bent out ship-borne spies to estimate the size and power of Jagreen Lem's fleet Only four returned and all were uselessly insane. The fifth has just come back, but-

-Butwhat

"See for yourself. He has been-altered, Eiric.**

"Altered Altered Let me see him. Take me to him." Eiric nodded curdy to the other captains who had come out to greet him. He passed them and followed behind Moonglum through the stone corridors of the fortress, lit badly by spluttering rushes.

Leading Eiric to an antechamber, Moonglum stopped outside, running his fingers through his thick, red hair. "He is therein. Would you care to interview him alone? I'd rather not set eyes on him again!"

"Very wen," Eiric opened the door, wondering how this spy would be changed. Sitting at the plain wooden table, was the remains of a man. It looked up. As Moonglum had warned him—it had been altered.

Eiric felt pity for the man, but he was not nauseated or horrified like Moonglim, for in his sorcery-working he had seen far worse creatures. It was as if the whole of one side of the spy's body had become at one stage viscous, had flowed, and men coiled in a random shape. Side of head, shoulder, arm, torso, leg, all were replaced by streamers of flesh like
rat's tails, lumps of matter like swollen boils, weirdly mottled. The spy spread his good band and some of the streamer seemed to jerk and wave in unison.

Eiric spoke quietly. "What magic wrought this drastic changer"

A kind of Chuckle came from the lopsided face. "I entered the Realm of Chaos, lord. And Chaos did this, tt changed me as you see. The boundaries are being extended. I did not know it I was inside before I realised what had happened. The area of Chaos is being widened!" He leant forward, his shaking voice almost screaming. "With it sail the massed fleets of Jagreen Lem-great waves of warships, squadrons of invasion craft, thousands of transports, shun mounting great war engines, fire-ships-ships of all kinds, bearing a multitude of standards-me kings of the south left...

live have sworn loyally to Jagreen Lem and he has used all their resources and his own to marshal this sea-horde! As he sails, he extends the area of Chaos, so whereas his sailing is dower than normal, when he reaches us here-Chaos will be with him. I saw such ships that could be of no earthly contriving-the size of castles-each one seeming to be a dazzling combination of all colours!

**So be has managed to bring more supernatural allies to his standard," Eiric roused. Those are the Ships of Hdl, Scpiriz mentioned . . ."

"Aye-and even if we beat the natural craft." the messenger said, hysterically, "we could not beat born the ships of Chaos and me stuff of Chaos which boils around mem and did to me what you observe! It boils, it warps, it changes constantly. That is Q I know, save that Jagreen Lem and hnhuman allies are unharmed by it as I was harmed. When mis change began to take place in my body, I fled to me Dragon Uto of Melnibone, which seems to have withstood me process and is the only safe land in an the waters of the world. My body-healed-swiftly, and I chanced another sailing to bring me here."

"You were courageous," Eiric said hoUowly. "You will be wen rewarded, I promise."
"I want only one reward, my lord."

• What is that?••

••Death. I can no longer live with the horror of my body
Bdrorring the horror in my brains!"

**I will see to it," Eiric promised. He remained brooding

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for a few seconds before nodding farewell to the spy and
leaving the room.

Moooglum met him outside.

"It looks blade for us, Eiric." he said softly.

Eiric sighed. "Aye-perhaps I should have gone to seek the
Chaos Shield first."

"What's thatr

Eiric explained all Sepiriz had told him.

"We could do with such a defence," Moonglum agreed.
"But there it is-the priority is tomorrow*s sailing. Your cap-
tains await you in the conference chamber.**

"I will see them in a short while," Eiric promised. "First I
wish to go to my own room to collect my thoughts. Tell them
HI )oin them when that's done."

When he reached his room, Eiric locked the door behind
him, still thinking of the spy's information. He knew that
without supernatural aid no ordinary fleet, no matter bow
large or how courageously manned, could possibly withstand
Jagreen Lem. And the fact was that he had only a compara-
tively small Beet, no supernatural entities for allies, no means
of combatting the disrupting chaotic forces. If only he had
the Chaos Shield beside him now ... But it was useless to re-
gret a decision of the kind he'd made. If he sought the shield
now, he couldn't fight the battle in any case.

For weeks he had consulted the gnmoires that, in the form
of scrolls, tablets, books and sheets of precious metals en-
graved with ancient symbols, littered his room. The Element-
tals bad helped him in the past, but, so disrupted were they
by Chaos, that they were weak for the most part.

He unstrapped his hell-sword and filing it on me bed of
tumbled silks and furs. Wryly he thought back to earlier times when he had given in to despair and how those incidents which had engendered the mood seemed merely gay escapades in comparison to the task which now weighed on his mind. Though weary, he chose not to draw Stormbringer's stolen energy into himself, for the feeling that was so close to ecstasy was leavened by the guilt-the guilt which had possessed him since a child when he had first realised that the expression on his remote father's face had not been one of love, but of disappointment that he should have spawned a deficient weakling-a pale albino, good for nothing, without the aid of drugs or sorcery.

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Eiric sighed and went to the window to stare out over the low hills and beyond them to the sea. He spoke aloud, perhaps subconsciously, hoping that the release of the words would relieve some of the tension within him.

"I do not care for this responsibility," he said. "When I fought the Dead God he spoke of both gods and men as shadow-things, playing puppet-parts before the true history of Earth began and men found their fate in their own hands. Then Sepiriz teus me I must turn against Chaos and help destroy the whole nature of the world I know or history might never begin again, and Fate's great purpose would be thwarted. Therefore I am the one who must be split and tempered to fulfill my destiny-I must know no peace of mind, must fight men and gods and the stuff of Chaos without surcease, must bring about the death of this age so that, in some far dawn-age, men who know little of sorcery or the Lords of the Higher Worlds, may move about a world where the major forces of Chaos can no longer enter, where justice may actually exist as a reality, and not as a mere concept in the minds of philosophers."

He rubbed his red eyes with his fingers.

"So fate makes Eiric a martyr that Law might rule the world. It gives him a sword of ugly evil that destroys friends and enemies alike and sucks their soul-stuff out to feed him the strength he needs. It binds me to evil and to Chaos, in order that I may destroy evil and Chaos-but it does not make me some senseless dolt easily convinced and a willing sacrifice. No, it makes me Eiric of Memibone and floods me with a mighty misery..."
"My lord speaks aloud to himself—and his thoughts are gloomy. Speak them to me, instead, so that I might help you bear them, Eiric.'*

Recognising the soft voice, but astonished nonetheless. Ellie turned quickly towards the source and saw his wife, Zarokinia standing there, her arms outstretched and a look of deep sympathy upon her young face.

He took a step towards her before stopping and saying anfrOy: "When did you come here? Why? I told you to remain in your father's palace at Kariaak until this business is done, ifeverr

**H ever .. .** She repeated, dropping her arms to her sides with a little shrug. Though scarcely more than a girl, with her

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full red lips and long blade: hair, die bore herself aft ft princess must and seemed more than her age.

"Ask not that question," he said cynically. "It is not one we ask ourselves here. But answer mine: How did you come here and why?" He knew what her reply would be. but be spoke only to emphasise his anger which in turn was a result of his horror that she should have come so close to danger—danger which he had already rescued her from once.

"I came with my cousin Opluk*s two thousand,** she said, fitting her head defiantly, "when be joined the defenders of Uhaio. I came to be near my husband at a time when he may need my comforting. The gods know I've had little oppor-tunity to discover if be doesF

Eiric paced the room in agitation. "As I love you, Zarozinia, believe that I would be in Kariaak now with you had I any excuse at all. But I have not—you know my role, my destiny, my doom. You bring sorrow with your presence, not help. If this business has a satisfactory end, then well meet again, m joy—not in misery as we now must!"

He crossed to her and took her in his arms. "Oh, Zorinia, we should never have met, never have married. We can only hurt one another at this time. Our happiness was so brief.. .-

*If you would be hurt by me, then hurt you shall be," she said softly, "but if you would be comforted, then I am hero
to comfort my lord."

He relented with a sigh. These are loving words, my dear—but they are not spoken in loving times. I have put love aside for the nonce. Try to do likewise and thus well both dispense with added complication."

Without anger, she drew slowly away from him and with a slight smile that had something of irony in it, pointed to the bed, where Stormbringer lay.

"I see your other mistress still shares your bed," she said. "And now you need never try to dismiss her again, for that black Lord of Nihrain has given you an excuse to forever keep her by your side. Destiny—is that the word? Destiny! Ah, the deeds men have done in Destiny's name. And what is destiny, Brie, can you answer?"

He shook his head. "Since you ask the question in malice, I not make the attempt to answer it."

She cried suddenly: "Oh, Eirici I—faave travelled for many

days to see you, thinking you would welcome me. And now we speak in anger!"

"Fear! he said urgently. "It is fear, not anger. I fear for you as I fear for the fate of the world! See me to my ship in the morning and then make speed back to Kariaak. I beth yon."

"If you wish it"

She walked back into the small chamber which joined the main one.

Three

"We talk only of defeat! roared Kargan of the Purple Towns, beating upon the table with his fist His beard seemed to bristle with rage.

Dawn had found all but a few of Ac captain* retiring through weariness. Kargan* Moonglum, Etric's cousin Dyvim Slonn and moon-faced Dralab of Tarkesh, remained in the chamber, pondering tactics.

Eiric answered him calmly: "We talk of defeat, Kargan, because we must be prepared for that eventuality. It seems
likely, does it not? We must, if defeat seems imminent, flee our enemies, conserving our force for another attack on Jagreen Lera. We shall not have the forces to fight another major battle, so we must use our better knowledge of currents, winds and terrain to fight him from ambush on sea or land. Thus we can perhaps demoralise his warriors and take considerably more of them than they can of us.**

"Aye—I see the logic," Kargan rumbled unwillingly, evidently disturbed by this talk for, if the major battle was lost, then lost also would be the Isle of the Purple Towns, bastion against Chaos for the "minly"* nations of Vumir and Dnu-ora.

Moonglum shifted his position, granting slightly. "And if they drive us back, men back we must go, beading rather than breaking, and returning from other directions to attack and confuse them. Ifs in my mind that well have to move more rapidly than we*Q be able to, since we'd be tired and with few provisions ..." He grinned faintly, "Ah, forgive me for my pessimism. Ill-placed. I fear."

"No," Brie said. "We must face all this or be caught unawares. You are right And to allow for ordered retreat, I have already sent detachments to die Sighing Desert and the Weeping Waste to bury large quantities of food and such 130

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dungs as extra arrows, lances and so forth. If we are forced back as far as the barrens, we'll likely fare better than Jagreen Lern, assuming that it takes him time to extend the area of Chaos and that his allies from the Higher Worlds are not overwhelmingly powerful."

"You spoke of realism . . ." said Dylvim Slonn, pursing his curving lips and raising a slanting eyebrow.

"Ay—but some things cannot be faced or considered—for if we are totally engulfed by Chaos at me outset, then well have no need of plans. So we plan for the other eventuality, you see."

Kargan let out his breath and rose from the table. "There's no more to discuss," he said. "TU to bed. We must be ready to sail with the noon tide tomorrow."

They all gave signs of assent and chairs scraped as they pushed them back and left the chamber.
Bereft of human occupants, the chamber was silent save for the sputtering of the lamps and the rustle of the maps and papers as they were stirred by a warm wind.

It was late in the morning when Elric arose and found Zarozinia already up and dressed in a skirt and bodice of doth-of-gold with a long black-trimmed cloak of silver flowing from her shoulders and spreading to the floor.

He washed, shaved and ate the dish of herb-flavoured fruit she handed him.

"Why have you arrayed yourself in such finery?" he asked.

"To bid you goodbye from the harbour," she said.

"If you spoke truth last night, then you'd best be dressed in furneral red." he smiled and then, relenting, clasped her to him. He gripped her tightly, desperately, before standing back from her and taking her chin in his hand raised her face to tare down into it "In these tragic times," he said, "there's little room for love-play and kind words. Love must be deep and strong, manifesting itself in our actions. Seek no courtly words from me, Zarozinia, but remember earlier nights when the only turbulence was our pulse-beats blending."

He was clad, himself, in Melnibonean war regalia, with a breastplate of shiny black metal, a high-collared jerkin of black velvet, black feather breeks covered to the knee by his boots, also of black leather. Over his back was pushed a cloak of deep red, and on one thin, white finger, was the Ring of Kings, the single rare actorious stone set in silver.

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His long white hair hung loose down to his shoulders, kept from his eyes by a bronze circlet in which were set other precious charm stones of peryx, mio and golden otredos. Stoimbringer was sheathed at his left hip and an ebony-handled poignard dangled at his right. Upon the table, among the open books, a tapering black helm, engraved with old runes, lay, its crown gradually rising into a spike, standing almost two feet from the base. At this base, dominating the eye-slits, was a tiny replica of a spread-winged dragon, with a gaping snout, a reminder that, as well as being Emperors of the Bright Empire, Eiric's ancestors were Dragon Masters over all that remained of the dragon kind. Brie, himelf, was chief master—though now only his cousin Dyvim Siorrn knew the dragon speech and spells, the rest having perished.
in various ways since the Sack of Imrryr years before when Eiric, turned renegade, had led the attack upon the Dreaming City.

Now he picked up the helm and fitted it over his head so that it covered the top half of his face, only his red eyes gleaming from its shadows. He refrained from pulling the side wings about his lower face but for the meantime, left them sweeping back from the bottom of the helmet.

Noting her silence, he said, with a heart already heavy, "Come, my love, let's to the harbour to astound these under-civilised allies of ours with our elegance. Have no fear that I shall live to survive this day's battle—Pate has not finished with me yet and protects me as a mother would her SOB—so that I might witness further misery until such a day when it's over for all time."

Together, they left the Fort of Evening, riding on magical Nihrain horses, down to the harbour where the other Sealords and captains were already assembled beneath a bright sun.

All were dressed in their finest martial glory, though none could match Eiric. Old racial memories were awakened in many when they saw him and they were troubled, fearing him without knowing why, for their ancestors had had great cause to fear the Bright Emperors in the days when Melnibone ruled the world and a man accoutred as Eiric commanded a million eldritch warriors. Now a bare handful of Imryiana greeted him as he rode along the quayside, noting the ships riding at anchor with their coloured banners and heraldic devices lifting proudly in the breeze.

Dyvim Slonn was equipped in a close-fitting dragon helm, STORMBRINGER 133

its protecting pieces fashioned to represent the entire bead of a dragon, scaled in red and green and silver. His armour was lacquered yellow, though the rest of his dress was black, like Eiric's. At his side was Stonnbringer's sister-sword Moumbdale.

As Eiric rode up to the group, Dyvim Slonn turned his heavily armoured head towards the open sea. There was little inkling of encroaching Chaos on the calm water or in the dear sky.

"At least well have good weather on our way to meet Jagreen Lern," Dyvim Slorm said.
"A small mercy." Eiric smiled faintly. "Is there any more news of their numbers?"

"Before the spy who returned yesterday died he said there were at least four thousand warships, ten thousand transports—and perhaps twenty of the Chaos ships. They'll be the ones to watch since we've no idea what powers they have."

Eiric nodded. Their own fleet comprised some five thousand warships, many equipped with catapults and other heavy war-engines. The transports, though they turned the odds, in numbers, to a far superior figure, would be slow, unwieldy, and of not much use in a pitched sea-battle. Also, if the battle were won, they could be dealt with later, for (hey would obviously follow in the rear of Jagreen Lern's warned

So, for all Jagreen Lern's numerical strength, there would be a good chance of winning a sea-fight under ordinary conditions. The disturbing factor was the presence of the supernatural ships. The spy's description had been vague. Eiric needed more objective information—information he would be unlikely to receive now, until the fleets joined in battle.

In his shirt was tucked the beast-hide manuscript of an extraordinarily strong invocation used in summoning the Sea King. He had already attempted to use it, without success, but hoped that on open sea his chances would be better, particularly since the Sea King would be angered at the disruption Jagreen Lern and his occult allies were causing in the balance of nature. Once before, long ago, the Sea King had aided him and had, Eiric recalled, predicted that Eiric would ammonia again.

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Kargan, in the thick: but light sea-armonr of his people which gave him the appearance of ft hairy-faced armadillo, pointed as several small boats detached themselve* from Ac fleet and sailed towards die quay.

"Here come the boats to take us to our ships, my lordal"

The gathered captains stirred, all of them with serious expressions, seeming, each and every one, to be pondering some personal problem, staring into the depths of their own hearts—perhaps trying to reach me fear which lay there; trying to reach it and tear it out and fling it from them. They all
had more than the usual trepidation experienced when facing a fight-for, like Brie, they could not guess what the Chaos ships were capable of.

They were a desperate company, understanding that something less palatable than death might await them beyond the horizon.

Eric squeezed Zarozinia's arm.

"Goodbye."

Tareweu, Brio-may whatever benevolent gods Acre are left on the Earth protect you."

"Save your prayers for my companions,** he said quietly. "for they wffl be less able than I to face what lies out there."

Moonglun called to him and Zarozmia: "Give her a kiss, Eric, and come to the boaL Tell her well be back with victory tidings"

Eiric would never have admitted such familiarity, not even with his kinsman Dyvnn Slonn, from anyone but Moonglum. But he took it in good part saying softly to her: "There, you see, little Moonglum is confident-and he*s usually we one with warnings of ominous portent!"

She said nothing, but kissed him lightly on roe mouth, grasped his hand for a moment and then watched him as he strode down the quay and clambered into the boat which Moonglum and Rargan were steadying for him.

The oars splashed and bore the captains towards me flagship, Timber-tearer, Eiric standing in the bow staring ahead, looking back only once when the boat drew alongside the ship and he began to climb the rope ladder up to the deck, his black helm bobbing,

Bracing himself on the deck, Brie watched me backs of the warrior-rowers as they bent to the oars, supplementing

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the light wind which filled the great purple sail, making it curve out in a graceful billow.

The Isle of the Purple Towns was now out of sight and green, glinting water was all that was visible around the fleet, which stretched behind the flagship, its furthest ships tiny shapes in the distance.
Already the fleet was re-forming into the five squadrons which would comprise its final battle-order. Each squadron was under the command of an experienced Sealord, from the Purple Towns, for most of the other captains were landsmen who, though quick to learn, had little experience of sea tactics.

Moonglum came stumbling along the swaying deck to stand beside his friend.

"How did you sleep last night?" he asked Eiric.

"Well enough, save for a few nightmares."

"Ah, then you shared something with us all. Sleep was hard won for everyone, and when it came it was troubled. Visions of monsters and demons crowded my dreams."

Eiric nodded slightly, but paying little attention to Moonglum. The elements of chaos in their own beings were evidently awakening in response to the approach of the Chaos horde itself. He hoped they would be strong enough to withstand the actuality as they had survived their dreams.

"Disturbance to for'ard!"

It was the look-out's cry, baffled and perturbed. Eiric cupped his hands around his mouth and tilted his head back.

"What sort of disturbance?"

"It's like nothing I've ever seen, my lord-I can't describe it"

Eiric turned to Moonglum. "Relay the order through the fleet-slow the pace to one drum-beat in four, squadron commanders stand by to receive final battle orders." He strode towards the mast and began to climb up it towards the look-out's post. He climbed until he was high above the deck. The look-out swung out of his cradle, since there was room only for one.

"Ts it the enemy, my lord?" he said, as Eiric clambered into his place. Eiric stared hard towards the horizon, making out a kind of dazzling blackness that from time to time sent up sprawling gouts of stuff into the air where it hung for some moments, before sinking back into the main mass.

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Smokey, hard to define, it crept gradually nearer, crawling over the sea towards them.

"It's the enemy," said Eiric quietly.

He remained for some while in the look-out's cradle, studying the chaos-stuff as it filing itself about in the distance like some amorphous monster in its death-agonies. But these were not death-agonies—not for Chaos at any rate.

From this vantage point, Eiric also had a dear view of the fleet as it formed itself into its respective squadrons, making up a black wedge nearly a mile across at its longest point and nearly two miles deep. His own ship was a short distance in front of the rest, well in sight of the squadron commanders. Brie shouted down to Kargan, whom he saw passing the mast: "Stand by to move ahead, Kargan!"

The Sealord nodded without pausing in his stride. He was folly aware of the battle-plan, as they all were for they had discussed it long enough. The leading squadron, under the command of Eiric, was comprised of their heaviest warships which would smash into the centre of the enemy fleet and seek to break its order, aiming particularly at the ship of Jagreen Lero. If Jagreen Lerm could be slain or captured, their victory would be more likely.

Now the dark stuff was closer and Eiric could just make out me sails of the first vessels, spread out one behind the other. Then, as they came even closer, he was aware that to each side of this leading formation were great glinting shapes that dwarfed even the huge battlecraft of Jagreen Lerm.

The Chaos Ships'

Eiric recognised them, now, from his own knowledge of occult lore.

These were the ships said normally to saQ the deeps of the oceans, taking on drowned sailors as crews, captained by creatures that had never been human. It was a fleet from the deepest, gloomiest parts of the vast underwater domain which had, since the beginning of time, been disputed territory-disputed between water-elementals under their king Straasha and the Lords of Chaos, who claimed the sea-depths as their main territory on Earth by right Legends said that at one time Chaos had ruled the sea and Law the land. This, perhaps, explained the fear of the sea that many human beings had, and me pull the sea had for others.
But the fact was that, although the elementals had succeeded in winning the shallower portions of the sea, the Chaos Lords had retained the deeper parts by means of this, their fleet of the dead. The ships themselves were not of earthly manufacture, neither were their captains originally from earth, but their crews had once been human, and were now indestructible in any ordinary sense.

As they approached, Eiric was soon in no doubt that they were, indeed, those ships.

The Sign of Chaos flashed on their sails, eight amber arrows radiating from a central hub—signifying the boast of Chaos, that it contained all possibilities whereas Law was supposed, in time, to destroy possibility and result in eternal stagnation. The sign of Law was a single arrow pointing upwards, symbolising direction and control.

Eiric knew that in reality. Chaos was the real harbinger of stagnation, for though it changed constantly, it never progressed. But, in his heart, he felt a yearning for this state, for he had many loyalties to the Lords of Chaos in the past and his own folk of Meloibone had worked, since their inception, to further the aims of Chaos.

But now Chaos must make war on Chaos; Eiric must turn against those he had once been loyal to, using weapons forged by chaotic forces to defeat those selfsame forces in this time of change.

He clambered from the cradle and began to ship down the mast, leaping the last few feet to land on the deck as Dyvim Storm came up. Quickly he told his kinsman what he had seen.

Dyvim Storm was astounded. "But the fleet of the dead never comes to the surface-save for..." his eyes widened.

Eiric shrugged. "That's the legend—the fleet of the dead will rise from the depths when the final struggle comes, when Chaos shall be divided against itself, when Law shall be weak and mankind shall choose sides in the battle that will result in a new Earth dominated either by total Chaos or by almost-total Law. When Sepiriz told us this was the case, I felt a response. Since then, in studying my manuscripts, I have been fully reminded."
"Is this, then, the final battler*

"It might be," he said. "It is certain to be one of the last when it will be decided for all time whether Law or Chaos shall rule here."

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"If we're defeated, then Chaos will undoubtedly rule."

"Perhaps—but remember that the struggle need not be decided by battles alone."

"So Sepiriz said, but if we're defeated this day, well have little chance to discover the truth of that." Dyvim Slorm gripped Mouroblade's hilt. "Someone must wield these blades—these destiny swords—when the time comes for the deciding duel. Our allies dimmish, Elite."

**Aye. But I've a hope that we can summon a few others. Straasha, King of the Water Elementals, has ever fought against the death fleet—and he is brother to Graoll and Misha, the Wind Lords. Perhaps through Straasha, I can summon his unearthly kin. In this way we will be better matched, at least."

"I know only a fragment of the spell for summoning the Water King," Dyvim Slorm said.

"I know the whole rune. I had best make haste to meditate upon it, for our fleets will clash in two hours or less and then we have no time for the summoning of spirits but Will have to keep tight hold on my own less some Chaos creature releases it**

Eiric moved towards the prow of the ship, and, leaning over, stared into the ocean depths, turning his mind inward and contemplating the strange and ancient knowledge which lay there. He became almost hypnotised as he lost contact with his own personality and began to identify with the swirling ocean below.

Involuntarily, old words began to form in his throat and his Ups began to move in the rune which his ancestors had known when they and all the elementals of the Earth had been allies and sworn to aid one another long ago in the dawn of the Bright Empire, more than ten thousand years before.
"Waters of the sea, thou gave us birth
And were our milk and mother both
In days when skies were overcast
You who were first shall be the last* 

"Sea-rulers, fathers of our blood,
Thine aid is sought, thine aid is sought,

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Your salt is blood, our blood your sail,
Your blood the blood of Man.

"Straasha, eternal king, eternal sea
Thine aid is sought by me;

For enemies of thine and mine
Seek to defeat our destiny, and drain away our sea."

The spoken rune was merely a vocalisation of the actual invocation which was produced mentally and went plunging into the depths, through the dark green corridors of the sea until it finally found Straasha in his domain of curving, coral-coloured, womb-like constructions which were only partially in the natural sea and partially in the plane where the demeatals spent a large part of their immortal existence.

Straasha knew of the Ships of Hell rising to the surface and had been pleased that his domain was now cleared of them, but Elite's summons awakened his memory and he remembered the folk of Mehuboo6 upon whom all the elementals had once looked with a sense of comradeship; he remembered the ancient invocation, and felt bound to answer it, though he knew his people were badly weakened by the effect Chaos had had in other parts of the world. Not only humans had suffered; the elemental spirits of nature had been merely pressed as well.

But he stirred so that water and the stuff of his other plane "were both disturbed. He summoned some of his followers and began to glide upwards into the domain of the Air.

Semi-conscious now, Eiric knew that his invocation had Bet with success. Sprawled in the prow, he waited.

At last the waters heaved and broke and a great green figure, with turquoise beard and hair, pale green skin that
eemed made of the sea itself, and a voice that was like a rushing tide.

Once more Straasha answers thy summons, mortal. Our destinies are bound together. How may I aid thee, and, in aiding thee, aid myself?

"In the throat-torturing speech of the elemental, Eiric answered, telling the sea king of the forthcoming battle and what it implied.

So at long last it has come to pass! I fear I cannot aid you which, for my folk are already suffering terribly from the de-

preaations of our mutual enemy. We shall attempt to did you if we can. Thafs all I promise.

The sea king sank back into the waters and Eiric watched him depart with a feeling of acute disappointment. It was with a brooding mind that he left the prow and went to the main cabin to tell his captains the news.

They received it with mixed feelings, for only Dyvim Slonn was used to dealing with superoaturals. Moonglum had always been dubious of Eiric's powers to control his wild, elemental friends, while Kargan growled that Straasha may have been an ally of Eiric's folk but had been more of an enemy to his. The four of them, however, could plan with slightly more optimism and face the coming ordeal with better confidence.

Four

The fleet of Jagreen Lera bore towards them and in its wake, the boiling stuff of Chaos hovered.

Eiric gave the command and die rowers hauled at their curs, sending Timber-tearer rushing towards the enemy. So far his elemental allies had not appeared, but he could not afford to wait for them.

As Timber-tearer rode the foaming waves, Eiric hauled bi- sword from its scabbard, brought the side wings of his helmet round to cover his face and cried the age-old ululating war-shout of Melnibone, a shout full of joyous evil. Stormbringer's eerie voice joined with his, giving vent to a thrumming song, anticipating the blood and the souls it would soon feast upon.
Jagreen Lem's flagship now lay behind three rows of men-o'-war and behind that the ships of death.

Timber-tearer's iron ram ripped into the first enemy ship and the rowers leaned on their oars, backing away and turning to pierce another ship below the water line. Showers of arrows sprayed from the holed ship and clattered on deck and armour. Several rowers went down.

Eiric and his three companions directed their men from the main deck and suddenly they saw the streaking balls of green fire come curving out of the sky.

"Prepare to quench fireal" Kargan yelled and the group of men already primed for this leapt for the tubs containing a special brew, which Eiric had told them how to make earlier. This was spread on decks and splashed on canvas and, when the fire-balls landed, they were swiftly put out by the stuff.

"Dont engage unless forced to," Eiric called to the men, "keep aiming for the flagship. If we take that our advantage will be good."

"Where are your allies, Eiric?" Kargan asked sardonically, shuddering a little as he saw the Chaoa stuff in the distance suddenly move and erupt tendrils of black matter into the sky.

"They'll come, never fear," Eiric answered, but he was unsure.

Now they were in the thick of the enemy fleet, the ships of their squadron followed behind. The war-engines of their own fleet sent up a constant barrage of fire and heavy stones.

Only a handful of Bine's craft broke through the enemy's first rank and reached the open sea, sailing towards Jagreen Lem's flagship.

As they were observed, the enemy ships sailed to protect the flagship and the scintillating ships of death, moving with fantastic speed for their size, surrounded the theocrat's vessel.

Shouting over the waters, Kargan ordered their diminished squadron into a new formation.

Moonglum shook his head in astonishment "How can
things of that size support themselves on the water?” he said to Eiric.

Eiric said: **It's unlikely that they actually do.** As then-ship manoeuvred into its new position, he stared at die huge craft, twenty of them, dwarfing everything else on the sea. They seemed covered with a kind of scintillating wetness which flashed all the colours of the spectrum so that their outlines were hard to see and the shadowy figures moving about on their gigantic decks could not easily be observed.

Whisps of dark stuff began to drift across the scene, close to the water, and Dyvim Slonn, from the lower deck, pointed and shouted:

"See! Chaos comes. Where is Straasha and his folk?"

Eiric shook his head, perturbed. He had expected aid by now.

"We cannot wait. We must attack!" Kargan's voice was pitched higher than usual.

A mood of bitter recklessness came upon Eiric then he smiled. "Come then. Let's do so!"

Speedily the squadron coursed towards tike disturbing ships of death.

Moonglum muttered: "We are going to our doom, Eiric. No man would willingly get close to those ships. Only the dead are drawn to them, and they do not go with joyF"

But Eiric ignored bis friend.

A strange silence seemed to come upon the waters so that

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the sound of the splashing oars was sharp. The death fleet waited for them, impassively, as if they did not need to prepare for battle.

He tightened his grip on Stormbringer. The blade seemed to respond to the pounding of his pulse-beat, moving in his hand with each thud of his heart as if linked to it by veins and arteries.

Now they were so close to me Chaos ships that they could
make out better the figures crowding the great decks. Horrily, Eiric thought he recognised some of the gaunt faces of toe dead and, involuntarily, he called to the sea-folk's king.

"StnashaT"

The waters heaved, foamed and seemed to be attempting to rise but then subsided again. Straasha beard—but he was finding it difficult to fight against the forces of Chaos.

"Straashar"

It was no good, the waters hardly moved.

A mood of wild despair came over Eiric. He screamed to Kargan: "We cannot wait for aid. Swing the ship round the Chaos fleet and we'll attempt to reach Jagreen Lero's flagship from the rear.

Under Kargan's expert direction, the ship swung to avoid Hie Ships of Hell in a wide semi-circle. Spray cascaded against Eiric's face, flooding the decks. He could hardly see through it as they cleared the Chaos ships which had now en-gaged other craft and were altering the nature of their tim- bers so that they fell apart and the unfortunate crews were drowned or warped into alien shapes.

To his ears came the miserable cries of the defeated and the triumphantly surging thunder of the Chaos Fleet's music as it pushed forward to destroy the eastern ships.

Timber-tearer was rocking badly and was hard to control, but at last they were around the hell fleet and bearing down on Jagreen Urn's vessel from the rear.

Eiric, having but recently been a prisoner upon it, recog- nised it at once. Now they nearly struck the theocrat's vessel with their ram, but were swept off-course and had to ma-noeuvre again. Arrows rose from the enemy's decks and thudded and rattled on their own. They retaliated as, riding a huge wave, they slid alongside the flagship and flung out grappling irons. A few held, dragging them towards the theo-crat's vessel as the men of Pan Tang strove to cut the grap-pling ropes. More ropes followed and then a boarding platform fell from its harness and landed squarely on Jagreen Lena's deck. Another followed it.
Elric ran for the nearest platform. Kargan behind him, and they led a body of warriors over it, searching for Jagreen Lera.

Stormbringer took a dozen lives and a dozen souls before Elric had gained the main-deck. There a resplendent commander stood, surrounded by a group of officers. But it was not Jagreen Lerna.

Elric clambered up the gangway, slicing through a warrior's waist as the man sought to block his path. He yelled at the group: "Where's your cursed leader? Where's Jagreen Lerna?"

The commander's face was pale for he had seen in the past what Elric and his hell-blade could do.

"He's not here, Elric, I swear."

"What? Am I to be thwarted again? I know you are lying!" Elric advanced on the group who backed away, their swords ready.

"Our theocrat does not need to protect himself by means of lies, doom-fostered one!" sneered a young officer, braver man the rest.

**Perhaps not," cried Elric with a wild laugh as he rushed towards him swinging Stormbringer in a shrieking arc, **but at least Til have your life before I put the truth of your words to die test My sword and I need revitalising—and your soul should make an appetiser before I take Jagreen Lern's!**

The man put up his blade to block Stormbringer's swing. The runesword cut through the metal with a triumphant cry, swung back again and plunged itself into the officer's side. He gasped, but remained standing with his hands clenched.

"No!" he groaned. "Oh. not my soul!"** His eyes widened, tears streamed from them and madness came into them for a second before Stormbringer satiated itself and Elric drew it out, replenished. He had no sympathy for the man. "Your soul would have gone to the depths of hell in any case," he said lightly. "But now I've put it to some use at least"

Two other officers scrambled over the rail, seeking to escape their comrade's fate.
Elric hacked at the hand of one so that he fen, screaming, to the deck, his hand still grasping me rail. The other he skewered in the bowels and, as Stormbringer sucked out bis soul, he hung there, pleading incoherently, in an effort to avert the inevitable.

So much vitality flowed into Elric now. that as he rushed at the remaining group around the commander, be seemed almost to fly over the deck and rip into them, slicing away Umbs as if they were stalks of Sowers, until he encountered the commander himself.

The commander said softly, weakly: "I surrender. Do not takemysouL"

"Where is Jagreen Lera?"

The commander pointed into the distance, where the Chaos fleet could be seen creating havoc amongst the eastern ships.

"ThereI He sails with Lord Pyaray of Chaos whose fleet that Is. You cannot reach him there for any man not protected-or not already dead-would turn to flowing, liquid flesh once he neared the fleet"

That cursed hellspawn still cheats me," Elric spat "Here's payment for your information-"

Without mercy for one of those who had wasted and eaten slaved two continents, Elric struck his blade through the ornate armour and, delicately, with all me old malevolence of bis sorcerer ancestors, tickled the man's heart before finishing him.

He looked around for Kargan, but could not see him. Then he saw that the Chaos fleet had turned back! At first he thought it was because Straasha had at last brought aid, but then he saw that the remnants of his fleet were fleeing.

Jagreen Lera was victorious. Their plans, their formations, their courage-none of these had been capable of withstanding the horrible warpings of Chaos.

And now the dreadful fleet was bearing down on me two flagships, locked together by their grapples. There was no chance of cutting one of them free before the fleet arrived.

Elric yelled to Dyvhn Slorm and Moonglum whom he saw naming towards him from the other end of the deck.
"Over we side! Over the side for your lives-and swim as far as you can away from here, the Chaos fleet comes!"

They looked at him, startled, teen realised me truth of his - ." words. Other men of both sides were already leaping into the Moody water. Eiric aheatbed his sword and dived. The left was cold, for all'the warm blood in it. and he gasped as he swam in the direction of Moonglum*s red head, which he could see ahead, and, dose to it, Dyvim Slorm's honey-coloured hair.

He turned once and saw the very timbers of the two ships begin to melt, to twist and curl in strange patterns as the Ships of Hell arrived. He felt very relieved he had not been aboard.

He reached his two friends.

-A short-term measure this.‘ said Moonglum. spitting water from his mouth. "What now, Eiric? Shall we strike for the Purple Towns?" Moonglum's capacity for facetiousness had not. it seemed, been limited by witnessing the defeat of their fleet and the advance of Chaos. The Isle was too far away.

Then, to their left they saw the water froth and form itself into what was to Eiric a familiar shape.

"Straashal"

I could not aid thee, I could not aid thee. Though I tried, my ancient enemy was too strong for me. Forgive me. In recompense let me take you and your friends back with me to my own land and save you, at least from Chaos.

"But we cannot breathe beneath the seal"

You wiS not need to.

"VerywelL"

Trusting to the elemental's words, they allowed themselves to be dragged beneath the waters and down into the cool, green depths of the sea, deeper and deeper until no sunlight filtered mere and all was wet darkness and they lived, though at normal times the pressure would have crushed them.
They seemed to travel for miles through the mysterious underwater grottoes until at last they came to a place of coral-coloured rounded constructions that seemed to drift slowly in a sluggish current Brie knew it by a description in one of his grimoires. The domain of Straasha die Sea King.

The elemental bore them to the largest construction and one section of it seemed to fade away to admit teem. They moved now through twisting corridors of a delicate pink texture, slightly shadowed, no longer in water. They were now on the plane of the elemental folk. In a huge circular cave, they came to rest.

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With a peculiar rushing sound, the Sea King walked to a large throne of milky jade and sat upon it, his green head on his green fist.

"Eiric, once again I regret I was unable, after all, to aid you. All I can do now is have some of my folk carry you back to your own land when you have rested here for a while. We are all, it seems, helpless against this new strength which Chaos has of late."

Eiric nodded. "Nothing can stand against its warping influence-unless it is the Chaos Shield."

Straasha straightened his back. "The Chaos Shield. Ah, yes. It belongs to an exiled god, does it not? But his castle is virtually impregnable."

"Why is that?"

"It lies upon the topmost crag of a tall and lonely mountain. reached by one hundred and thirty-nine steps. Lining these steps are forty-nine ancient elder trees, and of these you would have to be specially wary. Also he has a guard of one hundred and forty-four warriors."

"Of the warriors I would certainly be wary. But why the elders?"

"Each elder contains the soul of one of Mordaga's followers who was punished thus. They are malevolent trees-ever ready to take the life of anyone that comes into their domain."

"A hard task, to get that shield for myself," Eiric mused.
"But get it I must, for without it Fate's purpose would be forever thwarted-and with it I might have vengeance on the one who commands the Chaos Fleet-and Jagreen Lern who sails with him."

"Slay Pyaray, Lord of the Fleet of Hell, and, lacking his direction, the fleet itself would perish. His life-force is contained in a blue crystal set in the top of his head and striking at that with a special weapon is the only means of killing him."

"Thanks for that information," Eiric said gratefully. "For when the time comes, I shall need it."

"What do you plan to do, Eiric?" Dyvim Slonn asked.

"Put all else aside for the moment and see the sad giant's shield. I must-for if I do not have it, every battle fought will be a repetition of the one we have Just lost"

"I will come with you, Eiric," Moonglum promised.

"I also," said Dyvim Storm.

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"We shall require a fourth if we are to carry out the prophecy," Eiric said. "I wonder what became of Kargan."

Moonglum looked at the {round. "Did you not notice?"

"Notice wfaat?"

"On board Jagreen Lcrn's flagship when you were hewing about you in an effort to reach the main deck. Did you not know, then, what you had done—or rather what your cursed word did??

Eiric felt suddenly exhausted. "No. Did ^-did it-*»B him?"

"Aye.**

"Gods!" He wheeled and paced the chamber, slapping his fist in his palm. "Still this hell-made blade exacts its tribute for the service it gives me. Still it drinks the souls of friends. Tis a wonder you two are still with me!!!

"I agree it's extraordinary," Moonglum said feelingly.

"I grieve for Kargan. He was a good friend.*"
"Eiric." Moonglum said urgently. "You know that Kargas's death was not your responsibility. It was fated."

"Aye, but why must I always be the executioner of fate? I hesitate to list the names of the good friends and useful allies whose souls my sword has stolen. I hate it enough that it must suck souls out to give me my vitality—but that it should be most partial to my friends, that is what I cannot bear. I've half a mind to venture into the heart of Chaos and mere sacrifice us both I The guilt is indirectly mine, for if I was not so weak I must bear such a blade, many of those who have befriended me might be alive now."

"Yet the blade's major purpose seems a noble one," Moon- glum said in a baffled voice. "Oh, I fail to understand an this-paradox, paradox upon paradox. Are the gods mad or are they so subtle we cannot fathom the workings of their minds?"

"It's hard enough at times like these to remember any greater purpose," Dyvim Slorm agreed. "We are pressed so sorely, that we haven't a moment for thought, but must fight the next battle and the next, forgetting often why it is we fight."

"Is the purpose, indeed, greater and not lesser," Eiric smiled bitterly. "If we are the toys of the gods—are not perhaps the gods themselves mere children?"

"These questions are of no present importance," said Straasha from his throne.

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-And at least," Moonglum told Eiric. "future generations will thank Stormbringer if so(r) fulfills her destiny."

"If Sepiriz is right." Eiric said. "future generations will know nothing of any of us-blades or men!"

"Perhaps not consciously—but in the depths of their souls they will remember us. Our deeds will be spoken of as belonging to heroes with other names, that is all."

"That the world forgets me is all I ask," Eiric sighed.

As if growing impatient with this fruitless discussion, the Sea King rose from his throne and said: "Come, I will make
certain that you are transported to land, if you have no objection to travelling back in the same manner as you came berer*

"None," said Eiric.

Five

They staggered wearily on to the beach of the Isle of the Purple Towns and Eiric turned back to address the Sea King, who remained in the shallows.

"Again I thank you for saving us. Lord of the Sea." he said respectfully. "And thanks also for telling me more of the sad giant's shield. By this action you have perhaps, given us the opportunity to make certain that Chaos will be swept away from the ocean—and the land, also."

Aahh, the Sea King nodded, yet even if you are successful and the seats unspoiled, it wul mean the passing of us both, wul it not?

•True."

Then let it be so, for I at least am weary of my long existence. But come—now I must return to my folk and hope to withstand Chaos for—a little longer. Farewell!

And the Sea King sank into the waves again and vanished.

When they eventually reached the Fortress of Bvening, heralds ran out to assist them.

"How went the battle? Where is the fleet?** one asked Moonglum.

"Have the survivors not yet returned?"
"Survivors? Then . . . ?"

"We were defeated." Eiric said hollowly. "Is my wife stffl here?"

"No. she left soon after the fleet sailed, riding for Karlaak."

"Good. At least we shall have time to erect new defences against Chaos before they reach that far. Now, we must have food and wine. We must devise a fresh plan of battle."

"Battle, my lord? With what shall we fight?"
*We shall see," Eiric said, "we shall see."
Later, they watched as the battered remnants of the fleet began to sail into the harbour. Moonglum counted despairingly. "Too few," he said. "This is a black day."

From behind them in the courtyard a trumpet sounded. "An arrival from the mainland," Dyvim Storm said. They strode together down to the courtyard, in time to see a scarlet-clad archer dismounting from his horse. His near-fleshless face might have been carved from bone. He stooped with weariness.

Eiric was surprised. "Rackhirl You command the Dmioran coast Why are you here?"

"We were driven back. The Theocrat launched not one fleet but two. The other came in from the Pale Sea and took us by surprise. Our defences were crushed. Chaos swept in and we were forced to See. The enemy has established itself less than a hundred miles from Bakshaan and marches across country-if march is the word, rather it flows. Presumably it expects to meet up with the army the Theocrat intends to land here."

"Aaahh, we are surely defeated . . ." Moongluffl's voice was little more than a sigh.

"We must have that shield, Eiric," Dyvim Slorm said. Eiric frowned, his heart sinking. "Any further steps we take against Chaos will be doomed unless we have its protection. You, Rackhir, will be the fourth man in the prophecy."

"What prophecy?"

"I'll explain later. Are you fit enough to ride back with us now?"

"Give me two hours to sleep and then I will be."
"Good. Two hours. Make your preparations, my friends, for we go to claim the sad giant's shield I"

It was not until three days later that they met the first survivors, many of them with bodies twisted by Chaos, straggling along a white road that lead towards Jadmar, a city still free.

Of them, they learned that half Dmiora, parts of Vflmir and the tiny independent kingdom of Org, had all fallen.
Chaos was closing in, its shadow spreading more and more swiftly as its conquests increased.

It was with relief that Eiric and his companions finally reached Kariaak to find it so far not under attack. But reports placed the armies of Chaos less than two hundred miles away and marching in that direction.

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Zarozinia greeted E1ric with trouble-tinged Joy. There were rumours you were dead-killed to the sea battle.** Eiric clasped her to him.

"I cannot stay long," he said, "I have a mission beyond the Sighing Desert."
"I know."
"you know? How?"

"Scpiriz was here. He left a gift m our stables for yon. Four Nflirain horses."

"A useful gift. They wai carry us far more swiftly than any other beasts. But wffl that be swift enough? I hesitate to leave you here with Chaos encroaching at such a rate."

"You must leave me, E1ric. If all seems lost here, we shall flee into the Weeping Waste. Even fagreen Lern can have scant interest in the barrens."

"Promise me that you will.**

"I promise."

Feeling a little more relieved. E1ric took her by the hand. **I spent the most restful period of my life in this palace," he said. "Let me spend this last night with you and perhaps we shall find a little of the old peace we once bad-before I ride on to the sad giant's lair."

So they made love, but when they slept, their dreams were so full of dark portent that each wakened the other with their groans so that they lay side by side, clinging to one another until the dawn, when E1ric rose, kissed her lightly, clasped her hand and then went to the stables where he found his friends waiting-around a fourth figure. It was Sepiriz.

"Sepiriz, wanks for your gift. They will probably make the difference between our being too late or not," E1ric said sin-
because I can perform another small service before your main journey begins," said the black seer. "AH of you save Moonglum have weapons endowed with some special power. EIric and Dyvim Slonn have their runeblades, Rackhir, the Arrows of Law, which the sorcerer Lamsar gave him at (he time of the Siege of Tanelorn—but Moonglum* s weapon has nothing save the skill of its bearer."

"I think I prefer it thus," retorted Moonglum. "I've seen what a charmed blade can take from a man.**

"I can give you nothing so strong-nor so evil-aa Stormbringer," Sepiriz said. "But I have a charm for your

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; aword, a slight one that my contact with me White Lords has enabled me to use. Give me your sword, Moonglum."

i1--- A trifle unwillingly, Moonglum unsheathed his curved steel < Made and banded it to the Nihrain who took a small engraving tool from his robe and, whispering a rune, scratched several symbols on the sword near its hilt. Then he gave it back to the Eastlaoder.

"There. Now the sword has the blessing of Law and you; wul find it more able to withstand Law's enemies."

EIric said impatiently. "We must ride now, Sepiriz, for tfane grows desperately short."

,**Ride, men. But be wary for patrolling bands of Jagreen Lern's warriors. I do not think they will be anywhere along your route when you journey there—but watch for them coming back.**

.'- They mounted die magical Nihrain steeds which bad Jt, helped EIric more man once, and rode away from Karlaak by the Weeping Waste. Rode away perhaps for ever. <" In a short while they had entered me Weeping Waste, for & flus was the quickest route to the Sighing Desert.

f; Rackhir alone knew this country well and he guided them.

:^ The Nihrain steeds, treading the ground of their own [L«trange plane, seemed literally to fly for it could be observed H.1hat their hooves did not touch the damp grasses of the It Weeping Waste. They moved at incredible speed and Rack-kil-liir, until he became used to the pace, gripped his reins tightly.

:f1 In this place of eternal rainfall, the land ahead was difficult \to see, and the drizzle spread down their faces and into their
ey as they peered through it, trying to make out the high
mountain range, which ran along the edge of the Weeping
Waste, separating it from the Sighing Desert.

Then at last, after a journey of a day, they could observe
ly the high crags with their tops lost in cloud and soon, thanks
to me marvellous speed of the Nihrain stallions, they were
riding through the deep gorges and the rain ceased until, on
the evening of the second day, the breeze became warm and
finally harsh and hot as they left the mountains and felt the
femous rays of the sun blazing down on them, knowing they
had come to the edge of the Sighing Desert. This wind
coughed constantly over the barren sand and rocks, its contin-
uous sighing giving the desert its name.

They protected their faces, particularly their eyes, with

their hoods as best they could, for the stinging sand was ever
present

Resting only for a few hours at a time, Rackhir directing
them, they allowed the horses to carry them at ten times the
speed of ordinary steeds, further and further into the depths
of the vast desert

They spoke little, for it was difficult to be heard over the
sighing wind, and each man became sunk into himself, dwell-
ing on personal thoughts.

Brie had long since fallen into what was virtually a
mindless trance, letting the horse carry him over the desert
He had fought against his own churning thoughts and emo-
tions, finding it hard, as he often did, to retain any objective
impression of his predicament His past had been too trou-
bled, his background too morbid for him to do much now to
see clearly.

Always he had been a slave to his melancholic emotions,
his physical failings and to the very blood flowing in his
veins. He saw life not as a consistent pattern, but as a series
of random events. He had fought all his life to assemble his
thoughts and, if necessary, accept the chaotic nature of
nings, learn to live with if but, except in moments of ex-
treme personal crisis, had rarely managed to think coherently
for any length of time. He was, perhaps, because of his out-
lawed life, his albinism, his very reliance on his runesword
for strength, obsessed with the knowledge of his own doom.
What was thought, he asked himself, what was emotion? What was control and was it worth achieving? Better, maybe, to live by instinct than to theorise and be wrong; better to remain the puppet of the gods, letting them move you this way and that at their pleasure than to seek control of your own fate, dash with the will of the Lords of the Higher Worlds and perish for your pains.

So he considered as he rode into the searing lash of the wind, already striving against natural hazard. And what was the difference between an earthly hazard and the hazard of uncontrolled thought and emotion? Both held something of the same qualities.

But his race, though they had ruled the world for ten thousand years, had lived under the dominance of a different star. They had been neither true men nor true members of the ancient races who had come before men. They were an interme-

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diary type and Eiric was half-consciously aware of this;

.. aware that he was the last of an inbred line who had, without effort used Chios-given sorcery as others used their earthly dolls for convenience. His race had been of Chaos, having no need of self-control or the self-restrictions of the new laces who had emerged with the Age of me Young Kingdoms, and even these, according to the seer Sepiriz, were not the true men who would one day walk an Earth where order "and progress might become the rule and Chaos rarely exert

Influence-if Brie triumphed, destroying the world he knew. -"- This thought added to his gloom, for he had no destiny but death, no purpose save what fate willed. Why fight against if why bother to sharpen his wits or put his mind in order when he was little more than a sacrifice on the altar of destiny? He breathed deeply of the hot dry air and expelled it from his stinging lungs, spitting out the clogging sand which bad laaanged to enter his mouth and nostrils.

Dyvim Sloom shared something of Eiric's mood, though his feelings were not so strong. He had a more ordered life man had Eiric, though they were of the same blood. Whereas Eiric had questioned me custom of his folk, even renounced king-ifaip that he might explore the new lands of me Young Kingdoms and compare their way of life with his own, Dyvim Slorm had never indulged in such questioning. He had suffered bitterness when through Eiric's renegade activities, the
Dreaming City of Imrryr, last stronghold of me old race of Ikflelnibone, bad been razed; shock, too, of a kind, when he md what remained of the Imrryrians had been forced out late me world, also, to make their living as mercenaries of mose they considered upstart kings of lowly and contemptible peoples. Dyvim Slorm, who had never questioned, did not question now, though be was disturbed.

. Moonglum was less self-absorbed. Since the time, many-years before, when he and Eiric bad met and fought against me Dharzi together, he had felt a peculiar sympathy, even empathy, with his friend. When Eiric sank into such moods as we one be was in now, Moonglum felt tormented only because he could not help him. Many times he had sought me means of pulling Eiric out of his gloomy depression, but f these days be had learned that it was impossible. By nature cheerful and optimistic, even he felt dominated by me doom of which was on them.

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Rackhir, too, who was of a calmer and more philosophical frame of mind than his fellows, did not feel capable of fully grasping the implications of their mission. He had thought to spend the rest of bis days in contemplation and meditation in the peaceful city of Tanelorn, which exerted a strange calming influence on all who lived there. But this call to aid in the fight against Chaos had been impossible to ignore and he had unwillingly strapped on his quiver of Arrows of Law and taken up his bow again to ride from Tanelom with a small party of those who wished to accompany him and offer their services to Eiric.

Peering through the sand-filled air he saw something loom ing ahead—a single mountain rising from the wastes of the desert, as if placed there by means other than natural.

He called, pointing: "Eirici There) That must be Mordaga's castleF

Eiric roused himself and let his eyes follow Rackhir's pointing hand. "Aye," he sighed. "We are there. Let us pause now and rest, recuperating our strength before we ride the final distance."

They reined in their steeds and dismounted, easing their aching limbs and stretching their legs to allow the blood to flow freely again.

They raised their tent against the wind-blown sand and ate
their meal in a mood of companionship, created by the knowledge that after they reached the mountain, they might never see one another alive again.

Six

The steps wound up around the mountain. High above they could see the gleam of masonry and, just where the steps curved and disappeared for the first time, they saw an elder tree. It looked like an ordinary tree, but it became a symbol for them—there was their initial antagonist. How would it fight? What influence would it exert on them?

Eiric placed a booted foot on the first step. It was high, built for the feet of a giant.

He began to climb, the other three following behind him. Now, as he reached the tenth step, he unsheathed Stormbringer, felt it quiver and send energy into him. The climbing instantly became easier.

As he came close to the elder, he heard it rustle, saw that there was an agitation in its branches. Yes, it was certainly sentient.

He was only a few steps from the tree when he heard Dyvim Storm shout: "Gods! The leaves—look at the leaves!"

The green leaves, their veins seeming to throb in the sunlight, were beginning to detach themselves from the branches and drift purposefully towards the group.

One settled on Eiric's bare hand. He attempted to brush it off, but it clung. Others began to settle on different parts of his body. They were coming in a green wave now, and he felt a peculiar stinging sensation in his hand. With a curse he peeled it off, and to his horror saw that tiny pin-pricks of blood were left where it had been. His body twitched in nausea and he ripped the rest from his face, slashing at others with his crooning runesword. As they were touched by the blade, so they shrivelled, but they were swiftly replaced.

He knew, instinctively, that they were sucking not only blood from his veins, but the soul-force from his being; he was weakening slightly already.

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Behind him, his companions were experiencing the same
with yells of terror.

These leaves were being directed and he knew where the direction came from—the tree itself. He clambered up the remaining steps, fighting off the leaves which swarmed like locusts around him. With grim intention he began hacking at the trunk which gave out an angry groaning and the branches sought to reach him. He slashed them away and then plunged Stonnbringer deep into the tree. Sods of earth spattered upwards as the roots threshed. The tree screamed and began to heel over towards him as if, in death, it sought to kill him also. He wrenched at Stonnbringer, which sucked greedily at the half-sentient tree's life-stuff, failed to tug the sword out, and leapt aside as the tree crashed down over the steps, barely missing him. One branch slashed his face and drew blood. He gasped and staggered, feeling the life draining from him.

As he stumbled towards the fallen tree, he saw that the wood was suddenly dead and the remaining leaves had shrivelled.

"Quickly," he gasped as the three came up, "shift this thing. My sword's beneath and without it I'm dead!"

Swiftly they set to work and rolled the peculiarly light tree over so that Eiric could weakly grasp the hilt of Stonnbringer still imbedded therein.

As he did so he almost screamed, experiencing a sensation of tremendous force. Energy filled him, pulsed through him so that he felt like a god himself.

He laughed as if possessed by a demon and the others looked at him in astonishment.

"Come, my friends, follow me. I can deal with a million such trees now!"

He leapt up the steps as another shoal of leaves came towards him. Ignoring their bites, he went straight for the elder itself and, as if part of the sword, aimed for its centre. Again this tree screamed.

"Dyvim Slorm!" he shouted, drunk on its life-force. "'Do an I do—let your sword drink a few such souls and we're invincible!"

"Such power is scarcely palatable," Rackhir said, brushing dead leaves from his body as Eiric withdrew his sword again
and ran towards the next. The elders grew thicker here and they bent their branches to reach him, looming over him, the branches like fingers seeking to pluck him apart.

Dyvim Slorm, a trifle less spontaneously, imitated Eiric’s method of despatching the tree-creatures and soon he too became filled with the stolen sous of the demons imprisoned within the elders and his wild shout joined Eiric’s as, like fiendish woodsmen, they attacked again and again, each victory lending mem more strength so that Moonglum and Rackhir looked at one another with wonder and a trace of fear to see such a terrible change come over their friends.

But there was no denying that their methods were effective against the elders. Soon they looked back at a waste of fallen, blackened trees spreading down the mountain-side.

All the old unholy fervour of the dead kings of Melnibone was in the faces of the two kinsmen as they sang old battle-songs, their twin blades joining in the harmony to send up a disturbing melody of doom and malevolence!

His lips parted to reveal his white teeth, his red eyes Maz-ing with dreadful fire, his milk-white hair streaming in the burning wind, Eiric flung up his sword to the sky and turned to confront his companions.

"Now, friends, see how the ancient ones of Melnibone conquered man and demon to rule the world for ten thousand years!"

Moonglum thought that he merited the nick-name of Wolf gained in the west long since. All the chaos-force that was now within him had gained complete control over everything else. He realised that Eiric was no longer split in his loyalties, there was no conflict in him now. His ancestors' Mood dominated him and he appeared as they must have ages since when all other races of mankind fled before them, fearing their magnificence, their malice and their evil. Dyvim Slorm seemed equally as possessed and Moonglum sent up a heartfelt prayer to whatever kindly gods remained in the universe that Eiric was his ally and not his enemy.

They were close to 'the top now, Eiric and his cousin springing ahead with superhuman bounds. The steps terminated at the mouth of a gloomy tunnel and into the darkness rushed the pair, laughing and calling to one another.
Less speedily, Moonglum and Rackhir followed, the Red Archer nocking an arrow to his bow.

Etric peered into the gloom, his head swimming with the power that seemed to burst from every pore of his body. He heard the clatter of armoured feet coming towards him, and, as they approached, he realised that these warriors were but human. Though nearly a hundred and fifty, they did not daunt him. As the first group rushed at him, he blocked blows easily and struck them down, each soul taken making only a fraction's difference to the vitality already in him. Shoulder to shoulder stood the kinsmen, butchering the soldiers like so many children. It was dreadful to the eyes of Moonglum and Rackhir, as they came up to witness the flood of blood which soon made the tunnel slippery. The stench of death in the close confines became too much as Eiric and Dyvim Slorm moved past the first of the fallen and carried the attack to the rest.

Rackhir groaned. Though they be enemies and the servants of those we fight, I cannot bear to witness such slaughter. We are not needed here, friend Moonglum. These are demons waging war, not men!"

"Aye," sighed Moonglum as they broke out into sunlight again and saw the castle ahead, the remaining warriors reassembling as Eiric and Dyvim Slorm advanced menacingly, with malevolent joy, towards them.

The air rang with the sounds of shouting and steel clashing. Rackhir aimed an arrow at one of the warriors and launched it to take the man in the left eye. "Til see that a few of them get a cleaner death," be muttered nocking another arrow to me string.

As Eiric and his kinsman disappeared into the enemy ranks, others, sensing perhaps that Rackhir and Moonglum were less of a danger, rushed at the two.

Moonglum found himself engaging three warriors and discovered that his sword seemed extraordinarily light and gave off a sweet, clear tone as it met the warriors' weapons, turning them aside speedily. The sword supplied him with no energy, but it did not blunt as it might have and the heavier swords could not force it down so easily.
Rackhir had expended all his arrows in what had virtually been an act of mercy. He engaged the enemy with his sword and killed two, taking Moonglum’s third opponent from behind with an upward thrust into the man’s side and through to his heart.

Then they went with little stomach into the main fray and

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... that already the turf was littered with a great many corpses.

Rackhir cried to Eiric: "Stop! Eiric-let us finish these. You have no need to take their souls. We can kill them with more natural methods!"

But Eiric laughed and carried on his work.

As Eiric finished another warrior and there were no others in the immediate area, Rackhir seized him by the arm.

"Eiric-

Stormbringer turned in Eiric's hand, howling its satiated glee, and clove down at Rackhir.

"- Seeing his fate, Rackhir sobbed and sought to avoid the Mow. But it landed in his shoulder blade and sheared down to his breast-bone.

"Eiric!" he cried. "Not my soul, too!"

And so died the hero Rackhir the Red Archer, famous in the Eastlands, cloven by a treacherous blade. By the friend whose life he had saved, long ago when they had first met near the city of Ameeron.

Then came realisation. Eiric tried to tug the sword away but it was too late. Again he had involuntarily slain one close to him while in the power of his runesword.

"Oh, Rackhir!" he cried, kneeling beside the body and taking it in his arms. The stolen energy still pulsed in him, but his great grief no longer gave it the same control over him. Tears streamed down Eiric’s tortured face and a great, t, racking groan came from him.

^ "Once more." he muttered, "once more. Will it never cease?"

> Beyond him, his two remaining companions stood on op-
Mposite sides of the field of the slain. Dyvim Slorm had done^ with slaying, but only because there were none left to kill. He was gasping^ staring around him half in bewilderment Moonglum stared at Eiric with horrified eyes which yet held a fleam of sympathy for his friend, for he knew well Eiric's doom and knew mat the life of one close to Eiric was the price Stormbringer demanded for supplying the albino with his vitality.

"Rackhir! No gentler hero was there, no man more desirous of peace and order than you!" Eiric raised himself to his feet and turned to look at the huge castle of granite and Milestone, which stood in enigmatic silence as if awaiting bis next action. On the battlements of the topmost turret he could make out a figure which could only be a giant.

"I wear by your stolen soul, Rackhir. that what you wished to come to pass shall come to pass, though I, a thing of Chaos, achieve its triumph and Chaos win be driven back! Anned with awotd and shield of Chaos forging I shall do battle with every fiend of hell if needs be. Chaos was the indirect cause of your death. And Chaos will be punished for it But first, we must take Ac shield."

Dyvim Slorm, not realising quite what had happened, shouted In exultation to bu Unmnan "Eiric-lefs viait the sad giant nowF"

But Moonglum, coming up to gaze down on me ruined body of Rackhir. murmured: "Aye, Chaos is me cause, Eiric. Ill join in your vengeance with a will so long as." he shuddered, *Tm spared from me attentions of your hell-blade."

Together, three abreast, tfaey marched through we open portal of Mordaga's castle and were hnmfdintdy in a rich and barbaricauy furnished hall.

"Mordaga!" Eiric cried. "We have come to fulfill a propbccyi We await you.*

They waited impatiently, until at last, a bulky figure came through a great arch at the end of the vast hall.

Mordaga was as taD aft two men, but his back was slightly stooped. He had long, curling black hair and was dad in * deep blue smock, belted at the waist Upon his great feet
were simple leather sandals. His black eyes were fun of a sorrow such as Moonglum had only seen before in Eiric's eyes.

Upon the sad giant's arm was a round shield which bore upon it me eight amber arrows of Chaos. It was of a silvery green colour and very beautiful. He had no other weapons.

"I know me prophecy," he said in a voice that was like a lonely, roaring wind. "But still I must seek to avert it. Will you take the shield and leave me in peace, human? I do not want death."

Eiric felt a kind of empathy for sad Mordaga and he knew something of what the fallen god must feel at this moment.

"The prophecy says death," he said softly.

"Take the shield." Mordaga lifted it off his mighty arm and held it towards Eiric. "Take the shield and change fate this once."

Eiric nodded. "I will."

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With a tremendous sigh, the giant deposited me Chaos Shield upon the floor.

"For thousands of years I have lived in the shadow of that prophecy," he said, straightening his back. "Now, though I die in old age, I shall die in peace and, though I once did not think so, I shall welcome such a death after all this time, I mink."

"You may not die thus. With your shield's protection gone," Eiric warned him, "for Chaos comes and will engulf you as it will engulf everything unless I can stop it. But at least, it seems, you'll be in a more philosophic frame of mind to meet it."

"Farewell and I thank you," said the giant turning and he plodded back towards the entrance through which he had come.

As Mordaga disappeared, Moonglum dashed forward on fleet feet and followed him through the entrance before either Eiric or Dyvim Storm could cry out or stop him.

Then they heard a single shriek that seemed to echo away...
Jinto eternity, a crash which shook the hall and then the foot-fall returning.

Moonglum reappeared in the entrance, a bloody sword in his hand.

Unable to understand this uncharacteristic action, Eiric was silent merely staring at me Eastlander as he approached down the hall-

"It was murder," said Moonglum simply. "I admit it I took him in the back before he was aware of it. It was a good, quick death and he died whilst happy. Moreover it was a better death than any his minions tried to mete to us. It was murder, but it was necessary murder in my eyes."

"Whyr said Eiric, still mystified.

Grimly, Moonglum continued: "He had to perish as fate decreed. We are servants of fate, now, Eiric, and to divert it in any small way is to hamper its aims. But more than that it was me beginning of my own vengeance taking. If Mordaga had not surrounded himself with such a host, Rackhir would not have died."

Eiric shook his head. "Blame me for that, Moonglum. The giant should not have perished for my own sword's crime."

"Someone had to perish," said Moonglum steadfastly, "and since the prophecy contained Mordaga's death, he was the one. Who else, here, could I kill, Eiric?"

Eiric turned away. "I wish it were I," he sighed. He looked down at the great, round shield with its shifting amber arrows and its mysterious silver-green colour. He picked it up easily enough and placed it on his arm. It virtually covered his body from chin to ankles.
"Come, let's make haste and leave this place of death and misery. The lands of Umiora and Vumir await our aid-if they have not already wholly fallen to Chaos!"

It was in the mountains separating the Sighing Desert from the Weeping Waste, that they first learned of the fate of the last of the Young Kingdoms. They came upon a party of six tired warriors led by Lord Voashoo, Zarorinia's father.

"What has happened?" Eiric asked anxiously. "Where is Zarozinia?"

"Our continent has fallen to Chaos, Eiric. As for Zarozinia, I know not if she's lost, liead or captured."

"Did you not seek for her?" Eiric said accusingly.

The old man shrugged. "My son. I have looked upon so much horror these past days mat I am now bereft of emotion. I care for nothing but a quick release from all this. The day of mankind is over on the Earth. Go no further than here, for even the Weeping Waste is beginning to change before the crawling tide of Chaos. It is hopeless."

"Hopeless! No! We still live-perhaps Zarozinia stin lives. Did you hear nothing of her fate?"

"Only a rumour that Jagreen Lern had taken her aboard the leading Chaos ship."

"She is on the seas, perhaps?"

"No-those cursed craft sail land as well as sea, if it can be told apart these days. It was they who attacked Kariaak, with a vast horde of mounted men and infantry following behind. Confusion prevails-youTI find nothing but your death back there, my son."

"We shall see. I have some protection against Chaos at long last, plus my sword and my Nihrain steed." He turned in the saddle to address his companions. "Well, friends, will you stay here with Lord Voashoon or accompany me into the heart of Chaos?"

"Well come with you," Moonglum said quietly, speaking for them both. "We've followed you until now and our fates are linked with yours in any case. We can do nought else."
"Good. Farewell, Lord Voashoon. If you would do a service, ride over the Weeping Waste to Eahmir and the Unknown Kingdoms where Moonglum's homeland lies. Tell them what to expect, though they're probably beyond rescue now."

"I will try," said Voashoon wearily, "and hope to arrive there before Chaos."

Then Eiric and his companions were off, riding towards the massed hordes of Chaos-three men against the unleashed forces of darkness. Three foolhardy men who had pursued their course so faithfully that it was inconceivable for them to flee now. The last acts must be played out whether howling night or calm day followed.

The first signs of Chaos were soon apparent as they saw the place where lush grassland once had been. It was now a yellow morass of molten rodé that, though cool, rolled about with a purposeful air. The Nihrain horses, since they did not actually gallop on the plane of Earth at all, crossed it with comparative ease and here the Chaos Shield was first shown to work, for as they passed the yellow liquid rock changed and became grass again for a short time.

They met once a shambling thing that still had limbs of sorts and a mourn that could speak. From this poor creature they learned that Kariaak was no more, that it had been churned into broiling nothingness and where it had been the forces of Chaos, both human and supernatural, had set up their camp, their work done. The thing also spoke of something that was of particular interest to Eiric. Rumour was that the Dragon Isle of Melniboné was the only place where Chaos had been unable to exert its influence.

"If, when our business is done, we can reach Melnibone," Eiric said to his friends as they rode on, "we might be able to abide until such a time that the White Lords can help us. Also there are dragons slumbering in the caves-and these would be useful against Jagreen Lem if we could waken them."

"What use is it to fight men now?" Dyvim Slorm said defeatedly. "Jagreen Lem has won, Eiric. We have not fulfilled our destiny. Our role is over and Chaos rules."

"Does it? But we have yet to fight it and test its strength
against ours. Let us decide then what the outcome has been."

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t Slorm looked dubious, but he said nothing.

| Oeo, at last, they came to the camp of Chaos.

| portal nightmare could encompass such a terrible
|^the towering Ships of Hell dominated the place as
|aved it from a distance, utterly horrified by the
|Kitm names of all colours seemed to flicker every-
|r the camp, fiends of all kinds mingled with the
evilly beautiful Dukes of Hell conferred with the
|kings who had allied themselves to Jagreen Lem
|• now regretted it. Every so often, the ground
|erupted and any human beings unfortunate
|pte be in the area were either engulfed and totally
|IBM) or else had their bodies warped in indescribable
|te noise was dreadful, blending of human voices and
'|Chaos sounds, devil's wailing laughter and, quite of-
|^tortured scream of a human soul who had perhaps
|KN> choice of loyalty and now suffered madness. The
|"W disgusting, of corruption, of blood, and of evil.
bPb B of Hell moved slowly about through the horde
|^tferetbed for miles, dotted with great pavilions of
|heir silk banners fluttering, hollow pride compared to
|fat of Chaos. Many of the human beings could
|te told from the Chaos creatures, their forms were
|ad under the influence of Chaos.

| Stuttered to his friends as they sat in their saddles
|"It is obvious that the warping influence of Chaos
|a stronger among the human ranks. This will con-
|even Jagreen Lern and the human leaders will lose
|lance of humanity and become Just a fraction of
|uff of Chaos. This will mean the end of the
|-mankind will pass away forever, taken into the
|OOK upon the last of mankind, my friends, save for
|^ Soon it will be indistinguishable from anything else.
|F Unstable Earth is beneath the heel of the Lords of
|• soon will be-and they are gradually absorbing it
|realm, into their own plane. They will first re-
|l then steal the Earth altogether; it will become just
|p of clay for them to mould into whatever gros-
s take their fancy."

seek to stop that," Moonglum said hopelessly.
**We must continue to strive, until we are conquered. I remember that Straasha the Sea King, said, if Lord Pyaray, commander of the Ships of Hell, is slain, the ships themselves will no longer be able to exist I have a mind to put that to the test Also I have not forgotten that my wife may be prisoner aboard his ship, or that Jagreen Lem is there. I have three good reasons for venturing there."

"No, Bind It would be more than suicide)**

"I do not ask you to accompany me."

• "If you go, we shall come, but I like it not"

"No-if one man cannot succeed, neither can three. I shall go alone. Wait here for me. If I do not return, then try to get to Melnibone."

"But Biric-!" Mbongium cried and then watched as his Chaos Shield pulsing, Eiric spurred his Nihrain steed towards the camp.

Protected against the Influence of Chaos, Eiric was sighted by a detachment of warriors as he neared the ship which was his destination. They recognised him and rode towards him shouting.

He laughed in their faces, half-maddened by the sights, smells and sounds around him. "Just the fodder my blade needs before we banquet on yonder ship!" he cried as he slashed off the first man's head as if it were a buttercup.

Secure behind his great round shield, he hewed about him with a will. Since Stonnbrmger had slain roe gods imprisoned in the elder trees, the vitality which the sword passed into him was almost without limit, yet every soul that Biric stole from Jagreen Lern's Warriors was another fraction of vengeance reaped. Against men, he was invincible. He split one heavily armoured warrior from bead to crutch, sheared through the saddle and smashed the horse's backbone apart.

Then the remaining warriore dropped back suddenly and Eiric felt his body tingle with peculiar sensations, knew he was in the area of influence exerted by me Chaos ship and knew also that he was being protected against it by his shield. He was now partially out of his own earthly plane and existed between his world and the world of Chaos. He dismounted
from his Nihrain steed and ordered it to wait for him. There were ropes trailing from the huge sides of the Ship and Eiric saw with horror that other figures were climbing up them-and he recognised several as men he had known in Karlaak.

Even now the Chaos ship was still recruiting its crew from the ranks of the dead!

He joined the ghastly ranks and swarmed with them up the tides of the great gleaming ship, grateful at least for the cover they gave him.

He reached the ship's rail and hauled himself over it, spitting bile from his throat as he entered a peculiar region of darkness and came to the first of a series of decks that rose like steps to the topmost one where he could see the occupants—a manlike figure and something like a huge, blood-red octopus. The first was probably Jagreen Lern. The second was obviously Pyaray, for this, Eiric knew, was the guise he took when he manifested himself on Earth.

Contrasting with the ships seen from the distance, once aboard Eiric became conscious of the dark, shadowy nature of the light filled with moving threads, a network of dark reds, blues, yellows, greens and purples which, as he moved through it, gave and re-formed itself behind him.

He was constantly being blundered against by the moving cadavers and he made a point of not looking at their faces too closely, for he had already recognised several of the searraiders whom he had abandoned years before, during the escape from Imrryr.

Slowly he was gaining the top deck, noting that so far, both Jagreen Lern and Lord Pyarary seemed unaware of his presence. Presumably they considered themselves entirely free from any kind of attack now they had conquered all.

He grinned maliciously to himself as he continued climbing, gripping the shield tightly, knowing that if once he lost hold of it, his body would become transformed either into some shambling alien shape or else flow away altogether to become absorbed into the Chaos stuff.

By now Eiric had forgotten everything but his main object which was to kill Lord Pyaray. He must gain the top-most
deck and deal first with the Lord of Chaos. Then he would kill Jagreen Lem and, if she were really there, rescue Zarozania and bear her to safety.

Up the dark decks, through the nets of strange colours, Eiric went, his milk-white hair flowing behind him in contrast to the moody darkness around him.

As he came to the last deck but one, he felt a gentle touch on his shoulder and looking in that direction saw, with heart-lurching horror, that one of Pyaray's blood-red tentacles had found him. He stumbled back, pulling up his shield.

The tentacle tip touched the shield and rebounded suddenly, the entire tentacle shrivelling. From above, where the Chaos Lord's main bulk was, there came a terrible screaming and roaring.

"What's this? What's this? What's this?"

Eiric shouted in impudent triumph at seeing his shield work with such effect: "Tis Eiric of Melnibone, great lord. Come to destroy thee!"

Another tentacle dropped towards him, seeking to curl around the shield and seize him. Then another followed it and another. Eiric hacked at one, severed its sensitive tip, saw another touch the shield, recoil and shrivel and then avoided the third in order to run round the deck and ascend, as swiftly as he could, the ladder leading to the deck above.

Here he saw Jagreen Lem, his eyes wide. The Theocrat was clad in his familiar scarlet armour. On his arm was his buckler and in the same hand an axe, while his right hand held a broadsword. He glanced down at these weapons, obviously aware of their inadequacy against Eiric's.

"You later, Theocrat," Eiric promised grimly.

"You're a fool, Eiric! You're doomed now! whatever you do!"

It was probably true, but he did not care.

"Aside, upstart," Eiric said as, his shield up, he moved warily towards the many-headed Lord of Chaos.

"You are the killer of many cousins of mine, Eiric," the creature said in a low voice. "And you've banished several
Dukes of Chaos to their own domain so that they cannot reach Earth again. For that you must pay. But I at least do not underestimate you, as, in likelihood, they did." A tentacle reared above him and tried to come down from over the shield's rim and seize his throat. He took a step backwards and blocked the attempt with the shield.

Then a whole web of tentacles began to come from all sides, each one curling around the shield, knowing its touch to be death. He skipped aside, avoiding them with difficulty, slicing about him with Stormbringer.

As he fought, he remembered Straasha's last message:

Strike for the crystal a-top his head. There is his life ami his soul.

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Eiric saw the blue radiating crystal which he had originally taken to be one of Lord Pyaray's several eyes.

He moved in towards the roots of the tentacles, leaving his back badly unprotected, but there was nothing else for it. As he did so, a huge maw gaped in the thing's head and tentacles began to draw him towards it. He extended his shield towards the maw and had the satisfaction of seeing yellow jelly-like stuff spurt from it as the Lord of Chaos screamed in.

He got his foot on one tentacle stump and clambered up the slippery hide of the Chaos Lord, every time his shield touched him creating some sort of wound so that Lord Pyaray began to thresh about dreadfully. Then he stood above the glowing soul-crystal. For an instant he paused, then plunged Stormbringer point-first into the crystal!

There came a mighty throbbing from the heart of the entity's body. It gave vent to a monstrous shriek and then Eiric yelled as Stormbringer took the soul of a Lord of Hell and channelled this surging vitality through to him. It was too much. He was hurled backwards.

He lost his footing on the slippery back, stumbled off the deck itself and fell to another nearly a hundred feet below. He landed with bone-cracking force, but, thanks to the stolen vitality, was completely unharmed. He got up, ready to clamber towards Jagreen Lem.
'The Theocrat*s anxious face peered down at him and he yelped: "You'll find a present for you in yonder cabin, Eiric!"

Tom between pursuing the Theocrat and investigating the Cabin, Eiric turned and opened the door. From inside came a dreadful sobbing.

"Zaroriniat" he cried. He ducked into the dark place and (here he saw her.

Her lovely body was dreadfully changed so that it now resembled the body of a white worm. Only her head, the same beautiful head, was left.

Horrified he almost dropped his shield.

**Did Jagreen Lem do this?**

**He and his ally." The head nodded.

Sickened, Eiric could hardly bear to look at her. "Another great score that must be paid," he muttered.

And then the worm-body had threshed and impaled itself on his sword. "There!" the head cried. "Take my soul into you, Eiric, for I am useless to myself and you, now! Can my soul with yours and we shall be forever together."

He tried to withdraw the thirsty runeMade, but it was impossible. And, unlike any other sensation he had ever received from it, this was almost gentle, warm and pleasant, his wife's soul flowed into his and be wept as it did so.

"Oh, Zarozinia,** he sobbed. **Oh. my loveF

So she died, her soul blending with his as, years before, the soul of his first love, Cymoril, had been taken. He did not look at the dreadful worm-body, did not glance at her face, but walked slowly from the cabin.

But now it appeared that the deck was disintegrating, flowing apart Jagreen Lena had evidently made good his escape and Eiric in his present mood, did not feel ready to pursue him. Sword and shield both aiding him in their ways, he leapt from the ship to the pulsating ground and ran for the Nihrain steed. •*

Then, the tears still flowing down his white face, he rode,
leaving the Ships of Hell breaking apart behind him. At least these would threaten the world no more and a blow had been struck against Chaos. Now only the horde itself remained to be dealt with—and the dealing would not be so easy.

He rejoined his friends in silence, said nothing to them and led the way over the shaking earth towards Melnibone, island of his ancestors, where the last stand against Chaos would be made, the last battle fought and his destiny completed.

And in his mind as he rode, he seemed to hear Zarozima'a youthful voice whispering comforting words as, still sobbing, he galloped away from the camp of Chaos.

BOOK FOUR

Doomed Lord's Passing

| For the mind of Man alone is free to explore the lofty
| vastness of the cosmic infinite, to transcend ordinary con-
| sciousness, to roam the secret corridors of the brain where
| past and future melt into one . . . And universe and individ-
| ual are tinted, the one mirrored in the other, and each con-

I; tains the other.

| -The Chronicle of the Black Sword

One

| The dreaming city no longer dreamed in splendour. The tat-
| tend towers of Imrryr were blackened husks, tumbled rags
| of masonry standing sharp and dark against a sullen sky.
| Once, EXric's vengeance had brought fire to the city, and the
| fire had brought ruin.

Streaks of cloud, like sooty smoke, whispered across the pulsing mm so that the shouting, red-stained waters beyond Imrryr were soiled by shadow, and they seemed to become quieter as if bushed by the black scan that rode across their ominous turbulence.

Upon a confusion of fallen masonry, a man stood watching the waves. A tall man* broad-shouldered, slender at hip, a man with slanting brows, pointed, lobeless ears, high cheekbones and crimson, moody eyes In a dead white ascetic face. He was dressed in black, quilted doublet and heavy cloak, both high-collared, emphasising the pallor of his albino

•kin. The wind, erratic and warm, played with his cloak, fingered it and passed mindlessly on to howl through the broken
towers.

Eiric heard the howling and his memory was filled by the sweet, the malicious and melancholy melodies of old Melnibone. He remembered, too, the other music his ancestors had created when they had elegantly tortured their slaves, choosing them for the pitch of their screams and forming them into the instruments of unholy symphonies. Lost in this nostalgia for a while, he found something close to forgetfulness and he wished that he had never doubted the code of Melnibone, wished that he had accepted it without question and thus left his mind unadorned. Bitterly, he smiled.

A figure appeared below him and climbed the tumbled stones to stand by his side. He was a small, red-haired man with a wide mouth and eyes that had once been bright and amused.

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"You look to the Bast, Eiric." Moonglum murmured. **You look back towards something irremediable.**

Eiric put his long-fingered hand on his friend's shoulder. "Where else is there to look, Moonglum, when the world lies beneath the heel of Chaos? What would you have me do? Look forward to days of hope and laughter, to an old age lived in peace, with children playing around my feet?" He laughed softly. It was not a laugh that Moonglum liked to hear.

"Sepiriz spoke of help from the White Lords. It must come soon. We must wait patiently." Moonglum turned to squint into the glowering and motionless sun and then, his face set in an introspective look, cast his eyes down to the rubble on which he stood.

Eiric was silent for a moment, watching the waves. Then he shrugged. **Why complain? It does me no good. I cannot act on my own volition. Whatever fate is before me cannot be changed. I pray that the men who follow us win make use of their ability to control their own destinies. I have no such ability." He touched his jaw bone with his fingers and then looked at the hand, noting nails, knuckles, muscles and veins standing out on the pale skin. He ran this hand through the silky strands of his white hair, drew a long breath and let it out in a sigh. "Logic! The world cries for logic. I have none.
yet here I am, formed as a man with mind, heart and vitals, yet formed by a chance coming together of certain elements. The world needs logic. Yet all the logic in the world is worm as much as one lucky guess. Men take pains to weave a web of careful thoughts-yet others thoughtlessly weave a random pattern and achieve the same result. So much for the thoughts of the sage."

"Ah,** Moonglum winked with attempted levity, **thus speaks the wild adventurer, the cynic. But we are not all wud and cynical, Eiric. Other men tread other paths-and reach other conclusions than yours."

"I tread one that*s prc-ordained. Come, lets to the Dragon Caves and see what Dyvim Slorm has done to rouse our reptilian friends."

They stumbled together down the ruins and walked the shattered canyons that had once been the lovely streets of Imrryr, out of the city and along a grassy track mat wound through the gorse, disturbing a flock of large ravens that fled into the air, cawing, aD save one, the king, who balanced himself on a bush, his cloak of ruffled feathers drawn up in dignity, bis black eyes regarding them with wary contempt.

Down through sharp rocks to the gaping entrance of the Dragon Caves, down me steep steps into torch-Ht darkness with its damp warmth and smell of scaly reptilian bodies. Into the first cave where the great recumbent forms of the sleeping dragons lay, their folded leathery wings rising into the shadows, their green and black scales glowing faintly, their clawed feet folded and their slender snouts curied back, even in sleep, to display the long, ivory teeth that seemed like so many white stalactites. Their dilating red nostrils groaned in torpid slumber. The smell of their hides and their breath was unmistakable, rousing in Moonglum some memory inherited from his ancestors, some shadowy impression of a time when these dragons and their masters swept across a world they ruled, their inflammable venom dripping from their fangs and heedlessly setting fire to the countryside across which they flew. Eiric, used to it, hardly noticed the smell, but passed on through the first cave and the second until he found Dyvim Slorm, striding about with a torch in one hand and a scroll in the other, swearing to himself.
He looked up as he heard their booted feet approach. He spread out his arms and shouted, his voice echoing through the caverns, "Nothing! Not a stir, not an eyelid flickering! There is no way of rousing them. They'll not wake until they have slept their necessary number of years. Oh, that we had not used them on the last two occasions, for we have greater need of them today!"

"Neither you nor I had the knowledge we have now. Regret is useless since it can achieve nothing." Eiric stared around him at the huge, shadowy forms. Here, slightly apart from the rest, lay the leader-dragon, one he recognised and felt affection for: Flamefang, the eldest, who was five thousand years old and still young for a dragon. But Flamefang, like the rest, slept on.

He went up to the beast and stroked its metal-like scales, ran his hand down the ivory smoothness of its great front fangs, felt its warm breath on his body and smiled. Beside him, on his hip, he heard Stormbringer murmur. He patted the blade. "Here's one soul you cannot have. The dragons are indestructible. They will survive, even though all the world collapses into nothing."

Dyvim Slorm said from another part of the cavern: "I can't think of further action to take for the meantime, Brie. Let's go back to the tower of D'aliputna and refresh ourselves."

Eiric nodded assent and, together, the three men returned through the caverns and ascended the steps into the sunlight.

"So," Dyvim Slorm remarked, "still no nightfall- The sun has remained in that position for thirteen days, ever since we left the Camp of Chaos and made our perilous way to Melnibone. How much power must Chaos wield if it can top the sun in its course?"

"Chaos might not have done this for all we know," Moon-glum pointed out. Though it's likely, of course, that if did. Time has stopped. Time waits- But waits for what? More confusion, further disorder? Or (he influence of me great balance which will restore order and take vengeance against those forces who have gone against its will? Or does Time wait for us-three mortal men adrift, cut off from what is happening to all other men, waiting on Time as it waits on
“Perhaps the sun waits on us,” Brie agreed. Tor is it not our destiny to prepare the world for its fresh course? It makes me feel a little more than a mere pawn if that’s the case. What if we do nothing? Will the sun remain where it is forever?”

They paused in their progress for a moment and stood staring up at the pulsating red disc which flooded the streets with scarlet light, at the black clouds which fled across the sky before it. Where were the clouds going? Where did they come from? They seemed instilled with purpose. It was possible that they were not even clouds at all, but spirits of Chaos bent on dark errands.

Eiric grunted to himself, aware of the uselessness of such speculation. He led the way back to the tower of D*a*rputaa where years before he had sought his love, his cousin Cymorfl, and later lost her to the ravening thirst of the blade by his side.

The tower had survived the flames, though the colours that had once adorned it were blackened by fire. Here he left his friends and went to his own room to fling himself, fully clad upon the soft Melnibonean bed and, almost immediately, fall asleep.

Two

Eiric slept and Eiric dreamed and, though he was aware of the unreality of his visions, his attempts to rouse himself to wakefulness were entirely futile. Soon he ceased trying and merely let his dream form itself and draw him into its bright landscapes...

He saw Imrryr as it had been many centuries ago. Imrryr, the same city he had known before he led the raid on it and caused its destruction. The same, yet with a different, brighter appearance as if it were newly-built. As well, the colours of the surrounding countryside were richer, the sun darker orange, the sky deep blue and sultry. Since then, he realised, the very tints of the world had faded with the planet's ageing...

People and beasts moved in the shining streets; tall, eldritch Melniboneans, men and women walking with grace, like proud tigers; hard-faced slaves with hopeless, stoic eyes, long-legged horses of a type now extinct, small mastodons
drawing gaudy cars. Clearly on the breeze came the mys-
terious scents of the place, the muted sounds of activity-all
hushed, for the Melniboneans hated noise as much as they
loved harmony. Heavy silk banners flapped from the scintil-
lating towers of Milestone, jade, ivory, crystal and polished
red granite. And Eiric moved in his sleep and ached to be
there amongst his own ancestors, the golden folk who had
dominated the old world.

Monstrous galleys passed through the water-maze which
led to Imrryr's inner harbour, bringing the best of the world's
booty, tax gathered from all parts of the Bright Empire, And
across the azure sky lazy dragons flapped their way towards
the caves where thousands of the beasts were stabled, unlike
the present where scarcely a hundred remained. In the tallest
tower—the Tower of B'aU'nezbett, the Tower of Kings—his
ancestors had studied sorcerous lore, conducted their mali-
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ocious experiments, indulged their sensuous appetites—not dec-
adently as men of the Young Kingdoms might behave, but
according to their native instincts.

Eiric knew that he looked upon the ghost of a now-dead
city. And he seemed to pass beyond the Tower's gleaming
walls and see his emperor-ancestors indulging in drug-sharp-
ened conversation, lazily sadistic, sporting with demon-
women, torturing, investigating the peculiar metabolism and
psychology of the enslaved races, delving into mystic lore, ab-
sorbing a knowledge which few men of the later period could
experience without falling insane.

But it was clear that his must either be a dream or vision
of a nether world which the dead of all ages inhabited, for
here were emperors of many different generations. Erie knew
them from their portraits: Black-ringletted Rondar IV,
twelfth emperor; sharp-eyed, imperious Eiric I, eightieth em-
peror; horror burdened Kahan Vn, three-hundred-and-
twenty-ninth emperor. A dozen or more of me mightiest and
wisest of his four-hundred-and-twenty-seven ancestors, includ-
ing Terhali, the Green Empress, who had ruled the Bright
Empire from me year 8406 after its foundation until 9011.
Her longevity and green-tinged skin and hair had marked her
out. She had been a powerful sorceress, even by Memibonean
standards. She was also reputed the daughter of a union be-
tween Emperor luntric X and a demon.
Eiric, who saw all these as if from a darkened corner of the great main chamber, observed the shimmering door of black crystal open and a newcomer enter. He started and again attempted to wake himself, without success. The man was his father, Sadric the eighty-sixth, a tall man with heavy-lidded eyes and a misery in him. He passed through the throng as if it did not exist. He walked directly towards Eiric and stopped two paces from him. He stood looking at him, the eyes peering upwards from beneath the heavy lids and prominent brow. He was a gaunt-faced man who had been disappointed in his albino son. He had a sharp, long nose, sweeping cheekbones and a slight stoop because of his unusual height. He fingered the thin, red velvet of his robe with his delicate, beringed hands. Then he spoke in a clear whisper which, Eiric remembered, it had always been his habit to employ.

"My son. are you, too dead? I thought I*d been here but a fleeting moment and yet I see you changed in years and with a burden on you that time and fate have placed there. How did you die? In reckless combat on some upstart's foreign blade? Or in this very tower in your ivory bed? And what of Imrryr now? Does she fare well or ill, dreaming in her decline of past splendour? The line continues, as it must—will not ask you if that part of your trust was kept. A son, of course, born of Cymoril whom you loved, for which your cousin Yyrkoon hated you."

"Father—"

The old man raised a hand that was almost transparent with age. "There is another question I must ask of you. One that has troubled all who spend their immortality in this shade of a city. Some of us have noticed that the city itself fades at times and its colours dim, quivering as if about to vanish. Companions of ours have passed even beyond death and, perhaps, I shudder to contemplate it, into non-existence. Even here, in the timeless region of death, unprecedented changes manifest themselves and, those of us who've dared ask the question and also give its answer, fear that some tumultuous event has taken place in the world of the living. Some event which, so great is it, that even here we are affected and our souls' extinction threatened. A legend says that until the Dreaming City dies, we ghosts may inhabit its earlier glory. Is that the news you bear to us? Is this your message? For I note on clearer observation that your body lives still and mis is merely your astral body, released for a while to wander the realms of the dead."
"Father—** but already the vision was fading; already he was withdrawing back down the bellowing corridors of the cosmos, through planes of existence unknown to living men, away, away...

"Father!" he called, and his own voice echoed, but there was none there to make reply. And in some sense at least he was glad, for how could he answer the poor spirit and reveal to him the truth of his guesses, admit the crimes he himself was guilty of against his ancestral city, against the very blood of his forefathers? All was mist and groaning sorrow as his echoes boomed into his ears, seeming to take on their own independence and warp the word into weirder words: "F-a-a-a-th-e-r-r-r... A-a-a-a-v-a-a-a-a... A-a-a-a-ah-a-a-a-a... R-a-a-a... D-a-ra-va-ar-a-a...!"

Still, though he strove with all his being, he could not rouse himself from slumber, but felt his spirit drawn through other regions of smoky indeterminacy, through patterns of colour beyond his earthly spectrum, beyond his mind's conception.

A huge face began to take form in the mist. "Sepiriz!" Eiric recognised the face of his mentor. But the black Nihrainian, disembodied, did not appear to hear him. *"Sepiriz—are you dead?"

The face faded, then reappeared almost at once upon the rest of the man's tall frame.

"Eiric, I have discovered you at last, robed in your astral body, I see. Thank Fate, for I thought I had failed to summon you. Now we must make haste. A breach has been made in the defences of Chaos and we go to confer with the Lords of Law!"

"Where are we?"

"Nowhere as yet. We travel to the Higher Worlds. Come* hurry, ni be your guide."

Down, down, through pits of softest wool mat engulfed and comforted; through canyons that were cut between blazing mountains of light which utterly dwarfed them, through caverns of infinite blackness wherein their bodies shone and Eiric knew that the dark nothingness went away in all direc-
tions for ever.

And then they seemed to stand upon a horizonless plateau, perfectly flat with occasional green and blue geometric constructions rising from it. The iridescent air was alive with shimmering patterns of energy, weaving intricate shapes that seemed very formal. And there, too, were things in human form—things which had assumed such shape for the benefit of the men who now encountered them.

The White Lords of the Higher Worlds, enemies of Chaos, were marvellously beautiful, with bodies of such symmetry that they could not be earthly. Only Law could create such perfection and, Eiric thought, such perfection defeated progress. That the twin forces complemented one another was now plainer than ever before, and for either to gain complete ascendancy over the other meant entropy or stagnation for the cosmos. Even though Law might dominate the earth, Chaos must be present, and vice versa.

The Lords of Law were accoutred for war. They had made this apparent in their choice of earth-like garb. Fine metals and silks—or their like on this plane—gleamed on their perfect bodies. Slender weapons were at their sides and their overpoweringly beautiful faces seemed to glow with purpose. The tallest stepped forward.

"So, Sepiriz, you have brought the one whose destiny it is to aid us. Greetings. Eiric of Melnibone. Though spawn of Chaos you be, we have cause to welcome you. Do you recognise me? The one whom your earthly mythology calls Donblas the Justice Maker."

Immobile, Eiric said: "I remember you. Lord Donblas. You are misnamed, I fear, for justice is nowhere present in the world."

"You speak of your realm as if it were all realms.** Donblas smiled without rancour, though it appeared that he was unused to such impudence from a mortal. Eiric remained insouciant His ancestors had been opposed to Donblas and all his brethren, and it was still hard to consider the White Lord an ally. "I see now how you have managed to defy our opponents," Lord Donblas continued with approval. "And I grant you that justice cannot be found on earth at this time. But I am named the Justice Maker and have still the will to make it when conditions change on your plane."
Eiric did not look directly at Donblas, for the sight of his beauty was disturbing. "Then let's to work, my lord, and change the world as soon we may. Let's bring the novelty of justice to our sobbing realm."

"Haste, mortal, is impossible here!" It was another White Lord speaking, his pale yellow surcoat rippling over the clear steel of breastplate and greaves, the single Arrow of Law emblazoned on it

"I'd thought the breach to earth made," Eiric frowned. "I'd thought this martial sight a sign that you prepared war against Chaos!"

"War is prepared-but not possible until the summons comes from your realm."

"From usi Has not Earth screamed for your aid? Have we not worked sorceries and incantations to bring you to us? What further summons do you need?"

"The ordained one," said Lord Donblas firmly.

"The ordained one? Godsl (You'll pardon roe, my lords.) Is further work required of me, then?"

"One last great task, Eiric," said Sepiriz softly. "As I have told you. Chaos blocks the attempts of the White Lords to gain access to our world. The Horn of Fate must be blown thrice before this business is fully terminated. The first blast will wake the Dragons of Inarryr, the second will allow the White Lords entrance to the earthly plane, the third-" be paused.

"Yes, the tnird?" Eiric was impatient

"The third will herald the death of our woridi"

"Where lies this mighty hom?"

"In one of several realms," said Scpinz. "A device of this kind cannot be made on our plane, therefore it has had to be constructed on a plane where logic rules over sorcery.'You must journey there to locate the Horn of Fate,"

"And how can I accomplish such a journey?"
Once again Lord Donblas spoke icvclly. "We will give you the means. Equip yourself with sword and shield of Chaos, for they will be of some use to you, though not so powerful as in your world. Go you then to the highest point on the ruined Tower of B'all'nezbett in Imrryr and step off into space. You will not fall-unless what little power we retain on earth fails us."

"Comforting words, my Lord Donblas. Very weu. I shall do as you decree, to satisfy my own curiosity if naufht else."

Donblas shrugged. "This is only one of many worlds-almost as much a shadow as your own—but you may not approve of it. You will notice its sharpness, its clearness of outline—that will indicate that Time has exerted no real influence upon it that its structure has not been mellowed by many events. However, let me wish you safe passage, mortal, for I like you—and I have cause to thank you, too. Though you be of Chaos, you have within you several of the qualities we of Law admire. Go now—return to your mortal body and prepare yourself for the venture ahead of you.**

Eiric bowed again and glanced at Sepiriz. The black Nihrainian stepped back three paces and disappeared into the gleaming air. Eiric followed him.

Once again their astral bodies ranged the myriad planes of the supernatural universe, experiencing sensations unfamiliar to the physical mind, before, quite without warning, Eiric felt suddenly heavy and opened his eyes to discover that he was in his own bed in the tower of D'a'rputna. Through the faint light filtering between chinks in the heavy curtain thrown over the window-slit, he saw the round Chaos Shield, its eight-arrowed symbol pulsing slowly as if in concert with the sun, and beside it his unholy runeblade Stormbringer, lying against the wall as if already prepared for their journey into the might-be world of a possible future.

Then Eiric slept again, more naturally, and was tormented, also, by more natural nightmares so that at last he screamed in his sleep and woke himself to find Moonglum standing by the bed. There was an expression of sad concern upon his narrow face. "What is it, Eiric? What ails your slumber?"

He shuddered. "Nothing. Leave me, Moonglum. and I'll join you when I rise."
"There must be reason for such shouting. Some prophetic dream, perhaps?"

"Aye. prophetic sure enough. I thought I saw a vision of my thin blood split by a hand that was my own. What import has this dream, what moment? Answer that, my friend, and, if you can't then leave me to my morbid bed until these thoughts are gone."

"Come, rouse yourself. Eiric. Find forgetfulness in action. The candle of the fourteenth day burns low and Dyvim Slorm awaits your good advice."

The albino pulled himself upright and swung his trembling legs over the bed. He felt enfeebled, bereft of energy. Moonglum helped him rise. "Throw off this troubled mood and help us in our quandary," he said with a hollow levity that made his fears more plain.


Unwillingly, Moonglum went to the wall where stood the evil weapon, took the runeblade by its scabbard and lifted it with difficulty, for it was an over-heavy sword. He shuddered as it seemed to titter faintly at him. and he presented it hilt-first to his friend. Gratefully, Eiric seized if was about to pull it from the sheath when he paused. "Best leave the room before I free the blade."

Moonglum understood at once and left, not anxious to trust his life to the whim of the hell-sword-or his friend.

When he was gone, Hric unsheathed the great sword and at once felt a faint tingle as its supernatural vitality began to stream into his nerves. Yet it was scarcely adequate and he knew that if the blade did not feed soon upon the life-stuff of another it would seek the souls of his two remaining friends. He replaced it thoughtfully in the scabbard, buckled it around his waist and strode to join Moonglum in the high-ceiled corridor.

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In silence, they proceeded down the twisting marble steps of the tower, until they reached the centre level where the main chamber was. Here, Dyvim Slorm was seated, a bottle of old Melnibonean wine on the table before him, a large silver bowl in his hands. His sword Mournblade was on the table beside the bottle. They had found the store of wine in
the secret cellars of the place, missed by the sea-reavers whom Eiric had led upon brryr when he and his cousin had fought on opposite sides. The bowl was full of the congealed mixture of herbs, honey and barley which their ancestors had used to sustain themselves in times of need. Dyvim Slorm was brooding over it, but looked up when they came close and sat themselves on chairs opposite him. He smiled hopelessly.

"I fear, Eiric. that I have done all I can to rouse our sleeping friends. No more is possible-and they still slumber."

Eiric remembered the details of his vision and, half-afraid that it had been merely a figment of his own imaginings, supplying the fantasy of hope where, in reality, DO hope was, said: "Forget the dragons, for a while at least Last night I left my body, so I thought, and journeyed to places beyond the earth, eventually to the White Lords' plane where they told me how I might rouse the dragons by blowing upon a horn. I intend to follow their directions and seek that horn."

Dyvim Slorm replaced his bowl upon the table. "We'll accompany you, of course."

"No need-and anyway impossible-I'll have to go alone. Wait for me until I return and if I do not-well, you must do what you decide, spending your remaining years imprisoned on this isle, or going to battle with Chaos."

"I have the idea that time has stopped in truth and if we stay here we shall live on forever and shall be forced to face the resulting boredom," Moonglum put in. "If you don't return, I for one will ride into the conquered realms to take a few of our enemies with me to limbo."

"As you will," Eiric said- "But wait for me until all your patience is ended, for I know not how long III be."

He stood up and they seemed a trifle startled, as if they had not until then understood the import of his words.

"Fare you well, then, my friend," said Moonglum.

"How well I fare depends on what I meet where I go," Eiric smiled. "But thanks, Moonglum. Fare you well, good cousin, do not fret Perhaps well wake the dragons yett"

"Aye," Dyvim Slorm said with a sudden resurgence of vi-
tality, "We shall, we shall! And their fiery venom will spread across the filth mat Chaos brings, burning it dean! That day must come or I'm no prophet at all!"

Infected by this unexpected enthusiasm, Eiric felt an increase of confidence, saluted his friends, smiled, and walked upright from the chamber, ascending the marble stairs to take the Chaos Shield from its place and go down to the gateway of the tower and pass through it, walking the jagged streets towards the magic-sundered ruin that had once been the scene of his dreadful vengeance and unwitting murder—the Tower of B'all'nezbett.

Three

Now, as Eiric stood before the broken entrance of the tower, his mind was beset with bursting thoughts which fled about his skull, made overtures to his convictions and threatened to send him hopelessly back to rejoin his companions. But he fought them, forced them down, forgot them, clung to his remembrance of the White Lord's assurance and passed into the shadowed shell which still had the smell of burnt wood and fabric about its blackened interior.

This tower, which had formed a funeral pyre for the murdered corpse of his first love Cymoril and his warped cousin, her brother Yyrkoon, had been gutted of innards. Only the stone stairway remained and that, he noted, peering into the gloom through which rays of sunlight slanted, had collapsed before it reached the roof.

He dare not think, for thought might rob him of action. Instead, he placed a foot upon the first stair and began to climb. As he did so, a faint sound entered his ears, or it may have been that it came from within his mind. However it reached his consciousness, it sounded like a far-away orchestra tuning itself. As he climbed higher the sound mounted, rhythmic yet discordant, until, by the time he reached the final step still left intact, it thundered through his skull, pounded through his body producing a sensation of dull pain.

He paused and stared downward to the tower's floor far below. Fears beset him. He wondered whether Lord Donblas had intended him to climb to the highest point he could easily reach, or the actual point which was still some twenty feet above him. He decided it was best to take the White Lord literally and swinging the great Chaos Shield upon his back, reached above him and got his fingers into a crack in the wall, which now sloped gently inwards. He heaved himself
up, his legs dangling and his feet seeking a bold. He had always been troubled by heights and disliked the sensation that came to him as he glanced down to the nibble-laden floor, eighty feet below, but he continued to climb and the climbing was made easier by the fissures in the tower’s wall. Though he expected to fall, he did not, and at last reached the unsafe roof, easing himself through a bole and on to the sloping exterior. Bit by bit he climbed until he was on the highest part of the tower. Then, fearing hesitation, he stepped outwards, over the festering streets of Imryr far below.

The discordant music topped. A roaring note replaced it. Swirling waves of red and black rushed towards him and men he had burst through to find he was standing on firm turf beneath a small, pale sun, the smell of grass in his nostrils. He noted that, whereas the ancient world seen in his dream had seemed more colourful than his own, his world, in turn, contained even less colour, though it seemed to be cleaner in its outlines, in sharper focus. And the breeze that blew against his face was colder. He began to walk over the grass towards a thick forest of low, solid foliage which lay ahead. He reached the perimeter of the forest but did not enter, circumnavigating it until he came to a stream that went off into the distance, away from the forest.

He noticed with curiosity that the bright clear water appeared not to move. It was frozen, though not by any natural process that he recognised. It had all the attributes of a summer stream yet it did not flow. Feeling that this phenomenon contrasted strangely with the rest of the scenery, he swung the round Chaos Shield on to his arm, drew his throb-bing sword and began to follow the stream.

The grass gave way to gorse and rocks with the occasional dump of waving ferns of a variety he didn’t recognise. Ahead, he thought he heard the tinkle of water, but here the stream was still frozen. As he passed a rock taller man the rest, he heard a voice above him.

"Eiric!"

He looked up.

There, on the rock, stood a young dwarf with a long, brown beard that reached below his waist. He clutched a spear, his only weapon, and he was clad in russet breeks and
jerkin with a green cap on his head and no shoes on his broad, naked feet. He had eyes like quartz that were at once hard, harsh and humorous.

"That's my name," Eiric said quizzically. "Yet how is it you know me?**

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"I am not of this world myself—at least, not exactly. I have no existence in time as you know it, but move here and there in the shadow worlds that the gods make. It is my nature to do so. In return for allowing me to exist, the gods sometimes use me as a messenger. My name is Jermays the Crooked, as unfinished as these worlds themselves." He clambered down the rode and stood looking up at Eiric.

"What's your purpose here?" asked the albino.

"Methought you sought the Horn of Fate?"

"True. Know you where it lies?"

"Aye," smiled the young dwarf sardonically. "It's buried with the still-living corpse of a hero of this realm—a warrior they call Roland. Possibly yet another incarnation of the champion Eternal.**

"An outlandish name."

"No more than yours to other ears. Roland, save that his life was not so doom beset, is your counterpart in his own realm. He met his death in a valley not far from here, trapped and betrayed by a fellow warrior. The horn was with him then and he blew it once before he died. Some say that the echoes still resound through the valley, and will resound forever, though Roland perished many years ago. The horn's full purpose is unknown here—and was unknown even to Roland. It is called Olifant and, with his magic sword Durandal, was buried with him in the monstrous grave mound that you see yonder."

The dwarf pointed into the distance and Biric saw that be indicated something be had earlier taken to be a large hillock.

"And what must I do to gain this horn?" he asked.

The dwarf grinned with a hint of malice in his voice, ^ou
must match that bodkin there 'gainst Roland's Durandana. His was consecrated by the Forces of Light whereas yours was forged by the Forces of Darkness. It should be an interesting conflict"

"You say he's dead-then how can he fight me?**

"He wears the horn by a thong about his neck. If you attempt to remove it, he will defend his ownership, waking from the deathless sleep that seems to be the lot of most heroes in this world."

Eiric smiled. "It seems to me they must be short of heroes if they have to preserve them in that manner.**

"Perhaps," the dwarf answered carelessly, "for there are a dozen or more who lie sleeping somewhere in this land alone.

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They are nipposcd to awaken only when a desperate need arises, yet I've known unpleasant things to happen and still they have slept It could be they await the end of their world, which die gods may destroy if It proves unsuitable, in which case they will fight to prevent such a happening. It is merely a poorly conceived theory of my own and of little weight Perhaps the legends arise from some dim knowledge of the fate of the Champion EIteroaL

The dwarf bobbed a cynical bow and, hefting his spear, sahited Eiric. "Farewell, Eiric of Melnibone. When you wish to return I will be here to lead you-and return you must, whether alive or dead, for, as you are probably aware, your very presence, your physical appearance itself, contradicts this environment. Only one thing fits here..."

"What's Aatr

"Your sword."

"My swordi Strange, I should haw thought that would be the last thing. He shook a growing idea out of his mind. He did not have time to speculate. "I've no liking to be here," he commented as the dwarf clambered over the rocks. He glanced in the direction of the great burial mound and began to advance towards it. Beside him he saw that the stream was moving naturally and he had the impression that though Law influenced this world, it was to some extent still forced to deal with the disrupting influence of Chaos.
The grave barrow, be could now see, was fenced about with giant slabs of unadorned stone. Beyond the stones were olive trees that had dull jewels hanging from tncir branches, and beyond them, through tee leafy apertures, Eiric saw a tall, curved entrance blocked by gates of brass embossed with gold.

Though strong, Stormbringer," he said to his sword, "I wonder if youll be strong enough to war in this world as well as giving my body vitality. Let's test you."

He advanced to the gate and drawing back his arm delivered a mighty blow upon it with the runesword. The metal rang and a dent appeared. Again he struck, this time holding the sword with both hands, but then a voice cried from his right

"What demon would disturb dead Roland's rest?"

"Who speaks the language of Melnibone?" Eiric retorted boldly.

"I speak the language of demons, for I perceive that is 192 Michael Moorcock what you are. I know of oo Mulnebooney and am wen-versed in the ancient mysteries."

"A proud boast for a woman." said Eiric. who had not yet seen the speaker. She emerged, then, from around the barrow, and stood staring at him from out of her glowing green eyes: She had a long, beautiful face and was almost as pale as himself, though her hair was jet black. "What's your name?" he asked. "And are you a native of this world?"

"I am named Vivian, an enchantress, but earthly enough. Your Master knows the name of Vivian who once loved Roland, though he was too upright to indulge her, for she is immortal and a witch," She laughed good-humouredly. "Therefore I am familiar with demons of your like and do not fear you. Aroint thee! Aroint thee-or shall I call Bishop Turpin to exorcise thee?"

"Some of your words," said Elric courteously, "are unfamiliar and the speech of my folk much garbled. Are you some guardian of this hero's tomb?"

"Self-made guardian, aye. Now go!" She pointed towards the stone slabs.
"That is not possible. The corpse within has something of value to roe. The Horn of Fate we call it, but you know it by another name."

"Olifanti But that's a blessed instrument No demon would dare touch it Even I..."

"I am no demon- Fm sufficiently human, I swear. Now stand aside. This cursed door resists my efforts too well."

"Aye," she said thoughtfully. "You could be a man-though an unlikely one. But the white face and hair, the red eyes. the tongue you speak...."

"Sorcerer I be, but no demon. Please-stand aside."

She looked carefully into his face and her look disturbed him. He took her by her shoulder. She felt real enough, yet somehow she had little real presence. It was as if she were far away rather than close to him. They stared at one another, both curious, both troubled. He whispered: "What knowledge could you have of my language? Is this world a dream of mine or of the gods? It seems scarcely tangible. Why?"

She heard him. "Say you so of us? What of your ghostly self? You seem an apparition from the dead past!"

"From the past! Aha-and you are of the future, as yet unformed. Perhaps that brings us to a conclusion?"

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She did not pursue the topic but said suddenly: "Stranger, you will never break this door down. If you can touch Olifant, that speaks of you as mortal, despite your appearance. You must need the horn for an important task."

Eiric smiled. "Aye-for if I do not take it back from whence it came, you will never exist!"

She frowned. "Hints! Hints! I feel close to a discovery yet cannot grasp why, and that's unusual for Vivian. Here-" she took a big key from her gown and offered it to him."This is the key to open Roland's tomb. It is the only one. I had to kill to get it, but oftimes I venture into the gloom of his grave to stare down at his face and pine that I might revive him and keep him living forever on my island home. Take the born! Rouse him-and when he has slain you, he will
come to me and my warmth, my offer of everlasting life, rather than lie in that cold place again. Go-be slain by Roland!"

He took the key.

"Thanks, Lady Vivian. If it were possible to convince one who in truth did not yet exist, I would tell you that Roland's dying of me would be worse for you than if I am successful."

He put the large key in the lock and it turned easily. The doors swung open and he saw that a long, low-roofed corridor twisted before him. Unhesitatingly, he advanced down it towards a flickering light that he could see through the cold and misty gloom. Yet, as he walked, it was as if he glided in a dream less real than that he bad experienced the previous night. Now he entered the funeral chamber, illuminated by tall candles surrounding the bier of a man who lay upon it dressed in armour of a crude and unfamiliar design, a huge broadsword, almost as large as Stonnbringer gripped to his chest and, upon the, hilt, attached to his neck by a silver chain—the Horn of Fate, Olifant!

The man's face, seen in the candlelight, was strange; old and yet with a youthful appearance, the brow smooth and the features unlined.

Eiric took Stonnbringer in his left hand and reached out to grasp me horn. He made no attempt at caution, but wrenched it off Roland's neck.

A great roar came from the hero's throat. Immediately he had raised himself to a sitting position, the sword shifting into his two hands, his legs swinging off the bier. His eyes widened as he saw Eiric with the horn in his hands, and he, Jumped at the albino, the sword Duraodana whistling downwards towards Eiric's head. He raised the shield and blocked the blow, slipped the horn into his jerkin and, backing away, returned Stormbringer to his right hand. Roland was now shouting something in a language completely unfamiliar to Eiric. He did not bother trying to understand, since the angry tones were sufficient to tell him the knight was not suggesting a peaceful negotiation. He continued defending himself with out once carrying the offensive to Roland, backing inch by inch down the long tunnel towards the barrow's mouth. Every time Duraodana struck the Chaos Shield, both sword and
shield gave out wild notes of great intensity. Implacably the hero continued to press Eiric backwards, his broadsword whirling and striking the shield, sometimes the blade, with fantastic strength. Then they had broken into daylight and Roland seemed momentarily blinded. Eirie glimpsed Vivian watching them eagerly for it appeared Roland was winning.

However, in daylight and with no chance of avoiding the angered knight, Eirie retaliated with all the energy he had been saving until this moment. Shield high, sword swinging, he now took the attack, surprising Roland who was evidently unused to this behavior on the part of an opponent.

Stormbringer mailed as it bit into Roland’s poorly-forged armor of iron, riveted with big unsightly nails, painted on the front with a dull red cross mat was a scarcely adequate insignia for so famous a hero. But there was no mistaking Durandana’s powers for, though seemingly as crudely forged as the armor, it did not lose its edge and threatened to bite through the Chaos Shield with every stroke. Eiric’s left arm was numb from the blows and his right arm ached. Lord Donblas had not lied to him when he had said that the strength of his weapons would be diminished on this world.

Roland paused, shouting something, but Eiric did not heed him, seized his opportunity and rushed in to crush his shield against Roland’s body. The knight reeled and staggered, his sword giving off a keening note. Eiric struck at a gap between Roland’s helmet and gorget. The head sprang off the shoulders and rolled grotesquely away, but no blood pumped from the jugular. The eyes of the head remained open, staring at Eiric.

Vivian screamed and shouted something in the same language which Roland had used. Eiric stepped back; his face grim.

"Oh, his legend, his legend!" she cried. "The only hope the people have is that Roland will some day ride once more to their aid. Now you have slain him! Fiend!"

"Possessed I may be," he said quietly as she sobbed by the headless corpse, "but I was ordained by the gods to do this work. I take my leave of your drab world, now."

"Have you no sorrow for the crime you've done?"

"None, madam, for this is only one of many such acts which, I'm told, serve some greater purpose. That I some-
times doubt the truth of this consolation need not concern you. Know you mis, though, I have been told that it is the fate of such as your Roland and myself never to die--always to be reborn. Farewell."

And he walked away from mere; passed through the olive grove and the tall stones, the Horn of Fate cold against his heart.

He followed the river towards the high rock where he saw a small figure poised and, when he reached it, looked up at me young dwarf Jennays the Crooked, took the horn from his jerkin and displayed h.

Jennays chuckled. "So Roland is dead, and you, Eiric, have left a fragment of a legend in this world, if it survives. Well, shall I escort you back to your own place?"

"Aye, and hurry."

Jennays skipped down me rocks and stood beside the tall albino. "Hmm," he mused, "that horn could prove trou-

Eiric obeyed the dwarf and followed him down to the banks of the strangely frozen river. It looked as if it should have been moving, but it evidently was not Jennays leapt into it and, incredibly, began to sink. "Quickly! Follow!"

Eiric stepped in after him and for a moment stood on me frozen water before he, also, began to sink.

Though the stream was shallow, they continued to sink until all similarity to water was gone and they were passing down into rich darkness that became warm and heavy-scented. Jennays pulled at his sleeve. "This way!" And they shot off at right angles, darting from side to side, up and down, through a maze that apparently only Jennays could ace. Against his chest, the hom seemed to heave and he pressed his shield to it. Then he blinked u he found himself in the light again, staring at the great red sun throbbing in the dark blue sky. His feet were on something solid. He looked and u that it was the Tower of B'all'nezbcgL For a while longer the horn heaved as if alive, like a trapped bird, but, after some moments, it became quiescent.

Eiric lowered himself to the roof and began to edge down
it until he came to the gap through which he had passed ear-
lier.

Then suddenly he looked up as he heard a noise in the sky. There, his feet planted on air, stood grinning Jermays the Crooked. "T'U be passing on, for I like not this worid at all." He chuckled. "It has been a pleasure to have had a part in this. Goodbye, Sir Champion. Remember me, the unfinished one, to the Lords of the Higher World*-and perhaps you could hint to them that the sooner they improve their memories or else their creative powers, the sooner I shall be happy."

Eiric said: "Perhaps you'd best be content with your lot. Jermays. There are disadvantages to stability, too."

Jermays shrugged and vanished.

Slowly, all but spent, Eiric descended the fractured wafl and, with great relief, reached the first stair to stumble down the rest and run back to the tower of D'ar'putna with the news of his success.

Four

The three thoughtful men left the city and went down to the Dragon Caves. On a new silver chain, the Horn of Fate was slung around Eiric'a neck. He was dressed in black leather, with his head unprotected save for a golden circlet that kept his hair from his eyes. Stonnbringer scabbarded at his side, the Chaos Shield on his back. He led his companions into the grottoes, to come eventually to the slumbering bulk of Flamefang the Dragon Leader. His lungs seemed to have insufficient capacity as he drew air into them and grasped me horn. Then he glanced at his friends, who regarded him expectantly, straddled his legs slightly and blew with all his strength into the hom.

The note sounded, deep and sonorous, and as it reverber-
ated through the caverns, he felt all his vitality draining from him. Weaker and weaker he became until he sank to his knees, the hom still at his lips, the note failing, his vision dimming, his limbs shaking, and then he sprawled face down on the rock, the hom clattering beside him.

Moonglum dashed towards him and gasped as he saw the bulk of the leading dragon stir and one huge, unblinking eye, as cold as the northern wastes, stare at him.

Dyvim Storm yelled jubilantly: "Flamefangi Brother Flam(r)."
fang. you wake!"

All about him he saw the other dragons stirring also, shaking their wings and straightening their slender necks, ruffling their homy crests. Moonglum felt smaller than usual as the dragons wakened. He began to feel nervous of me huge beasts, wondering how they would respond to the presence of one who was not a Dragon Master. Then he remembered the enervated albino and knelt beside Eiric, touching his leathern-covered shoulder.

"Eiric! D'you live?"

Eiric groaned and tried to turn over onto his back. Moon-

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glum helped him sit upright *T'm weak, Moonglum-ao weak I can't rise. 'Die born took all my energy!* **

"Draw your sword—it will supply what you need.* **

Eiric shook his head. "I'll take your advice, though I doubt whether you're right this time. That hero I slew must have been soulless, or else his soul was well-protected, for I gained nothing from him.* **

His hand fumbled towards his hip and grasped Stormbringer's hilt. With a tremendous effort, he drew it from the scabbard and felt a faint flowing leave it and enter aim, but not enough to allow him any great exertion. He got up and staggered towards Flamefang. The monster recognised him and nutted its wings by way of welcome, its hard, solemn eyes seeming to warm slightly. As he moved round to pat its neck, he staggered and fell to one knee, rising with ef-

f fort.

In earlier times there had been slaves to saddle me dragons but now they would have to saddle their beasts themselves. They went to the saddle-store and chose the saddles they Deeded, for each saddle was designed for an individual beast BIlric could scarcely bear the weight of Flamefang*s elaborately carved saddle of wood, steel, jewels and precious metals. He was forced to drag it across die cavern floor. Not wishing to embarrass him with their glances, the other two ig-

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cautiously approached to dress his dragon with its high wooden saddle with silver stirrups and sheathed, lance-like goad from which was draped the pennant of a noble family of Melnibone, now all dead.

When they had finished saddling their own beasts, they went to help Eiric who was half-falling with weariness, his back leaning against Flamefang's scaly body. While they tied the girths, Dyvim Slorm said: "Will you have strength enough to lead us?"

Eiric sighed. "Aye-enough, I think, for that But I know I'11 have none for the ensuing battle. There must be some means of gaining vitality."

"What of the herbs you once used?"

"Those I had have lost their properties, and there are no fresh ones to be found now that Chaos has warped plant, rock and ocean with its dreadful stamp."

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Leaving Moonglum to finish Flamefang's saddling, Dyvim Slorm went away to return with a cup of liquid which he hoped would help revivify Eiric. Eiric drank it, gave the cup back to Dyvim Slorm and reached up to grasp the saddle-pommel, hauling himself into the high saddle. "Bring straps," he ordered.

"Straps?" Dyvim Slorm frowned.

"Aye. If I'm not secured in my saddle, I'11 likely fan to the ground before we've flown a mile."

So be sat in the tall saddle and gripped the goad which bore his blue, green and silver pennant, gripped it in his gauntleted hand and waited until they came with the straps and bound him firmly into place. He gave a slight smile and shook the dragon's halter. "Forward, Flamefang, lead the way for your brothers and sisters."

With folded wings and lowered head, the dragon began to walk its slithering way to the exit Behind it, on two dragons almost as large, sat Dyvim Slorm and Moonghun, their faces grimly concerned, watchful for Eiric's safety. As Flamefang moved with rolling gait through the series of caverns, its fellow beasts fell in behind it until all of them had reached the great mouth of the last cave which overlooked the threshing sea. The sun was still in its position overhead, scarlet and
swollen, seeming to swell in rhythm with the movement of the sea. Voicing a shout that was half-hiss, half-yell. Eiric lapped at Flamefang's neck with his goad.

"Up, Flamefaogt Up for Melnibone and vengeance!"

As if sensing the strangeness of the world, Flamefang paused on the brink of the ledge, shaking his head and snorting to himself. Then, as he launched into the air, his wings began to beat, their fantastic spread flapping with slow grace, but bearing the beast along with marvellous speed.

Up, up, beneath the swollen sun, up into the hot, turbulent air, up towards the East where Ac camps of hell were waiting. And in Flamefang's wake came its two brother-dragons, bearing Moonglum and Dyvim Solorn who had a horn of his own, the one used to direct the dragons. Ninety-five other dragons, males and females, darkened the deep blue sky, all green, red and gold, scales clashing and flashing, wings beating and, in concert, sounding like the throbbing of a million drums as they flew over the unclean waters with gaping jaws and cold, cold eyes.

Though beneath him now Eiric saw with blurring eyes

many colours of immense richness, they were all dark and changing constantly, shifting from one extreme of a dark spectrum to the other. It was not water down mere BOW—it was a fluid comprised of materials born natural and supernatural, real and abstract Pain* longing, misery and laughter could be seen as tangible fragments of the tossing tide, passions and frustrations lay in it also, as well as stuff made of living flesh that bubbled on occasions to the surface.

In his weakened condition, the sight of the fluid sickened Eiric and he turned his red eyes upwards and towards the East as the dragons moved swiftly on their course.

Soon they were flying across what had once been the mainland of the Eastern Continent, the major Vilmirian peninsula. But now it was bereft of its earlier qualities and huge columns of dark mist rose into the air so that they were forced to guide their reptilian steeds among them. Lava streamed, bubbling, on the far-away ground, disgusting shapes flitted over land and air, monstrous beasts and occasional group of weird riders on skeletal horses who looked up when they heard the beat of the dragon wings and rode in frantic fear towards their camps.
The world seemed a dead corpse, given life in corruption by virtue of the vermin which fed upon it.

Of mankind nothing was left, save for the three mounted on the dragons.

Eiric knew that Jagreen Lera and his human allies had long-since forsaken their humanity and could no longer claim kinship with the species their hordes had swept from the world. The leaders alone might retain their human shape, the Dark Lords don it, but their souls were warped just as the bodies of their followers had become warped into hell-shapes due to the transmuting influence of Chao*. All the dark powers of Chaos lay upon the world, yet deeper and deeper into its heart went the dragon flight, with Eiric swaying in his saddle and only stopped from falling by the straps that bound his body. From the lands below there seemed to rise an aching shriek as tortured nature was defied and its components forced into alien forms.

Onward they sped, towards what had once been Kariaak by the Weeping Waste and which was now the Camp of Chaos. Then, from above, they heard a cawing yell and saw black shapes dropping down on them. Eiric had not even strength to cry out, but weakly tapped Flamefang's neck and made the beast veer away from the danger. Moonglum and Dyvim Slorm followed his example and Dyvim Slorm sounded his horn, ordering the dragons not to engage the attackers, but some of the dragons in his rear were too late and were forced to turn and battle with the black phantoms.

Eiric looked behind him and, for a few seconds, saw them outlined against the sky, rending things with the jaws of whales, locked in combat with the dragons that shot their flaming venom at them and tore at mem with teeth and claws, wings flapping as they strove to hold their height, but then another wave of dark green mist spread across his field of vision and he did not see the fate that befell the dozen dragons.

Now Eiric signalled Flamefang to fly low over a small army of riders fleeing through the tormented land, the eight-arrowed standard of Chaos flapping from the leader's encrust-
ed lance. Down they went and loosed weir venom, having the satisfaction of seeing the beasts and riders scream, bum and perish, their ashes absorbed into the shifting ground.

Here and there, now, they saw a gigantic castle, newly-raised by sorcerer, perhaps as a reward to some traitor king who had aided Jagreen Lem, perhaps as the keeps of the Captains of Chaos who, now that Chaos ruled, were establishing themselves on earth. They swept down on them, released their venom and left them burning with unnatural fires, the gouting smoke blending with me shredding mist And at last Eiric saw the Camp of Chaos—a city but recently made in the same manner as the castles, the flaring sign of Chaos hanging amber in the sky overhead. Yet he felt no elation, only despair that he was so weak be would not have the strength to meet his enemy Jagreen Lem in combat What could he do? How could strength be found—for, even if he took no part in the fighting, he must have sufficient vitality to blow the horn a second time and summon the White Lords to earth.

The city seemed peculiarly silent as if it waited or prepared for something. It had an ominous atmosphere and Eiric, before Flamefang crossed the perimeter, made his dragon steed turn and circle.

Dyvim Slorm, and Moonglum and the rest of the dragon flight followed his example and Dyvim Slorm called across the air to him. "What now, Eiric? I had not expected a city to be here so soon!"

"Neither had L But look—** he pointed with a trembling band he could hardly lift. •there's Jagreen Lern's Merman standard. And there—" now he pointed to the left and right, "the standards of a score of the Dukes of Hell! Yet I see no other human standards." Moonglum shouted:

"Those castles we destroyed. I suspect that Jagreen Lern had already divided up these sundered lands and given them to his, hirelings. How can we tell how much time has really passed-time in which an this could have been brought about?"

•T^uc," Brie nodded, looking up at the still sun. He lurched forward in his saddle, half-swooning, pulled himself upright, breathing heavily. The Chaos Shield seemed like a huge weight on his arm, but be held it warily before him.
Then be acted on impulse and goaded Flamefang into speed so that me dragon rushed towards me city, diving down towards me castle of Jagreen Lem.

Nothing sought to stop him and he landed me beast among me turrets of the castle. Silence was dominant. He looked around, puzzled, but could see nothing save the towering buildings of dark stone that seemed to ooze beneath Flamefang's feet.

The straps stopped him from dismounting, but he saw enough to be sure the city was deserted. Where was me horde of heD? Where was Jagreen Lern?

Dyvim Storm and Moonglum came to Join him, while the rest of the dragons circled above. Qaws scratched on rock, wings slashed the air and they settled, turning their mighty heads this way and that, ruffling their scales restlessly for, once aroused from their dumber, me dragons preferred the airtotbeland.

Dyvim Slorm stayed but long enough to mutter: "ni scout the city," and then was flying away again, low amongst the castles until they heard him cry out and saw him swoop out of sight. There came a yeu, but they could not see what caused it, a pause, and then Dyvim Slorm's dragon was flapping up again and they saw he had a writhing prisoner slung over the front of his saddle. He landed. The thing he had captured bore resemblance to a human being, but was misshapen and ugly, vim a jutting underlip, low forehead and no chin; huge, square, uneven teeth bristled in its mouth and its bare arms were covered in waving hairs.

"Where are your masters?" Dyvim Slorm demanded. The thing seemed to possess no fear, but chuckled: "They predicted your coming and. since the city limits movement. have assembled their armies on a plateau they have made five miles to the north-east" It turned its dilated eyes to Eiric. "Jagreen Lern sent greetings and said he anticipated your foolish downfall."

Eiric shrugged.

Dyvim Slorm drew his own runeblade and hacked the creature down. It cackled as it died, for its sanity had fled with its fear. He shivered as the thing's soul-stuff blended with his own and passed extra energy to him. Then he cursed.
and looked at Eiric with pain in his eyes.

"I acted in haste—I should have given him to you."

Eiric said nothing to mis but whispered in his failing voice:

"Let's to their battlefield. Hurry!"

Up to Join their flight they went again, into me rushing, populated air and towards me north-east

It was with astonishment that they sighted Jagreen Lern's horde, for they could not understand how it could have managed to regroup itself so swiftly. Every fiend and warrior on earth seemed to have come to fight under the Theocrat's standard. It dung like a vile disease to me undulating plain. And around it, clouds grew darker, even though lightning, obviously of supernatural origin, blossomed and shouted, criss-crossing the plain.

Into this noisy agitation swept me dragon flight and they recognised the force commanded by Jagreen Lern himself for his banner flew above it. Other divisions were commanded by Dukes of Hell-Malohin, Zhortra, Xiombarg and others. Also Eiric noted the three mightiest Lords of Chaos, dwarfing me rest Charoros the Reaper with his great head and his curving scythe, Mabelode me Faceless with his face always in shadow no matter which way you looked at h, and SIortar me Old, slim and beautiful, reputed me oldest of the gods. This was a force which a thousand powerful sorcerers would find it bard to defend against, and me thought of attacking mem seemed folly.

Eiric did not bother to consider this for he had embarked on his plan and was committed to carrying it through even though, in his present condition, be was bound to destroy himself if he continued.

They had the advantage of attacking from the air, but this would only be of value while me dragons' venom lasted.

When it gave out, they must go in closer. At that moment Eiric would need much energy—and he had none.

Down swept the dragons, shooting their incendiary venom into the ranks of Chaos.

Normally, no army could stand against such an attack, but,
protected by sorcery, Chaos was able to turn much of the fiery venom aside. The venom seemed to spread against an invisible shield and dissipate. Some of it struck: its target, however, and hundreds of warriors were engulfed in flame and died blazing.

Again and again the dragons rose and dived upon their enemies, Brie swaying almost unconscious in his saddle, his awareness of what was going on diminishing with every attack.

His dimming vision was further encumbered by the stinking smoke mat had begun to rise off the battlefield. From the horde, huge lances were rising with seeming slowness, lances of Chaos like streaks of amber lightning striking at me dragons so that the beasts bellowed and burstled dead to the ground. Closer and closer, EIric's steed bore him until be was flying over the division commanded by Jagreen Urn himself. He caught a misty glimpse of the Theocrat sitting a repulsive, hairless horse and waving his sword, convulsed with mocking mirth. He faintly beard his enemy's voice drift up to him.

"Farewell. Brie-this is our last encounter, for today you go to limbo!"

Brie turned Flamefaag about and whispered into his ear:

"That one, brother-that one"*

With a roar, Plamefang loosed his venom at me laughing Theocrat. It seemed to EIric that Jagreen Lern must surely be burned to ashes, but just as the venom seemed to touch him* it was buried back and only a few drops struck some of the Theocrat's retainers, igniting their flesh and clothing.

Still Jagreen Lern laughed and now he released an amber Spear which had appeared in his hand. Straight towards EIric it went and, with difficulty, the albino put up his Chaos Shield to deflect it.

So great was the force of the bolt striking his shield that he was buried backwards in his saddle and one of the straps securing him snapped so that he fen to the left and was only saved by the other strap that had held. Now he crouched behind the shield's protection as it was battered with supernatural weapons. Flamefang, too, was encompassed by the shield's

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great power; but how long would even me Chaos Shield resist
mch an attack?

It seemed mat he was forced to use me shield for an infinite time before Flamefang's wings cracked me air like ships and he was rushing high above me horde.

He was dying.

Minute by minute me vitality was leaving him as If he were an old man ready for death. "I cannot die," be muttered* "I must not die. Is mere no escape from this dilemma?"

Flamefang seemed to hear him. The dragon descended towards me ground again and dropped until its scaly belly was scraping the lances of me horde. Then Flamefang had landed on the unstable ground and waited with folded wings as a group of warriors goaded their beasts towards him.

Eiric gasped: "What have you done, Flamefang? Is nothing dependable? You have delivered me into me hands of the enemy!**

With great effort he drew bis sword as the first lance struck his shield and me rider passed, grinning, sensing Elric's weakness. Others came on both sides. Weakly, he slashed at one and Stormbringer suddenly took control to make his aim true. The rider's arm was pierced and he was locked to the blade as h fed, greedily, upon his life-stuff. Immediately, Eiric felt some slight return of strength and realised that between them dragon and sword were helping him gain the energy be needed. But the blade kept the most part to itself. There was a reason for this, as Eiric found out at once, for the sword continued to direct bis arm. Several more riders were slain in this manner and Eiric grinned as he felt the vitality flowing back into his body. His vision cleared, his reactions became normal, his spirits rose. Now he carried the attack to the rest of me division, Flamefang moving over the ground with a speed belying his bulk. The warriors scattered and fled back to rejoin the main force, but Eiric no longer cared, he had me souls of a dozen of them and it was enough. "Now up. Flamefang! Rise and let us seek out more powerful enemies!**

Obediently Flamefang spread his wings. They began to flap and bear him off me ground until be was gliding low over the horde.

In the midst of Lord Xiombarg's division, Eiric landed again, dismounted from Flamefang and, possessed of his su-
pernatural energy, rushed into the ranks of fiendish warriors, hewing about him, invulnerable to all but the strongest attack of Chaos. Vitality mounted and a kind of battle-madness with it. Further and further into the ranks he sliced his way, until he saw Lord Xiombarg in his earthly guise of a slender, dark-haired woman. Eiric knew that the woman's shape was no indication of Xiombarg’s mighty strength but, without fear, he leapt forwards the Duke of Hell and stood before him, looking up at where he sat on his lion-headed, bull-bodied mount.

Xiombarg's girl's voice came sweetly to Eiric's ears. "Mortal, you have defied many Dukes of Hell and banished others back to the Higher Worlds. They call you god-slayer now, so I've heard. Can you slay me?"

"You know that no mortal can slay one of the Lords of the Higher Worlds whether they be of Law or Chaos, Xiombarg—but he can, if equipped with sufficient power, destroy their earthly semblance and send them back to their own plane, never to return?"

"Can you do this to me?"

"Let us see!" Eiric flung himself towards the Dark Lord.

Xiombarg was armed with a long-shafted battle-axe that gave off a night-blue radiance. As his steed reared, he swung the axe down at Eiric's unprotected head. The albino flung up his shield and the axe struck him. A kind of metallic shout came from the weapons and huge sparks flew away. Eiric moved in close and hacked at one of Xiombarg's feminine legs. A light moved down from his hips and protected the leg so that Stormbringer was brought to a stop, jarring Eiric's arm. Again the axe struck the shield with the same effect as before. Again Eiric tried to pierce Xiombarg's unholy defence. And all the while he heard the Dark Lord's laughter, sweetly modulated, yet as horrible as a hag's.

"Your mockery of human shape and human beauty begins to fail, my lord!" cried Eiric, standing back for a moment to gather his strength.

Already the girl's face was writhing and changing as, disconcerted by Eiric's power, the Duke of Hell spurred his beast down on the albino.

Eiric dodged aside and struck again. This time Stormbringer throbbed in his hand as it pierced Xiombarg's de-
fence and the Dark Lord moaned, retaliating with another axe-blow which Eiric barely succeeded in blocking. He turned his beast, the axe rushing about his head as he whirled it and flung it at Eiric with the intention of striking him in the head.

"Eiric ducked and put up his shield, the axe clipping it and foiling to the shifting ground. He ran after Xiombarg who was once again turning his steed. From nowhere he had produced another weapon, a huge double-handed broadsword, the breadth of its blade triple that of even Stonnbringer's. It seemed incongruous in the small, delicate hands of the girl-shape. And its size, Eiric guessed, told something of its power. He backed away warily, noting absently that one of the Dark Lord's legs was missing and replaced by an insect-like mandible. If he could only destroy the rest of Xiombarg's disguise, he would have succeeded in banishing him.

Now Xiombarg's laughter was no longer sweet, but had an unhinged note. The lion-head roared in unison with its master's voice as it rushed towards Eiric. The monstrous sword went up and crashed upon the Chaos Shield. Eiric fell on his back, feeling the ground itch and crawl beneath him, but his shield was still in one piece. He caught sight of the bull-hooves pounding down on him, drew himself beneath the shield, leaving only his sword-arm free. As the beast thundered above, seeking to crush him with its hooves, he thrust upwards into its belly. The sword was initially halted and then seemed to pierce through whatever obstructed it and draw out the life-force. The vitality of the unholy beast passed from sword to man and Eiric was taken aback by its strange, insensate quality, for the soul-stuff of an animal was different from that of an intelligent protagonist. He rolled from under the beast's bulk and sprang to his feet as the lion-bull collapsed, hurling Xiombarg's still-earthly shape to the ground.

Instantly the Dark Lord was up, standing with a peculiarly unbalanced stance with one leg human and the other alien. It limped swiftly towards Eiric, bringing me huge sword round in a sideways movement that would slice Eiric in two. But Eiric, full of the energy gained from Xiombarg's steed, leapt back from the blow and struck at the sword with Stormbringer. The two blades met, but neither gave. Stormbringer shrieked in anger for it was unused to resistance of this kind. Eiric got the rim of his shield under the blade and forced it up. For an instant Xiombarg's guard was open and Eiric
used that instant with effect, driving Stonnbringer into the Dark Lord's breast with all his strength.

Xiombarg whimpered and at once his earthly shape began to dissolve as Elric's sword sucked his energy into itself. Eiric knew that this energy was only that fraction constituting Xiombarg's life-force on this plane, that the mayor part of the Dark Lord's soul was still in the Higher Worlds for not even the most powerful of these godlings could summon the power to transport all of himself to the earth. If Eiric had taken every scrap of Xiombarg's soul, his own body could not have retained it but would have burst. However, so much more powerful than any human soul was the force sowing into him from the wound he had made, that he was once again the vessel for a mighty energy.

Xiombarg changed. He became little more than a flickering coil of coloured light which began to drift away and finally vanish as XJombarg was swept, raging, back to his own plane.

Eiric looked upwards. He was horrified to see that only a few of the dragons survived. One was fluttering down now and it had a rider on its back. From that distance he could not see which of his friends it was.

He began to run towards the place where it fell-
He heard the crash as it came to ground, heard a weird vailing, a bubbling cry and then nothing.

He battled his way through the milling warriors of Chaos and none could withstand him, until he came at last to the fallen dragon. There was a broken body lying on the ground beside it, but of the ruoeblade there was no sign. It had vanished.

It was the body of Dyvim Slonn, last of his kinsmen.

There was no time for mourning. Eiric and Moonglum and the bare score of remaining dragons could not possibly win against Jagrecn Lem's strength, which had been hardly touched by the attack. Standing over the body of his cousin, he placed the Horn of Fate to his lips, took a huge breath and blew. The clear, melancholy note of the horn rang out over the battlefield and seemed to carry in all directions, through all the dimensions of the cosmos, through all the myriad planes and existences, through all eternity to the ends
of the universe and the ends of Time itself.

The note took long moments to fade and, when it had at last died away, there was an absolute hush over the world, the muling millions were still, there was an air of expectancy.

And then the White Lords came.

Five

It was as if some enormous sun, thousands of times larger than earth's, had sent a ray of light pulsing through the cosmos, defying the flimsy barriers of Time and Space, to strike upon that great black battlefield. And along it, appearing on the pathway that the horn's weird power had created for them, strode the majestic Lords of Law, their earthly forms so beautiful that they challenged Elric's sanity, for his mind could scarcely absorb the sight. They disdained to ride, like the Lords of Chaos, on bizarre beasts but moved without steeds, a magnificent assembly with their mirror-clear armour and rippling surcoats bearing the single Arrow of Law.

Leading them came Donblas the Justice Maker, a smile upon his perfect lips. He carried a slender sword in his right hand, a sword that was straight and sharp and like a beam of light itself.

Elric moved swiftly then, rushed to where Flamefang awaited him and urged the great reptile into the moaning air.

Flamefang moved with less ease than earlier, but Elric did not know whether it was because the beast was tired or whether the influence of Law was weighing on its dragon which was, after all, a creation of Chaos.

But at last be flew beside Moonglum and, looking around, saw that the remaining dragons had turned and were flying back to the West. Only their own steeds remained. Perhaps the last of the dragons had sensed their part played and were returning to the Dragon Caves to sleep again.

Elric and Moongkun exchanged glances but said nothing, for the sight below was too awe inspiring to speak of.

A light, white and damling spread from the midst of the Lords of Law, the beam upon which they had come faded and they began to move towards the spot where Chardros the Reaper, Mabelode the Faceless, and Slortar the Old and the
lesser Lords of Chaos had assembled themselves, ready for the great fight

As the White Lords passed through the other denizens of hell and the polluted men who were their comrades, these creatures backed away screaming, falling where the radiance touched them. The dross was being cleaned away without effort—but the real strength in the shape of the Dukes of Hell and Jagreen Lem was still to be encountered.

Though at this stage the Lords of Law were scarcely taller than the human beings, they seemed to dwarf them and even Elric. high above, felt as if he were a tiny figure, scarcely larger than a fly. It was not their size so much as the implication of vastness which they seemed to carry with them.

Flamefang's wings beat wearily as he circled over the scene. All around him the dark colours were now full of clouds of lighter, softer shades.

The Lords of Law reached the spot where their ancient enemies were assembled and Elric heard Lord Donblas's voice carry up to him.

"You of Chaos have defied the edict of the Cosmic Balance and sought complete dominance of this planet. Destiny denies you this—for the earth's life is over and it must be resurrected in a new form where your influence will be weak."

A sweet, mocking voice came from the ranks of Chaos. It was the voice of Slortar the Old., "You presume too much, brother. The fate of the earth has not yet been finally decided. Our meeting will result in that decision—nothing else. If we win. Chaos shall rule. If you succeed in banishing us, then paltry Law bereft of possibility will gain ascendency. But we shall win—though Fate herself complains!"

"Then let this thing be settled." replied Lord Donblas. and Elric saw the shining Lords of Law advance towards their dark opponents.

The very sky shook as they clashed. The air cried out and the earth appeared to tilt Those lesser beings left alive scattered away from the conflict and a sound like a million throbbing harp-strings, each of a subtly varied pitch, began
to emanate from the warring gods.

Eiric saw Jagreen Lern leave the ranks of the Dukes of Hell and ride in his flaming scarlet armour, away from them. He realised, perhaps, that his impertinence would be swiftly rewarded by death.

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Brie sent Plamefang soaring down and he drew Storm-bringer, yelling the Theocrat's name and shouting challenges.

Jagreen Lero looked up, but be did not laugh this time. He increased hb speed until, as Eric had already noted, he saw towards what he was riding. Ahead, the earth had turned to black and purple gas that danced frenetically as if seeking to free itself from the rest of the atmosphere. Jagreen Lcm halted his hairless horse and drew his WBMXC from his belt. He raised his flame-red buckler which, like Eiric's, was treated against sorcerous weapons.

The dragon hurtled groundwards making Eiric gasp with the speed of its descent. It flapped to earth a few yards from where Jagreen Lern sat his horrible horse, waiting, philosophically, for Eiric to attack. Perhaps he sensed that their fight would mirror the larger fight going on around them, that the outcome of one would be reflected in the outcome of the other. Whatever it was, he did not indulge in his usual brag-gadocio, but waited in silence.

Careless whether Jagreen Lern had the advantage or not, Eiric dismounted and spoke to Flamelang in a purring murmur.

"Back, Flamefang, now. Back with your brothers. Whatever corna to pass, if I win or lose, your part is over." As Flamefang stirred and turned his huge head to look into Eiric's face, another dragon descended and landed a short distance away. Moonglum, too, dismounted, beginning to advance through the black and purple mist Eiric shouted to him: "I want no help in this, MoongiumF

Til give you none. But it will be my pleasure to see you take his life and soul I"

Eiric looked at Jagreen Lern whose face was still impassive.

Flamefang's wings beat and he swept up into me sky and was soon gone, the other dragon following. He would not re-
Eiric stalked towards the Theocrat, his shield high and his sword ready. Then, with astonishment, he saw Jagreen Lern dismount from his own grotesque mount and slap its hairless rump to send it galloping away. He stood waiting, slightly crouched in a position which emphasised his high-shouldered stance. His long, dark face was taut and his eyes fixed on Eiric as the albino came closer. An unstable smile of anticipation quivered on the Theocrat's lips and his eyes flickered.

Eiric paused just before he came within sword-reach of his enemy. "Jagreen Lern, are you ready to pay for the crimes you've committed against me and the world?"

"Pay? Crimes? You surprise me, Eiric, for I see you have fully absorbed the carping attitude of your new allies. In my conquests I have found it necessary to eliminate a few of your friends who sought to stop me. But that was to be expected. I did what I had to and what I intended—if I have failed now, I have no regret, for regret is a fool's emotion and useless in any capacity. What happened to your wife was no direct fault of mine. Will you have triumph if you slay me?"

Eiric shook his head. "My perspectives have, indeed, changed, Jagreen Lern. Yet we of Melnibone were ever a vengeful brood—and vengeance is what I claim!"

"Ah, now I understand you." Jagreen Lern changed his stance and he raised his axe to the defensive position. "I am ready."

Eiric leapt at him, Stormbringer shrieking through the air to crash against the scarlet buckler and crash again. Three blows he delivered before Jagreen Lern's axe sought to wriggle through his defence and he halted it by a sideways movement of the Chaos Shield. The axe succeeded only in grazing his arm near the shoulder. Eiric's shield clanged against Jagreen Lera's and Eiric attempted to exert his weight and push the Theocrat backwards, meanwhile stabbing around the rims of the locked shields and trying to penetrate Jagreen Lern's guard.

For some moments they remained in this position while the music of the battle sounded around them and the ground seemed to fall from under them, columns of blossoming colours erupting, like magical plants, on all sides. Then
Jagreen Lem jumped back, slashing at Eiric. The albino rushed forward, ducked and struck at the Theocrat's leg near the knee-and missed. From above, the axe dashed down and be flung himself to one side to avoid it. Carried off-balance by the force of the blow, Jagreen Lern staggered and Eiric leapt up and kicked at the small of the Theocrat's back. The man fell sprawling, losing bis grip on both axe and shield as be tried to do many things at once and failed to do anything. Eiric put his heel on the Theocrat's neck and held him there, Stonnbringer hovering greedily over his prone enemy.

Jagreen Lem heaved his body round so that he looked up

at Eiric. He was suddenly pale and his eyes were fixed on the black hclllblade when he spoke hoarsely to Eiric. "Finish me now. There's no place for my soul in all eternity-not any more. I must go to limbo-so finish me**

Brie was about to allow Stonnbringer to plunge itself into the defeated Theocrat when he stayed the weapon, holding it back from its prey with difficulty. The nmesword murmured in frustration and tugged in his hand.


Silently, the little Easflaoder obeyed. Eiric sheathed the resisting Stonnbringer, saying to ft: "There-(hat's the first time I've stopped you from feeding. What will you do now, I wonder?" Then he took Moonglum's blade and slashed it across Jagreen Lcra's cheek, opening it up in a long, deep cut which began slowly to fill with blood,

The Theocrat screamed.

"No. Eiric-ffl me!"

With an absent smile, Eiric slashed the other cheek. His bloody face contorted, Jagreen Lern shouted for death, but Eiric continued to smile his vague, half-aware smile, and said softly: "You sought to imitate the Emperors of 'Melnibooe, did you not? You mocked Eiric of that line, you tortured.him and you abducted his wife. You moulded her body into a hell-shape as you moulded the rest of the world. You slew El-ric's friends and challenged him in your impertinence. But you are nothing-you are more of a pawn than Eiric ever
was. Now. little roan. know how the folk of Melnibone toyed with such upstarts in the days when they ruled the world.

Jagreen Lern took an hour to die and only then because Moooglum begged Eiric to finish him swiftly.

Eiric handed Moonglum's tainted sword back to him after wiping it on a shred of fabric that had been part of the Theocrat's robe. He looked down at the mutilated body and stirred it with his foot, then he looked away to where the Lords of the Higher Worlds were embattled.

He was badly weakened from the fight and also from the energy he had been forced to exert to return the resisting Stonnbringer to its sheath, but this was forgotten as he stared in wonder at the gigantic battle.

Both the Lords of Law and those of Chaos had become huge and misty as their earthly mass diminished and they continued to fight in human shape. They were like half-real giants, fighting everywhere now-on the land and above it. Far away on the rim of the horizon, he saw Donblas the Justice Maker engaged with Chardros the Reaper, their outlines flickering and spreading, the slim sword daring and the great scythe sweeping.

Unable to participate, unsure which side was winning, Eiric and Moonglum watched as the intensity of the battle increased and, with it, the slow dissolution of the gods' earthly manifestation. The fight was no longer merely on the earth but seemed to be raging throughout all the planes of the cosmos and, as if in unison with this transformation, the earth appeared to be losing its form, until Eiric and Moonglum drifted in the mingled swir of air, fire, earth and water.

The earth dissolved-yet still the Lords of the Higher Worlds battled over it.

The stuff of the earth alone remained, but unformed. Its components were still in existence, but their new shape was undecided. The fight continued. The victors would have the privilege of re-forming the earth.

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At last, though Eiric did not know how, the turbulent dart
gave way to light, and there came a noise—a cosmic roar of
hate and frustration—and he knew that the Lords of Chaos
had been defeated and banished. The Lords of Law victori-
ous, Fate's plan had been achieved, though it still required
the last note of the hom to bring it to its required conclusion.

And Eiric realised he did not have the strength left to blow
the hom the third time.

About the two friends, the world was taking on a distinct
shape again. They found they were standing on a rocky plain
and in the distance were the slender peaks of new-formed
mountains, purple against a mellow sky.

Then the earth began to move. Faster and faster it whirled,
day giving way to night with incredible rapidity, and then it
began to slow until the sun was again all but motionless in
the sky, moving with something like its customary speed.

The change had taken place. Law ruled here now, yet the
Lords of Law had departed without thanks.

And though Law ruled, it could not progress until the horn
was blown for the last time.

"So it is over," Moonglum murmured. "All gone-Elwher,
my birth-place, Karlaak by the Weeping Waste, Bakshaan,
even the Dreaming City and the Isle of Melnibone. They no
longer exist, they cannot be retrieved. And this is the new
world formed by Law. It looks much the same as the old.*'

Eiric, too, was filled with a sense of loss, knowing that all
the places that were familiar to him, even the very continents
were gone and replaced by different ones. It was like the loss
of childhood and perhaps that was what it was—the passing
of the earth's childhood.

He shrugged away the thought and smiled. *'I'm supposed
to blow the hom for the final time if the earth's new life is to
begin. Yet I haven't the strength. Perhaps Fate is to be
thwarted after all?''

Moonglum looked at him strangely. "I hope not, friend."

Eiric sighed. "We are the last two left, Moonglum. You and
Moonghnn grinned a shadow of his old, cocky grin. "And where we've shared adventures, I've usually profited if you have not. The partnership has been complementary. I shall never know why I chose to share your destiny. Perhaps it was no doing of mine, but Fate's, for there is none final act of friendship I can perform." **

Eiric was about to question Moonglum when a quiet voice came from behind him.

"I bear two messages. One of thanks from me Lords of Law—and another from a more powerful entity."

"Sepiriz! Eiric turned to face his mentor. "Wen. are you satisfied with my work?" **

"Aye—greatly." Sepiriz's face was sad and he stared at Eiric with a look of profound sympathy. "You have succeeded in everything but the last act which is to blow the Horn of Fate for the third time. Because of you we world shall know progression and its new people shall have me opportunity to advance by degrees to a new state of being."

"But what is the meaning of it all?" Eiric said. "That I have never fully understood."

••Who can? Who can know why me Cosmic Balance exists, why Fate exists and the Lords of the Higher Worlds. Why mere must always be a champion to fight such battles? There seems to be an infinity of space and time and possibilities. There may be an infinite number of beings, one above me other, who see the final purpose, though, in infinity, there can be no final purpose. Perhaps all is cyclic and this same event win occur again and again until the universe is run down and fades away as me world we knew has faded. Meaning, Eiric? Do not seek that. for madness lies in such a course."

"No meaning, no pattern. Then why have I suffered aU A^'

"Perhaps even the gods seek meaning and pattern and this is merely one attempt to find it. Look—" he waved his hands to indicate the newly-formed earth. "All this is fresh and
moulded by logic. Perhaps the logic will control the newcomers, perhaps a factor will occur to destroy that logic. The gods experiment, the Cosmic Balance guides the destiny of the earth, men struggle and credit the gods with knowing why they struggle—but do the gods know?"

"You disturb me further when I had hoped to be comforted."

"I am sorry. I have come to wish you farewell, nay friend. Do what you must."

"Aye. Shall I see you again?"

"No, for we are both truly dead. Our age has gone."

Sepriz seemed to twist in the air and disappear.

A cold silence remained.

At length Eiric's thoughts were interrupted by Moonghnn. "You must blow the horn, Eiric. Whether it means nothing or much—you must blow it and finish this business forever!"

"How? I have scarcely enough strength to stand on my feet"

"I have decided what you must do. Slay me with Stonnbringer. Take my soul and vitality into yourself—then you will have sufficient power to blow the last blast."

-Kill you, Moonglum! The only one left—my only true friend? You babble"*

"I mean it You must, for there is nothing else to do. Further, we have no place here and must die soon at any rate. You told me how Zarozinia gave you her soul—now, take mine, too!"

"I cannot"

Moonglum paced towards him and reached down to grip Stormbringer's hilt, pulling it half-way from the sheath.

-Wo, Moonglum!"

But now the sword sprang from the sheath on its own voli-
tion. Eiric struck Moonglum's hand away and gripped the hilt. He could not stop it. The sword rose up, dragging his arm with it, poised to deliver a blow.

Moonglum stood with his arms by his side, his face expressionless, though Eiric thought he glimpsed a flicker of fear in the eyes. He struggled to control the blade, but knew it was impossible.

"Let it do its work, Eiric."

The blade plunged forward and pierced Moonglum's heart.

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His blood sprang out and covered it. His eyes blurred and filled with horror. "Ah. no-I-had-not-expected thisi"

Petrified, Eiric could not tug the sword from his friend's heart. Moonglumo's energy began to flow up its length and course into his body, yet, even when all the little Eastlander's vitality was absorbed. Eiric remained staring at the small corpse until the tears flowed from his crimson eyes and a great sob racked him. Then the blade came free.

He flung it away from him and it did not clatter on the rocky ground but landed as a body might land. Then it seemed to move towards him and stop and be had the suspicion it was watching him.

He took the horn and put it to his lips. He blew the blast to herald in the night of the new earth. The night that would precede the new dawn. And though the horn's note was triumphant, Eiric was not. He stood full of infinite loneliness and infinite sorrow, his head tilted back as me sound rang on. And, when the note faded from triumph to a dying echo that expressed something of Eiric's misery, a huge outline began to form in the sky above the earth, as if summoned by the horn.

It was the outline of a gigantic hand holding a balance and, as he watched, the balance began to right itself until each side was true.

And somehow this relieved Eiric's sorrow as he released his grip on the Horn of Fate.

"There is something, at least," he said, "and if it's an illusion, then it's a reassuring one."
He turned his head to one side and saw the blade leave the ground, sweep into the air and then rush down on him.

"Stonnbringer!" be cried, and then the helsword struck his chest, he felt the icy touch of the blade against his heart, reached out his fingers to clutch at it, felt his body constrict, felt it sucking his soul from me very depths of his being, felt his whole personality being drawn into the namesword. He knew, as his life faded to combine with the sword's, that it had always been his destiny to die in this manner. With the blade he had killed friends and lovers, stolen their souls to feed his own waning strength. It was as if the sword had always used him to this end, as if he was merely a manifestation of Stonnbringer and was now being taken back into the body of the blade which had never been a true sword. And, as he died, he wept again, for be knew that the fraction of

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the sword's soul which was his would never know rest but was doomed to immortality, to eternal struggle.

Eiric of Melnibone, last of the Bright Emperors, cried out, and then his body collapsed, a sprawled husk beside its comrade, and he lay beneath the mighty balance that still hung in the sky.

Then Stormbringer's shape began to change, writhing and curling above the body of the albino, finally to stand astraddle it

The entity that was Stonnbringer. last manifestation of Chaos which would remain with this new world as it grew, looked down on the corpse of Brie of Melnibon6 and smiled.

"Farewell, friend. I was a thousand times more evil than thou!"

And then it leapt from the Earth and went spearing upwards, its wild voice laughing mockery at the Cosmic Balance; filling the universe with its unholy joy.

THE END

of the Saga of Eiric of Melmbone.

About the Author

Born in London in 1939, Michael Moorcock became involved with the worlds of science fiction and fantasy at an early age. He
edited Tarzan Adventures at 17, and became the guiding hand behind the British SF magazine New Worlds in 1964. A major influence in the development of "New Wave" science fiction, he encouraged the use of experimental styles and ground-breaking topics in a movement which shocked many but changed the face of science fiction. Asafantasist, Moorcock is best known for the Eiric series, which A Reader's Guide to Fantasy describes as "a four-dimensional superseries which is marked by consistently high-quality narrative prose and inventive plotting," and for the World Fantasy Award winning novel Cloriana. Moorcock is a multiple winner of the British Fantasy Award for novels and short fiction.

About the Artist

Robert Gould has been involved with the creation and publication of Romantic Art for eight years. The artist's association with Moorcock's Eiric of Melnibone began with an original graphic story published in 1976 by Star-Reach Publications of California. His visualization of the world of Eiric continued variously in books, portfolios and several posters. Moorcock has said of Gould's cover designs for this new edition of the £/ric series, "I think they're tremendous . . I couldn't have asked for better."

Currently Robert Gould is in partnership with Mark Halperin in CYGNUS which publishes his work and that of other contemporary Romantic Artists in limited edition reproductions. For more information about the artist, contact: CYGNUS, 721 Massachusetts Avenue, Arlington, MA, 02174.
Introduction

ELRIC AT THE END OF TIME was the last story I wrote about the albino prince. In some ways it's an affectionate commentary on the kind of fantasy hero with whom I'm most closely identified and it's also based on the remark made some years ago by M. John Harrison that the people who inhabit my End of Time stories might, from Elric's perspective, seem to be the very Lords of Chaos themselves. The story brings together elements from most of the series which, by the mid-seventies, I was completing. It was finished in 1977, originally for a book which Big O intended to publish and which Rodney Matthews would illustrate. Big O effectively folded before the book could appear. The Rodney Matthews paintings all exist, but only a few of them have been seen (principally in Rodney's own 1983 Calendar) which is a great pity, since they represent some of his best and most ambitious work. The only previous appearance of the story was in Terri Windling's and Mark Arnold's Elsewhere anthology, which came out in the USA in 1981. The Last Enchantment was meant to be the final Elric story. It was written in 1962, only a short while after the first had appeared in magazine form and before I wrote what was to become Stormbringer. I gave the story to Ted Carnell for his magazine Science Fantasy but he didn't want a "last" Elric story. He persuaded me to write some more novellas and in his capacity as my agent sent The Last Enchantment to America, where it was rejected. Some fifteen years later Ted's successor, Les Flood, came across the story and returned it to me. It eventually appeared in Ariel magazine in the U.S. in 1978, illustrated by Tim Conrad. That was its only publication until now. Like Elric at the End of Time it has never been published in England and this is its first appearance in book form.

The Sojan stories are my first fantasy tales to be
professionally published. They were begun in the 1950s for Tarzan Adventures, before I came to edit the magazine. I was seventeen when they started to appear and they were not published in book form until Dave Britton and Mike Butterworth republished them as Sojan, the first book they did as Savoy Editions. It was re-illustrated by Jim Cawthorn, the original illustrator who has worked with me through my whole career as a writer of fantastic fiction. This book was primarily a compendium of my earliest work, together with some of my writing about my own fiction and I have included one or two other pieces from Sojan here.

The Stone Thing was written in response to a request from Eric Bentcliffe, editor of the fanzine Triode, which I used to write for in the fifties. It is one of several parodies of my own work which I've done over the years (some of which, it could be argued, were not published as such) and it's one I'm particularly fond of. Triode specialised in humorous "fan fiction"-stories written about actual personalities in the SF field-and dates from the period in which science fiction fans did not take themselves quite so seriously as nowadays, and those who made religion from an enthusiasm were generally mocked for it. I hope the story itself will show some readers that I am neither in touch with secret supernatural forces nor the spokesman for an illuminating new mystical knowledge. As a matter of fact I'm by nature extraordinarily sceptical of the supernatural. I have always conceived my fantastic stories simply as that-fantastic stories, escapist entertainment which hopes to give some pleasure to the reader. Any profundities in those romances are a tribute to the one who discovers them rather than to me. For a long while the exaggerated reaction of some readers to my fantasies caused me to try to dismiss them altogether. However, I should like to say that I denigrate neither the stories nor their readers, though I do prefer my comedies to my melodramas and personally would put a greater value on books such as Gloriana, The Condition of Muzak, Byzantium Endures or The Brothel in Rosenstrasse. I've always had a happy facility for fantasy and I suppose it's common enough for someone to make less of something which comes easily to them.
Some of the non-fiction pieces about Elric and Co. which were in the original Sojan selection edited by Dave Britton are still here, for whatever interest they provide. I have Dave Britton and Mike Butterworth to thank for many things, not least their willingness to sift through long-forgotten piles of paper and find manuscripts and tear-sheets (The Golden Barge would never have been published had it not been for their retaining a copy of the manuscript which I had thought permanently lost) and I should also like to recognise, once again, Ted Carnell's encouragement as the editor of my first Elric stories, Peter Ledeboer's kindness as the publisher who originally commissioned the title story as a vehicle for Rodney Matthews's illustrations, the present publishers Alison Peacock, Simon Scott and Nick Webb of NEL and the encouragement, inspiration and friendship of many people, amongst them Jim Cawthorn, Eric Bentcliffe, Ron Bennett, Alan Dodd, Arthur Thomson and Ethel Lindsay who have known me since, as an enthusiastic and, I'm sure, sometimes irritating fifteen-year-old, I first began to write the Sojan stories.

Michael Moorcock,
Fulham Road
July 1983

ELRIC

Elric at the End of Time

1. 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, apologising 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 make-shift chamber and was on her way to the End of Time.

2. In Which The Eternal Champion Finds Himself at the End of Time

ELRIC OF MELNIBONE 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 Melnibone. She had been borne into the Dragon Sea and thence to The Sorcerer's Isle, so-called because that barren place had once 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 planes both physical and astral, all around the region of The Sorcerer's 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 protege.

"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 pom- mel 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 battlesong.

"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 half-way 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 downward, 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 sheath the blade. He began to trudge through the snow toward 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 Melnibone. 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 half-way 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 Melnibone."

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.

3. 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 League to develop techniques to compensate for the fluctuations
and disruptions in the spacetime 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 utilised 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. He had not even, if Una were correct, 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 naive 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 dog-like 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 aircar 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 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 aircar 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 aircar 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 vyeeanr," 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 realised 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 twentieth-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.

4. In Which The Prince of Melnibone 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, realising 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 realised that the walls were of transparent crystal and, behind the walls, were all manner of artefacts. 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-mee . . . Bie-mee ..." 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, gaping 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 Melnibone 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.

5. 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 aircar (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 Morality, 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 aircar and lay there panting, cursing and groaning.

"How wonderful!" cried Werther. "Oh, this is a traveller 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:

"Heegeegrowinaz!"

"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 ..."

"Yakooom, 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 recognised with pleasure. "Mrs. Persson!"

Una brought her aircar 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 recognised 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 Melnibone, 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 marvellous 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 aircars 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 hell-born 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,
"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-travellers. 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 Melnibone 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'ren 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 Arioch? He, at least, I owe some allegiance to."
"We have no one of that name," apologised Mistress Christia. She enquired of Gaf, who knew everyone. "No time-traveller?"

"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 over-eager.

"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 visualise 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-travellers 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 Melnibone, 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 hooves 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 megafow-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 aircar 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.

6. In Which Elric of Melnibone 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 shapeshifting. 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 Melnibone, 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 multi-coloured 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.

7. 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 League of Temporal Adventures. But she needed aid. Somehow she had to return Elric to his own dimensions 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 bor-
row 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.

8. 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 rous-
ing 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 shoul-
der, 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 experi-
enced 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 be-
gan 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 cut 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 equalled 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.

9. 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, jostled, 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 recognise 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 thirteenth century, I assure you, except eat pomegranates and philosophise . . ."

"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 protege."

"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.

10. In Which The Castle Is Assaulted And The Plot Thickened

A MOON 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 com-
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 Melnibone.

"Sshh," 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 realise 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, settling like an insect between the giant's legs and flinging himself through a dimly lit window. He found himself in some sort of storeroom. He had not been seen, though the guard cocked his ear for half
a moment before resuming his pace.

Elric looked cautiously out and signalled 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 albinoes!"
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 one 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 a 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 warchariot 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 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 glinted 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 backward. "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 non-plussed. "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 realised 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-travellers 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."

11. 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 1590. They were one of his many affec-
tations. 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 cer-
tainly several miles in circumference.

For a moment the city seemed to retreat. The
golden light faded. The city remained, some dis-
tance 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 recognise 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 Melnibone.

"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 our-
selves up to the biggest chronoquake the universe
has ever experienced."

"You're exaggerating," she said.
"Why not? Everyone else is."

12. The Attack On The Citadel Of The Skies

"MELNIBONE! MELNIBONE"! 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, realising 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 Melnibonean'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 Melnibone 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 can force it to return to my own plane," said Elric reasonably.

"The Morphail Effect . . ." began Werther, but realised he was spoiling the spirit of the game. "Sorry."

The blue ray came again, but puttered 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 Melnibone, 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 Melnibone! 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 non-plussed. This was no one they recognised.

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 Melnibone, 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 paralysed.

But Elric refused to quail. "Lord Arioch, I have given you blood and souls. You owe me . . . ."

"I owe you nothing, Elric of Melnibone. 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 forever. 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 Melnibone."

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 from 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 Melnibone. 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 Melnibone 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.

13. 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 experience. 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 aircar, 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 realised he was still speaking High Melnibonean. 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 disrup-
tions at the End of Time until the beginning of the story concerning Jherek Carnelian and Miss Amelia Underwood.

14. In Which Elric of Melnibone 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 halfbrute 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 Arioch 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 Sorcerer's Isle.

He was determined to see Cymoril, whom he loved, to regain his throne from Yyrkoon, his cousin . . .

15. 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 brief-case, 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 Last Enchantment

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, something 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 Melnibone 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 toward 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 leperwhite, 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 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 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 toward Elric. The albino drew himself up and pulled his horse back.

"No closer," he warned. "I am Elric of Melnibone."

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 Melnibone. 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 Melnibone—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 rareactorios 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 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 was 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 years before when he and two companions had sought an ancient volume called the Dead God's 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 Arioch 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 a ululating hate-song of old Melnibone. 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 huge 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 Melnibone, 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 reformed 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 Melnibone 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 Melnibone, 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, murmured 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 and 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, criss-crossing 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 homunculae 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 multi-coloured 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 zigzagging 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 plea-
sure, 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 imper-
tinence, I grant you—but this is nothing new—you already sit there 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 Secret Life of Elric of Melnibone

SOME YEARS ago, when I was about eighteen, I wrote a novel called The Golden Barge. This was an allegorical fantasy about a little man completely without self-knowledge and with little of any other kind, going down a seemingly endless river, following a
great Golden Barge which he felt, if he caught it would contain all truth, all secrets, all solutions to his problems. On the journey he met various groups of people, had a love affair, and so on. Yet every action he took in order to reach the Golden Barge seemed to keep him farther away from it. The river represented Time, the barge was what mankind is always seeking outside itself (when it can be found inside itself), etc., etc. The novel had a sad ending, as such novels do. Also, as was clear when I'd finished it, my handling of many of the scenes was clumsy and immature. So I scrapped it and decided that in future my allegories would be intrinsic within a conventional narrative—that the best symbols were the symbols found in familiar objects. Like swords for instance.

Up until I was twenty or so, I had a keen interest in fantasy fiction, particularly Sword-and-Sorcery stories of the kind written by Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith and the like, but this interest began to wane as I became more interested in less directly sensational forms of literature, just as earlier my interest in Edgar Rice Burroughs’ tales had waned. I could still enjoy one or two Sword-and-Sorcery tales, particularly Poul Anderson's *The Broken Sword* and Fritz Leiber's *Grey Mouser* stories. A bit before this casting off of old loyalties, I had been in touch with Sprague De Camp and Hans Santessen of fantastic Universe about doing a new series of Conan tales. I think it was in the autumn of 1960, when I was working for Sexton Blake Library and reading SF for Suspense (the short-lived companion to Argosy) that I bumped into a colleague at Fleetway Publications, Andy Vincent, who was an old friend of Harry Harrison's (who had also freelanced for Fleetway for some time). Andy told me he was meeting Harry and Ted Carnell in the Fleetway foyer and suggested I went along. As I remember, that was where I first met Harry. Previously, I'd sold a couple of stories to Ted, one in collaboration with Barry Bayley, and had had more bounced than bought. Later on in a pub, Ted and I were talking about Robert E. Howard and Ted said he'd been thinking of running some Conan-type stuff in Science Fantasy. I told him of the fantastic Universe idea which had fallen through when Fantastic Universe folded, and said I still had the stuff
I'd done and would he like to see it. He said he would. A couple of days later I sent him the first chapter and outline of a Conan story. To tell you the truth, writing in Howard's style had its limitations, as did his hero as far as I was concerned, and I wasn't looking forward to producing another 10,000 words of the story if Ted liked it.

Ted liked it—or at least he liked the writing, but there had been a misunderstanding. He hadn't wanted Conan—he had wanted something on the same lines.

This suited me much better. I decided that I would think up a hero as different as possible from the usual run of S-and-S heroes, and use the narrative as a vehicle for my own "serious' ideas. Many of these ideas, I realise how, were somewhat romantic and coloured by a long drawn-out and, to me, at the time, tragic love affair which hadn't quite finished its course and which was confusing and darkening my outlook. I was writing floods of hack work for Fleetway and was getting sometimes £70 or £80 a week which was going on drink mainly, and, as I remember, involved rather a lot of broken glass of one description or another. I do remember, with great pride, my main achievement of the winter of 1960 or 1961, which was to smash entirely an unbreakable plate-glass door in a well-known restaurant near Piccadilly. And the management apologised . . .

I mention this, to give a picture of my mood at the time of Elric's creation. If you've read the early Elric stories in particular, you'll see that Elric's outlook was rather similar to mine. My point is, that Elric was me (the me of 1960-1, anyway) and the mingled qualities of betrayer and betrayed, the bewilderment about life in general, the search for some solution to it all, the expression of this bewilderment in terms of violence, cynicism and the need for revenge, were all characteristic of mine. So when I got the chance to write The Dreaming City, I was identifying very closely with my hero-villain. I thought myself something of an outcast (another romantic notion largely unsubstantiated now that I look back) and emphasised Elric's physical differences accordingly:
His bizarre dress was tasteless and gaudy, and
did not match his sensitive face and long-
fingered, almost delicate hands, yet he flaunted
it since it emphasised that he did not belong in
any company—that he was an outsider and an
outcast. But, in reality, he had little need to
wear such outlandish gear—for . . . (he) was a
pure albino who drew his power from a secret
and terrible source.

(Stealer of Souls, page 13)

The story was packed with personal symbols (as
are all the stories bar a couple). The "secret and
terrible source" was the sword Stormbringer, which
symbolised my own and others tendency to rely on
mental and physical crutches rather than cure the
weakness at source. To go further, Elric, for me,
symbolised the ambivalence of mankind in general,
with its love-hates, its mean-generosity, its confident-
bewilderment act. Elric is a thief who believes himself
robbed, a lover who hates love. In short, he cannot
be sure of the truth of anything, not even of his own
emotions or ambitions. This is made much clearer in
a story containing even more direct allegory, the
second in the series, While the Gods Laugh. Unfortu-
nately, Ted left out the verse from which the title
was taken:

I, while the gods laugh, the world's vortex am;
Maelstrom of passions in that hidden sea,
Whose waves of all-time lap the coasts of me,
And in small compass the dark waters cram.

Mervyn Peake (Shapes and Sounds)

This, I think, gave more meaning to both title and
story which involved a long quest after the Dead
God's Book—a mythical work alleged to contain all
the knowledge of the universe, in which Elric feels,
he will at last find the true meaning of life. He
expresses this need in a somewhat rhetorical way.
When the wingless woman Shaarilla asks him why
he wants the book he replies:

"I desire, if you like, to know one of (mis-
printed as or in magazine version) two things.
Does an ultimate God exist or not? Does Law or
Chaos govern our lives? Man needs a God, so
the philosophers tell us. Have they made one-
or did one make them?" etc., etc.

Here, as in other passages, the bewilderment is expressed in metaphysical terms, for at that time, due mainly to my education I was very involved with mysticism. Also, the metaphysical terms suited the description of a Sword-and-Sorcery hero and his magical, low-technology world.

It may seem odd that I use such phrases as "at that time" and so on, as if I'm referring to the remote past, but in many ways, being a trifle more mature, perhaps, happily married with a better sense of direction, etc., all this does seem to have taken place in the remote past.

The Dead God's Book is eventually located in a vast underground world which I had intended as a womb-symbol, and after a philosophical conversation with the book's keeper, Elric discovers it. This passage is, to me now, rather overwritten, but, for better or worse:

It was a huge book—the Dead God's Book, its covers encrusted with alien gems from which the light sprang. It gleamed, it throbbed with light and brilliant colour.

"At last," Elric breathed. "At last—the truth!"
He stumbled forward like a man made stupid with drink, his pale hands reaching for the thing he sought with such savage bitterness. His hands touched the pulsating cover of the Book and, trembling, turned it back . . . With a crash, the cover fell to the floor, sending the bright gems skipping and dancing over the paving stone. Beneath Elric's . . . hands lay nothing but a pile of yellowish dust.

The Dead God's Book and the Golden Barge are one and the same. They have no real existence, save in the wishful imagination of mankind. There is, the story says, no Holy Grail which will transform a man overnight from bewildered ignorance to complete knowledge—the answer already is within him, if he cares to train himself to find it. A rather over-emphasised fact, throughout history, but one gener-
ally ignored all the same.

The Stealer of Souls, the third story, continues this theme, but brought in rather different kinds of symbols. Coupled with the Jungian symbols already inherent in any tale using direct mythic material, I used Freudian symbols, too. This was a cynical attempt and a rather vulgar attempt to make the series popular. It appeared to work. The Stealer of Souls, whatever else it may be, is one of the most pornographic stories I have ever written. In Freudian terms it is the description of, if you like, a night's lovemaking.

Which brings me to another point. Although there is comparatively little direct description of sexual encounters in the stories and what there are are largely romanticised, the whole Elric saga has, in its choice of situations and symbols, very heavy sexual undertones. This is true of most Sword-and-Sorcery stories, but I have an idea that I may be the first such author to understand his material to this extent, to know what he's using. If I hadn't been a bit fed-up by the big response received by The Stealer of Souls (magazine story, not the book) I could have made even greater use of what I discovered.

Other critics have pointed out the close relationship the horror story (and often the SF story for that matter) has with the pornographic story, so there's no need to go any deeper into it here.

The pornographic content of the Elric saga doesn't interest me much, but I have hinted at the relationship between sex and violence in several stories, and indeed, there are a dozen syndromes to be found in the stories, particularly if you bear in mind my own involvement with sexual love, expression in violence, etc., at the time the stories were first conceived. Even my own interpretation of what I was doing is open to interpretation, in this case!

The allegory goes through all ten stories (including To Rescue Tanelorn which did not feature Elric) in Science Fantasy, but it tends to change its emphasis as my own ideas take better shape and my emotions mature. When, in the last Elric story of all, the sword, his crutch, Stormbringer turns and slays Elric it is
meant to represent, on one level, how mankind's wish-fantasies can often bring about the destruction of (till now at least) part of mankind. Hitler, for instance, founded his whole so-called "political" creed on a series of wish-fantasies (this is detailed in that odd book Dawn of Magic, recently published here).

Again this is an old question, a bit trite from being asked too often, maybe, but how much of what we believe is true and how much is what we wish were true. Hitler dreamed of his Thousand Year Reich, Chamberlain said There Will Be No War. Both were convinced—both ignored plain fact to a frightening extent, just as many people (not just politicians whose public statements are not always what they really believe) ignore plain facts today. This is no new discovery of mine. It is probably one of the oldest discoveries in the world. But, in part, this is what nearly all my published work points out. Working, as I did once, as editor of a party journal (allegedly an information magazine for party candidates) this conviction was strengthened. The build-up of a fantasy is an odd process and sometimes happens, to digress a bit, like this.

The facts are gathered, related, a picture emerges. The picture, though slightly coloured by the personalities of the fact-relaters, is fairly true. The picture is given to the politician. If the politician is a man of integrity he will not deliberately warp the facts, but he will present them in a simplified version which will be understood by the general public (he thinks). This involves a selection, which can change a picture out of all recognition, though the politician didn't deliberately intend to warp the facts. The other kind of politician almost automatically selects and warps in order to prove a point he, or his party, is trying to make. So the fantasy begins. Soon the real picture is almost irrevocably lost.

Therefore this reliance on pseudo-knowledge which seems to prove something we wish were true, is a dangerous thing to do.

This is one of the main messages of the Elric series, though there are several others on different levels.
Don't think I'm asking you to go back over the stories looking for these allegories and symbols. The reason I abandoned The Golden Barge was because among other things—it wasn't entertaining. The Elric stories are meant to entertain as much as anything else, but if anyone cares to look for substance beyond the entertainment level, they might find it.

One of the main reasons, though, for taking this angle when Alan (Dodd) asked me to write a piece on Elric, was because I have been a little disappointed at the first book being dismissed by some professional critics (who evidently didn't bother to read it closely, if at all) as an imitation of Conan. When you put thought and feeling into a story—thought and feeling which is yours—you don't much care for being called an imitator or a plagiarist however good or bad the story. Probably the millionth novel about a young advertising executive in love with a deb and involved with a married woman has just been published, yet the author won't be accused of imitating anyone or plagiarising anyone. It is the use to which one puts one's chosen material, not that material, which matters.

SOJAN

THE SWORDSMAN

1. Daughter of a Warrior King

A MYAT trotted peacefully across the broad, seemingly never-ending plain which made up the landscape as far as it was possible to see. No sound issued from the cloven hoofs, muffled by the moss-like substance which clothed the ground in a mantle of vivid colour-purple, green and yellow, with a trace of crimson or violet here and there. Nothing grew upon that plain. It was a wilderness, barren, deserted—the greatest desert on the planet of Zylor.

A wandering warrior sat astride the myat's broad back. At his steed's side hung a shield, a virtually unknown accoutrement on Zylor, but the tribe to which Sojan belonged had perfected it as a valuable asset. The beast upon which he rode was a big, sturdy animal. From both sides of its huge head grew long sharp horns, curving outward. More like
a reptile than a mammal, its head tapered like a
snake's, its tail was thick and it, too, tapered.

Sojan was clothed in a bright blue jerkin reaching
to his knees, his legs were bare and tough boots of
myat hide were upon his feet, reaching to about two
inches from his knees. Over the jerkin was a leather
harness of simple design-two straps across his shoul-
ders, coming to the waist and attached to a broad
belt whereupon hung his weapons-a sword, a dirk,
long and sharp, and a holster containing his big,
round-butted air-pistol.

The mercenary's hair was long and held by a fillet
of leather. At the back of his big saddle were two
saddle-bags, a container of water and, rolled across
these, his crimson cloak.

The man himself was tall, broad-shouldered and
slim-waisted with smooth muscles rippling beneath
his jerkin. The perfect fighting-man, keen-eyed and
wary.

Suddenly Sojan caught a flash of marble to the
west and knew that he had sighted Vermlot, the
capital city of Hatnor, the greatest warrior nation of
a warrior world. A rich city, was Vermlot, rich in
fighting-men and weapons of war, rich in terms of
gold, rich in beauty and splendour.

As he neared the city walls a guard bade him halt
and state his business.

"I come in peace," he cried, "to offer my sword,
my loyalty and my life to his Imperial Highness, the
War Lord of Hatnor. I am a mercenary, my only
possessions are the clothes I wear, the weapons I
carry and the myat I ride. I have travelled half a
world to offer my services to your ruler!"

He was admitted to the city and made his way to
one of the many taverns situated within the protec-
tion of the mighty walls. His strange protective
weapon aroused much interest. A certain warrior
made mock of him and his shield.

"Oh!" he laughed. "What a brave mercenary! He
has travelled half a world-to give us his protection-
for with his great shield in front of him he will be
able to withstand all our enemies. Perhaps he cannot fight without it. That's so, is it not, mercenary?"

Sojan halted, and gazed up at the man who was leaning against a pillar on the balcony above.

Grimly, quietly, he spoke, but his tones were cold and his words were acid.

"I do not like your attitude," he said. "And I like your words less. Draw your sword-if you know how to use it-and defend yourself! Perhaps you will be hiding behind the shield before I have finished with you!"

The warrior stiffened and his face flushed: he put one hand on the balcony rail and vaulted into the street below, drawing his long "vilthor", a sabre-like weapon, as he did so.

Sojan unslung his shield from the myat and drew his own long blade. The warrior of the Palace struck first, aiming a wicked slash at Sojan's legs with his curved vilthor but the mercenary from Ilthoth jumped high in the air and attacked the other with a weaving arc of steel, driving him further and further back. Then the man saw his chance and slashed at an exposed limb of the mercenary's, but was too slow. There was a dull thud as the sword hit and rebounded from the shield, then he was made to duck beneath a vicious slash from Sojan.

The Vermlotian slowly lost ground until with a flick of his wrist Sojan disarmed his opponent. Then, from a second-storey window a figure dropped, first to the balcony of the first-storey and from there to the ground. He removed his cloak and, with a smile upon his lips, came forward with drawn sword.

"I fancy you will not disarm me so quickly."

This time Sojan was not so lucky for the newcomer was as quick as the proverbial cobra. His sword weaved an invisible circle around Sojan's guard and the newcomer soon had him at his mercy. Before he knew it, the mercenary's sword flew from his grasp and clattered to the earth, ten feet away.
'Yield?' questioned the victor.

"I yield," panted he. "You are a great fighter. Who are you, sir?"

"Perhaps you have heard of me," smiled his late adversary, "I am Nornos Kad, War Lord of the Imperial Empire of Hatnor!"

"Sir," said Sojan with a bow, "I, who came to enlist in your service and offer my aid to you, begin by fighting you. I crave your forgiveness."

Nornos Kad laughed. "Never mind, you did very well against my warrior here. To best him is a test indeed and I feel that I would do well to enlist your services." He signed to a servant who was waiting in a doorway. "Come, you will be my guest until I have need of you. Here, Oumlat, take Sojan to one of the best guest rooms and see that he is well looked after."

For a week or so Sojan enjoyed the privileges of the Royal Guest until one morning a messenger came to say that Nornos Kad had asked for him.

"I summoned you, Sojan," Nornos Kad said, when they were alone, "because you are to accompany me on a journey. Our mission is to take Il-that, princess of Sengol, back to her father's country. I desire to bring Sengol into the Hatnorian alliance without bloodshed if possible and the king would think well of it if his daughter was personally escorted home by the War Lord himself. You had better prepare your weapons and be ready to move from your quarters by dawn tomorrow."

Ten warships, heavily armed with Hatnorian air-guns which worked on the simple principle of compressed air, with a range of over half a mile, and the Royal Airship, were ready to take to the air early the next morning. They rose majestically, hovered for a few moments, and then, with motors purring, the great gas-bags veered off towards Sengol which lay far to the north.

Within three or four hours they had crossed the outermost boundary of Hatnor and her satellites and were winging their way at a steady eighty miles an
hour over Veronlam, a country which owed no allegiance to Hatnor and which, although fearing the mighty Empire, was constantly stirring up petty strife between the minor Hatnorian nationals. They had nearly reached the border of Veronlam when the soft purr of motors was heard and a shell whistled past them and exploded in their rear air container.

"Veronlam pirates!" yelled the fore-gunner.

Quickly the small fleet formed a protective barrier about the Royal ship. One airship was hit a dozen times in as many different places and hurtled downwards, flames roaring from the gas-bag and the crew jumping overboard rather than die in the flames.

Nornos Kad realised at once that to fight against so many would soon end in disaster for his fleet, and he ordered them to turn about and flee back to Hatnor. He decided to rely upon his speedier engines to aid them rather than their powerful guns.

The Hatnorian fleet circled and fled. Nornos Kad was the last to leave the battle and hastily turned about to follow his ships. But alas, it was too late, for three well-aimed shots in their main tank sent them spiralling slowly to earth to land with a sickening crash amidst a tangle of red-hot girders and flaming fabric. Being on the platform of the ship

Nornos Kad, Sojan and Il-that were flung clear of the main wreckage, to lie stunned.

Sojan did not know how long it was he lay amidst the wreckage of the Royal Airship, but when he awoke it was dawn. He knew that none could have escaped if they had been trapped in the wreckage but nevertheless he spent a fruitless two hours searching for his companions-all he found were two or three charred corpses but none lived. Convinced that his companions were dead he took the only unbroken water bottle and set off in the direction of Hatnor. Sojan's eye caught the gleam of white stone far to the south of his position. With a sigh of relief he began to walk quickly towards the gleam which grew soon into a patch and from that into a city, its walls towering fifty paces in places. Knowing that he was still probably in Veronlam he knew that it would be useless to try to gain admission on the
strength of his allegiance to Nornos Kad the War Lord. Stripping himself of his Hatnorian Navy-Cloak and also his Navy-type gauntlets he stood arrayed as when he had first entered Hatnor, as a mercenary swordsman.

He easily gained admittance to the city of Quentos as mercenaries were always welcome to swell the ranks of any army.

"By Mimuk, friend, you're the third to pass through these gates this day," the guard said, as he was allowed to enter the city.

"The third. That's strange is it not, guard?" replied Sojan. "Three people in one day! Mimuk, you must be joking!"

"I joke not, friend mercenary, strange as it seems two others have preceded you and one of them was a woman. Our warriors found them near the wreck of an airship. Some say the ones we captured were Nornos Kad himself and Il-that, daughter of Hugor of Sengol. Two prizes indeed if it be the truth.”

Sojan strode off in the direction indicated by the friendly guard.

Arriving at the tavern he hired a room and ordered himself a meal. Finishing his repast, he was horrified to find that the only money he had was that of Hatnor. If he tried to pass this he knew that the suspicions of the keeper of the tavern would be instantly aroused. What should he do? He had brought nothing with him to the tavern save his sword, shield and poinard and the clothes he wore. He reasoned that the only chance he stood was to try and slip quietly out of the door before the proprietor spotted him and ordered him to pay his bill.

Just as he thought he had reached the safety of the street a hand fell on his shoulder and the leering face of the landlord was brought close to his.

"Going so soon, my lord? Methinks you would like to stay and sample some more of our victuals before you make your-er-hasty departure,” he said with ponderous sarcasm. "Now pay up or my men'll make sure you pay for your meal-in blood!”
"You threaten me, by Mimuk!" cried Sojan, his easily roused temper getting the better of him. "You dare threaten me! Draw your weapon!"

"Hey, Tytho, Zatthum, Wanrim—come and save me from this murdering bilker!" cried the keeper of the tavern in terror.

Instantly three ruffians appeared in the narrow doorway and, drawing their blades, rushed at Sojan, causing him to release his grasp upon the unfortunate man and turn to face this new danger.

Zatthum went down in the first minute with an inch of steel marking its path through his heart. The remaining two were not so easily defeated. Back and forth across the narrow street the three fought, sparks flying from their blades, the clang of their weapons resounding upon the rooftops. Sojan was marked in a dozen places, but his adversaries were bleeding in as many as he was. With a quick thrust, a parry and another thrust the mercenary succeeded in dispatching the second man. Now only Tytho was left. Sojan allowed himself to be headed off and the man edged him completely around so that they were now retracing their path. With a mighty effort Sojan, who was still tired after his narrow escape from the airship, gathered his remaining strength together and made a vicious lunge in Tytho's direction. He cried out in pain when Sojan's blade found the muscles of his left arm, but did not relax his grip upon his own sword. Again Sojan was forced further back towards the gaping crowd which had collected outside the tavern. His shield saved him from the thrust designed to end the fight but he knew he could not last longer for he was rapidly tiring. Suddenly his foot caught in the trappings of one of the dead men's harnesses and he fell backwards across the corpse. A grim smile graced Tytho's face as he raised his sword to deliver the final thrust.

"Kill him, Tytho, kill him," the crowd roared in frenzied bloodlust.

Sojan, entangled in the harness of the man he had slain, tried to rise but was stopped from doing so by a shove from Tytho's booted foot.
The hireling raised his sword again and the crowd leaned forward.

Suddenly there was a disturbance at one end of the street and the crowd quickly began to disperse.

As it did so, Tytho saw the City Patrol, scourge of the city thieves, was the cause of the crowd's disappearance. Looking hurriedly about him for a way of escape he found none; he dropped his sword and began to run, foolishly, along the street.

The leader of the Patrol raised his pistol. There was the slight hiss of escaping air and the running hireling gave a short cry, threw up his arms, stumbled and dropped on the cobbles of the street.

"What's happening here?"

By this time Sojan had disentangled himself from the harness of his late opponent and was standing, legs a'sprawl, hand to head.

"You've saved my life, sir!" he gasped. "These ruffians attacked me for my money. I succeeded in killing two but unfortunately became tangled up with this fellow." He indicated the body. "Tytho was about to finish me when you arrived!"

The leader laughed. "You certainly accounted very well for yourself," he said, "these three are among the worst of the type with whom we have to contend. Ruthless murderers, perfect swordsmen." Again he laughed. "Or almost perfect. You did us a service and I am grateful."

He surveyed Sojan's bloodstained and tattered clothing.

"You're a stranger here are you not?" he enquired. "A mercenary swordsman, perhaps?"

"Yes, I am named Sojan-they nickname me 'Shieldbearer' as I use this." Sojan pointed to his shield.

"Well, Sojan Shieldbearer, how would you like to bear a shield and wield a sword in the Patrol?"

Instantly Sojan saw his chance. If he could get a
post in the organised militia of the city, he might be
able to contact his prisoned friends.

"It has always been my ambition to serve in the
Veronlamite Guard," he lied, "but to become a mem-
ber of the great Patrol is a chance for which I had not
dared hope."

"Then come with us and we'll enlist you immedi-
ately. And," he added, "get you a decent jerkin and
harness."

Before he could become a full-fledged Patrolman,
Sojan had to undergo a course of basic training.
When this was finished, his duties were to Patrol,
with his men, a certain section of the city, and arrest
any thieves, footpads or similar wrongdoers. The
"justice" was rough indeed and was not appreciated
by the population. All the time he heard rumours
and from these rumours he gleaned that Nornos
Kad and Il-that were imprisoned somewhere in the
Prison of Zholun—a mighty towered building situ-
ated near the centre of the city. Sojan knew well that
the Patrol's duties included patrolling the prison and
acting as guards to "special" prisoners—and he was
hoping that he would be given this assignment soon.

Sure enough, one day his hopes were fulfilled and
he was assigned to guard a section of Zholun Prison.

With his eyes wide open, Sojan learned where the
two were imprisoned.

"One is in the East tower—the other in the West.
Nornos Kad lies in the East tower," a guard told
Sojan one night after Sojan had plied him with enough
ale to get him drunk.

Sojan had to work fast; there were rumours that
his friends were to die by the sword in two days'
time.

His first loyalty was to Nornos Kad. He contrived
to enter the East tower wherein Nornos Kad was
imprisoned. Stealthily he made his way to the metal-
studded door of the cell.

"Nornos Kad," he whispered.
He heard the rattle of chains and through the bars of the door saw his chieftain's handsome face, drawn and pale through lack of food and sleep.

"Sojan!" exclaimed the War Lord. "I thought you died in the crash!"

"I am alive and here to save you if I can. I was assigned to guard the West wing so it will be more difficult-however I shall try and get the keys. Until I return-have hope!"

And with that Sojan crept back along the gloomy passage. On return he found that the Patrolman on duty was talking to someone. He waited until the man had left and then walked into the little room which was being used to house guards.

"Hullo, Stontor," cried Sojan, "what's up?"

Stontor looked worried. "It's my wife, Sojan, she's been taken ill and I can't leave my post."

Sojan saw his chance.

"Well, you go and help her," he said. "I'll stay here until you get back. Don't worry."

"Thanks a lot, Sojan, you're a friend indeed. Here are the keys-shouldn't think there'll be much doing tonight." And with that he picked up his cloak and ran down the long passage.

Hastily Sojan picked up the keys and ran back to Nornos Kad's cell. Unlocking the door he helped Nornos Kad from his chains.

"I was lucky—a coincidence-guard's wife ill—but the main trouble will be getting out of the city," he panted, as he unlocked the heavy padlocks.

Together they returned to the guards' room. Here Sojan left Nornos Kad. Then he made his way back to the West wing where it was a simple matter to get the princess from her cell. Silently they returned to Nornos Kad.

Keeping to the sidestreets and the shadows, the three sped along towards the city gates.
Suddenly Nornos Kad hissed, "Stop! Stop, Sojan, there may be an easier way." He pointed to a flat area dotted with hangers and anchored airships. "With one of those we would have a better chance of escaping."

"But how?" enquired Sojan.

Again Nornos Kad pointed. "You see that small ship nearest to us—the one anchored down by a couple of ropes?" The ship of which he was speaking was fifteen feet above them, held to the ground by anchors attached to heavy ropes. "With luck we could gain the ship and climb the ropes."

Stealthily they padded along the side of the field, keeping well into the shadows all the time. A single guard lolled on the ground. Sojan crept behind him and reversing his pistol, knocked the man unconscious.

With Sojan's and Nornos Kad's help, Il—that was able to climb the rope and they boarded the ship. As they clambered over the rail a light suddenly appeared from one of the cabins and an armed man appeared on deck. He was followed by three others.

"Mimuk!" he cried. "What have we here?"

There was no time for words and, handing Nornos Kad his long dirk and Il—that his pistol, Sojan drew his sword, and engaged the man and his companions. Nornos Kad was close behind him. Back and forth across the narrow deck the six men fought, and the four crewmen were no mean battlers. Nornos Kad, weak from his sojourn in Zholun Prison, still put up a good fight. Together they succeeded in killing two of their opponents—but the other two were better swordsmen. The clash of steel echoed across the silent field. Sojan was blinded by the sudden flash of a searchlight and taking advantage of this, his opponent cut past his guard and made a painful gash in his side. The pain was like fire and Sojan could barely restrain himself from crying out. He stumbled to the deck and with a cry of triumph the crewman raised his sword. A sudden hiss and a strangled gasp and he collapsed over Sojan. Turning his head he saw Il—that with the pistol in her hand.
"Thanks," was all he could say as he struggled to his feet and ran to help Nornos Kad.

While Nornos Kad threw the bodies overboard, Sojan started the engines. Below them they heard shouts of a Patrol and two searchlights were now levelled on the swaying airship. Soon they heard cries as the bodies of the crewmen were found.

With two sword strokes Nornos Kad cut the anchoring ropes and the ship rose swiftly into the air. There was a coughing roar and the propellers began to turn. The searchlights followed them; all around them shells whistled.

Suddenly, behind them, they saw that three battlecruisers of the fastest and heaviest type had risen to follow them.

"More speed, Sojan, more speed!" cried Nornos Kad. "Make for Sengol, it's nearer."

With a glance at the compass, Sojan turned the ship's nose towards the North. Nearer and nearer came the battlecruisers, guns popping softly. Il-that, a true daughter of a warrior king, climbed into the gunner's rear-seat and aimed the guns of their own ship at the pursuing cruisers. She pressed the triggers and the twin muzzles of the gun gave a jerk, a hiss, and there was an explosion. What all a gunner's skill could not easily have accomplished, Il-that had done with luck-brought down a cruiser in its most vulnerable spot-the main gas-bag. Flames roared from the fabric and the ship lost height. Faster and faster it went as the earth pulled it downwards. The engines roaring to the last it crashed with a flash of orange and crimson flame. But the other two ships had still to be accounted for and Il-that was not so lucky this time.

For two hours the chase continued, neither gaining and all the time the shells from the Veronlam craft were getting closer and closer as the gunner perfected his aim.

"They will catch us soon," cried Il-that, who still sat in the rear-gunner's seat, "they seem to be drawing closer!"
"Then we shall have to land and hope that we're not still in Veronlam," yelled Nornos Kad above the shrieking wind.

"It will be a long time for us to do so, sir," Sojan told Nornos Kad, "we have no anchors, and to release the gas in the gas-bag would mean that while we lost height we should also lose speed."

"Then there's only one thing we can do!" cried the Emperor, "and that's this!" Raising his sword he cut deep into the nearest gas-bag. He was thrown to the deck as the contents rushed out and almost at once the ship began to drop, dangerously fast. The three stood by the side, ready to jump.

With a hard jolt the ship touched the ground, bumped along it, and stopped. Over the side the three companions went and ran over soft moss to the sheltering shadows of some rocks as the Veronlamite searchlights began to stab into the darkness.

But it was easy to hide in the rocks and the caves sheltered them when the Veronlams landed and made a vain search for them.

In the morning it was an easy matter to walk to the nearest Sengolian city and thence to the capital, where the king gratefully took his daughter and promised that Sengol would always be an ally to Hatnor.

(Original draft c. 1955)

2. Mission to Asno

MOTORS PURRING, captains shouting orders, the rustle of the canvas gun-covers being drawn back, gay flags, flashing steel, flying cloaks of many hues; a Hatnorian war-fleet rose rapidly into the sky.

On the deck of the flagship stood a tall, strong figure-that of Sojan, nicknamed "Shieldbearer", second in command to the great War Lord of Hatnor himself-Nornos Kad.

At his side was a long broadsword, upon his back his round shield; his right hand rested on the butt of
his heavy air-pistol-an incredibly powerful weapon. Clad in a jerkin of sky-blue, a divided kilt of deep crimson and boots of dark leather, over his shoulder his leathern war-harness, he was the typical example of a Zylorian mercenary, whose love of bright garb was legendary.

The great war-fleet was destined for Asno-a country far to the north of Hatnor where the king, so the spies told, was raising an army of mercenaries to attack Yundrot-a colony of the Hatnorian Empire.

To stop a major war, Nornos Kad decided to send a mighty fleet to crush the attack before it was started.

Having other business, he assigned Sojan to take his place and instructed him to completely wipe out any signs of an attack.

Only too pleased at the chance of battle, Sojan had readily assented and was now on his way-the entire fleet under his command.

Soon the fleet was winging its way over Asno-a land of snow and ice, fierce beasts, great tracts of uninhabited icefields-uninhabited, that is, by civilised beings.

In another hour it would be over Boitil, the capital city.

"Gunners, take your positions!" Sojan roared through cupped hands and picking up a megaphone—for there was no radio on Zylor—shouted the same orders, which went from ship to ship until every gunner was seated in his seat, guns loaded and ready for firing.

"Drop two hundred feet!" Sojan roared again to the steersman, and repeated these orders to the other captains, who in turn shouted them to their own steersmen.

"Prepare hand weapons and fasten down loose fixtures, check gas-bag coverings, every man to position!" Sojan shouted when the ships had all dropped two hundred feet.

"Slow speed!" The ships slowed into "second-speed."
In Zylorian naval terms there are five speeds: "Speed No. 1" is fastest possible, "Speed No. 2" is a fifth of this slower, and so on. When a commander gives the order to slow when travelling at Speed No. 1, the ship automatically adjusts to Speed No. 2; if going at No. 2 and told to slow, it changes to No. 3.

Now they were over the outskirts of the city, dropping lower and lower until Sojan thought they would touch the very towers of Boitil, scanning the squares and flying-fields for signs of the army. Halfway over the city a message was passed to Sojan that a great army camp had been spotted-just on the outskirts of the city. At the same time someone yelled for him to look, and doing so he saw that a fleet almost as large as his own was rising from flying-fields all over the vast city.

"Prepare for battle!" he shouted.

As one, the safety catches of the guns were pushed off.

"Shoot as you will!" Sojan ordered.

There was a muffled "pop" and the hiss of escaping air as the explosive shells of the Hatnorian craft were sent on their mission of destruction. Almost at once the enemy retaliated.

Two Hatnorian ships, one only slightly damaged, the other a mass of roaring yellow and blue flame, dropped earthwards.

For twelve hours the great air-battle was fought, developing into ship-to-ship duels as the opposing sides became mixed. Bit by bit the battle moved southwards until it was over the great ice wastes.

But expert handling of their craft, superior marksmanship and a slightly superior weight of numbers on the part of the Hatnorian fleet was slowly but surely weakening the Asnogian fleet. Sojan, now with a gun mounted on the officer's platform, was taking an active part in the battle. His uncanny ability to hit almost whatever he aimed at was taking great toll. Everywhere ships were hurtling earthwards, crashing in an inferno of flame, or merely
bouncing gently when a gas-bag was only slightly punctured.

At last, one by one, the enemy began to flee. The other ships, seeing their companions escape, disengaged and followed them. The hired ships, manned mainly by mercenaries, flew in every direction but that of Asno, while the Asnogian craft turned and headed for their home base. In this direction went the Hatnorian fleet, reforming to a close formation and turning to No. 1 speed. If they overtook a ship it was ruthlessly shot down; but half a dozen or so were lucky and escaped them. In three hours they were back over Asno and bombing the troop encampment with incendiaries until nothing remained of the great camp but smouldering fabric and twisted steel. Through the south gate of the city streamed forth ragged bands of hired soldiers, bent on escaping while they could. The planned attack on a Hatnorian colony had not even begun. A just reprisal on Nornos Kad's part. A reprisal carried out in full by Sojan. But his business was not finished and, landing on part of an undamaged airfield, Sojan ordered the frightened commanding officer to take him to King Tremorn of Asno.

"I bring a message from my Emperor!" he cried when he was in the vast chamber which housed the king's court. All around him stood courtiers and servants, worried and anxious to hear his terms. Great pillars supported the roof and brilliant tapestries hung from the ceiling. Murals on the walls depicted scenes of battles, on land, water and in the air.

"Speak your message," ordered the king. "What are your terms? I admit that I am beaten! For the present!" he added.

"For all time, sir, while a member of the Nornis family sits on the throne of Hatnor!" Sojan replied. "Now, do you wish to hear my terms?"

"Speak!"

"The first is that you acknowledge allegiance to Hatnor and pay a tribute of five hundred young men to train in our armies every tenth year. The second is that you disband any army you still have, save for
policing your city. On signs of attack, you will notify the Empire, who will come to your aid. As a member of the Empire you will be subject to all laws and trading terms of the Empire and in times of major war shall enlist two-thirds of your fighting strength in the armies of Hatnor and the remaining third if called upon. You will not make war-ships or weapons of war, save hand weapons, for your own use, but all war-ships and arms shall be sent direct to the capital. Do you recognise these terms?"

The king paused and, turning to his major domo, whispered a few words to him. The man nodded.

"Yes, I recognise your terms," he sighed.

"Then sign your name and oath to this document and seal it with your royal seal. Upon the breaking of your word, the lapse shall be punished according to the magnitude."

Sojan handed the paper to a courtier who carried it to the king. The act of bowing to a king is unknown upon the planet Zylor, instead the subject places his right hand upon his heart to signify complete allegiance.

So it was that Sojan achieved his purpose. But more adventures were yet to come before he could return to his palace at Hatnor.

3. Revolt in Hatnor

"SOJAN, SOJAN!" the call rang across the clear Zylorian sky as a small scout-ship veered towards the larger warship, the flagship of Sojan, second-in-command to the War Lord of Hatnor-Nornos Kad.

"Who are you?" Sojan's lieutenant roared through a megaphone.

"I bring urgent tidings from the court of Nornos Kad-the land is in turmoil!"

"Come alongside," the man roared.

As the scout-ship drew alongside, an armed man jumped from it and rushed up the ladder to the platform whereon Sojan stood.
"Sojan! While the fleet has been at war, revolution has swept through the land. Nornos Kad has been deposed and a tyrant sits on the throne of Hatnor. There is a price upon your head and upon the heads of all whom you command.

"Flee now, Sojan, while you have the chance. Trewin the Upstart controls the city and half the Empire. The other half is in a state of unrest, unsure whether to support one Emperor or another!"

"I cannot flee while my Emperor rots in chains-tell me, who still cries 'Loyalty to the Nornis family'?"

"None openly, Sojan. A few are suspected, but they are still powerful nobles and even Trewin dare not arrest them without cause."

Sojan's face became grim and he clenched his hand upon his sword hilt.

"Lun!" he cried. "Order the fleet to turn about and adjust to Speed One!"

A look of surprise crossed his lieutenant's face. "We're not running, Sojan?"

"Do as I say!"

"Turn about and adjust to Speed One!" Lun shouted through his megaphone.

At once the great fleet turned gracefully about and adjusted, speed by speed, until it was flying at maximum speed. There were puzzled looks in the eyes of many of Sojan's captains, but they obeyed his order.

"Tell them to set a course for Poltoon," he ordered Lun. Lun did so and soon every ship was heading south-to the steaming jungles and burning deserts of the Heat Lands.

"Why do we sail for Poltoon, Sojan?" asked Lun.

But Sojan's only reply was, "You will see," and he resumed his earnest conversation with the messenger who had brought him the news.

On the third day they were sailing at No. 1 speed over a vast belt of jungle, seemingly impenetrable.
But Sojan's eyes, less atrophied by civilised living, caught what he had been looking for—a patch of green, lighter than the dark green which predominated.

"STOP!" he roared. "Stop and hover—no one is to drop anchor."

The flying machines of the Zylorian nations are usually very similar to our airships. The gondola is supported by steel hawserS depending from the main gas-bag. The propeller is adjustable and can be slung either fore or aft of the ship—it is usually slung aft. They are steered by two methods, a rudder aft plus manipulation of the propeller. A normal sized warship usually mounts five guns—two very powerful ones fore and aft, a smaller one on the captain's platform and two mounted in a platform on top of the huge gas-bag. The gunners reach this platform by means of ladders from the deck to the platform. This position is extremely dangerous and if ever the gas-bag is hit it is unlikely that a gas-bag gunner could ever escape.

The ships stopped as ordered and while they waited, Sojan had his ship drop downwards, nearer and nearer to the little patch of green which became a small clearing, just large enough to land one ship, but for a fleet of over fifty ships to land here was impossible. With a slight bump the ship dropped to the ground and the anchor was thrown into the soft grass. Sojan ordered that the gas-bags be deflated. They could always be inflated again as every ship carried a large supply of gas-cylinders.

Now the ship was only a third of the size and was dragged into the undergrowth which was not at all thick. Sojan told his crew of eight to get to work and chip down all the small growth but to leave the huge forest giants standing. This they did and very soon the clearing widened and as it did so a new ship dropped down until the fifty were all deflated and covering a large area of ground under the trees. The cabins made excellent living quarters so there was no difficulty about housing the men. Rations were also plentiful and a spring of fresh water was nearby.

"I know this part of the country well," Sojan told
his men that night, "the inhabitants are for the most part friendly. While they are not civilised, they are not savages and I believe that they will give us some help. But now we sleep and tomorrow we shall rouse the tribes!"

Next morning, Sojan with a small party of his men set off for the village of his barbarian friends.

The chief greeted him warmly and was interested in Sojan's need for soldiers.

"You know me and my people, Soyin," he said, using the nearest Poltoonian equivalent of Sojan's name. "We all love to fight-and if there's a bit of loot thrown in, who's to say 'no'?"

"Then I can depend on you?"

"By all means-I shall form a council immediately and recruit as many of my fellow chiefs as possible. Between us we should muster a few thousand fighting men."

By Zylorian standards, where most nations are comparatively small to Earth nations, a thousand men is quite a large number.

"Then have them ready by the third day, my friend," Sojan replied. "Blood will stain the usurper's robes before the month is gone!"

4. The Hordes Attack

THE DAY of the invasion was drawing nearer and Sojan began to work harder and harder in the training of his barbarian horde-the Poltoonians. Spies brought word that there was more and more unrest in the outlying provinces of Hatnor.

"The time is right to strike," Sojan told his captains and the wild chiefs. "We must invade now or our cause will be lost and we will never again have the opportunity to win Hatnor back from the usurper and restore Nornos Kad to his rightful throne!"

His airships, camouflaged by the mighty trees of the steaming Poltoonian jungle, were provisioned and ready to do battle. His captains were word-
perfect in his plan of invasion. Everyone had his orders and knew how to carry them out.

A day later a horde, consisting of thousands of mounted barbarians led by Sojan himself, moved towards the North-and Hatnor!

Two days later, the faster moving airships rose into the air like a swarm of hornets armed with stings a hundred times more powerful. As they passed the horde, the ships slowed to minimum speed and followed, flying low, just above them. In another day they would arrive at the boundaries of Hatnor-and blood would run in the gutters of all who opposed them.

Sojan was sure that very little blood would flow as the army would be on his side. It was the criminal population, egged on by an evil and power-mad noble, who had risen and overthrown their Emperor while the bulk of his army was crushing a rebellion in an outer province.

There would always be unrest in any regime. Sojan knew this, but there was no cause for the people to grumble about their ruler. As always, the unrest had been caused by a powerseeker intent on turning a nation into a blood-bath for his own selfish ends.

Now the once happy people groaned beneath the tyrant's yoke, no man, woman or child could count themselves safe from his oppression.

Not only men made up the barbarian army, their maidens rode beside them, armed with knife, sword, shield and spear. In their left hands they carried charm sticks to keep their men and themselves from harm. Most of these girls were extremely beautiful and the armour they wore did not detract from their good looks in any way, rather it enhanced them.

At last they reached the outer boundaries of the Empire and found little opposition here. It would be later, when news of their invasion reached the city of Hatnor, that the fighting would begin. Sojan was finding it difficult to keep the barbarians in order; they had decided that anyone could be slain as long as they got their loot. But after a council meeting with the chiefs he was sure that they would be
Two days later found them at the gates of Vermlot, gates which were securely locked and guarded.

The barbarians were all for laying violent siege to the place, but Sojan realised that they could hold out for an eternity.

"You are forgetting our ships," he said, "we have the whole of the Hatnorian airforce under our control. They will not last as long as they hope!"

His flagship sailed gracefully down for him and then shot up again when he was aboard. Orders were shouted from ship to ship and the fleet dipped downwards towards the great city square. Aboard were hundreds of soldiers, the most reliable of the barbarian horde, and as soon as the ships reached the ground, not without some opposition, they swarmed from the ships and ran to engage the rather frightened militia who barred their way.

Wild cries, strangely woven banners raised against a background of flashing steel and muffled poppings of the airpistols and rifles. It was impossible to use the heavier artillery.

Into the square they poured and soon it was impossible to tell friend or foe as the fighting surged back and forth, spreading outwards into the streets, into the very houses themselves. Attacked from the inside as well as at their walls, the tyrant's men were uncertain whom to attack and while they wavered, the barbarians took the opportunity to batter in one of the minor gateways and clamber over the inner wall.

The streets were slippery with blood, echoing with the ring of steel and the cries of the wounded.

Sojan was in front, hewing and hacking with his great blade, his long hair streaming behind him and a grim smile upon his lips. "To the Palace, to the Palace," he cried. "Take the Palace or our cause is lost!"

And, like a tidal wave, the army surged over their enemies in the direction of the great Palace. The
doors would not open to their thunderous knocking so battering rams were brought in. As the main door flew open, Sojan and his men drew back in horror.

There stood Nornos Kad, their ruler, worn and in rags, a filthy stubble on his face. And surrounding him, a body of Trewin's personal guard. Behind them stood their leader.

"Come another step closer, Sojan, and I'll be forced to kill your precious Emperor!" he called.

Sojan and his men were in a quandary, what were they to do? It was checkmate, if not defeat, for them.

An idea sprang into Sojan's mind.

Aiming a pistol at Nornos Kad, he pulled the trigger. The Emperor fell to the ground with a moan and lay still.

"There, dog, I've done your dirty work for you!" he laughed.

In a rage Trewin fired blindly at Sojan. The Swordsman flung himself to the ground and the bullet whistled by to catch one of his men in the shoulder.

Lifting his own pistol, Sojan fired twice. Trewin, in the act of fleeing up the staircase, flung up his arms and toppled down the great stairway, blood trickling from his mouth. He landed with a thud at the feet of his guards.

With a cry, Sojan, his sword glistening in the light of the torches suspended around the wall, charged for the astounded guards who, without thinking, threw down their weapons and fled.

Nornos Kad picked himself up from the floor with Sojan's help.

"A clever move, Sojan," he grinned, "but it took some clever shooting, too."

He examined the hole which Sojan's bullet had made in his coat.

"It was a minor risk, sir. If I had not taken it, the city would even now be in the hands of Trewin."
"At the moment it seems to be in the hands of your Poltoonian barbarians," laughed the War Lord. "Let us go to the rescue of our fellow countrymen."

Peace had come once more to Hatnor.

5. The Purple Galley

To describe the wonderful pageantry, the colours, the races and the myriad weapons which flashed in that great hall would be impossible. The gleaming white stones of the hall, hung with vivid tapestries of red, black, gold, yellow, orange, green and purple, almost reflected the equally scintillating colours of the uniforms and dresses of the men and women who stood before the throne of Nornos Kad.

But there was one uniform missing, one tall figure which should have been there was not, one sword did not flash in the great hall.

And the faces of the nobles were sad for the missing man was Nornos Rique, Prince of Hatnor-the War Lord's son.

"My people," said Nornos Kad, softly and very sadly, "my son has been missing for thirteen days now and still no news of him or the Princess Asderma. Has anyone anything to report-you, Sojan, have you found any traces of my son?"

"No, sire, although I have searched the whole nation. I can only conclude that your son is not in the Hatnorian Empire!"

"Then we must find him, Sojan! Take the men you require-and return with my son! If it is possible then you are the man to find him!"

The sun was just setting when a weary and travel-stained rider guided his myat into the small collection of stone and wooden buildings which was the border town of Erm. He had ridden for days, stopping only to eat and gather a few hours' sleep when he could no longer stay awake. His clothes were good and were mainly made of durable hide. His weapons nestled in well-oiled sheaths and scabbards, his shield was covered with canvas. It was easy to see that here was the typical soldier of fortune-a Zylorian mercenary.
He dismounted at the small tavern and called through the door which was ajar.

"Hey there! Is there a stable for my animal and a bed for me?"

"Yes, my lord," came a woman's voice from the tavern and a girl of about eighteen appeared in the doorway. "Hey, Kerk!" she called. "Fetch a blanket for this gentleman's myat and take him to the stables!"

"This way my lord," said the battle-scarred veteran who came to do the woman's bidding. "What's trade like?" he added with a grin as they neared the wooden building which served as a stable for the beasts of the whole village.

"Not too bad," the mercenary smiled. "As long as men are men and their tempers are the same then I'll never be out of a job. There was an uprising in Hatnor some months ago. That was a good scrap if ever there was one!"

"Aye, I heard about it from another gentleman who came this way soon after it happened. Didn't say much, though-most untalkative type if you ask me! He wasn't a Hatnorian-nor a Northerner for that matter, that was easy to see!"

"What do you mean?" The mercenary was obviously interested; more than casually so.

"He was a Shortani man, you can't mistake'em."

"Shortani's a big continent-did you hear him say what country in Shortani?"

"Wait a minute. I believe he did say something." The old man paused and tugged at his grizzled beard. He frowned, thinking hard. "Yes, I've got it-it was raining at the time. Like it does most of the time in these parts," Kerk laughed.-"Never seems to stop it don't . . ."

"Yes," the mercenary was impatient, "but what did he say?"

"What? Oh, yes. The country. Well, he said, when he got here, that it was 'never like this in Uffjir!' Yes,
"Uffjir, hmm, that's right on the farthest side of Shortani. And even then he may not have been returning there. It probably isn't anything but it seems strange for an Uffjirian to travel so far from his tropical lands, especially in winter. What did he look like, this man?"

"Oh! The usual type, you know. Small, a bit fat, wore one of them fancy jewelled swords which snaps as soon as you cross it with a good bit of Turani steel. Why, I remember when I was a young'un-that would have been a bit before your time. We didn't have none of them newfangled flying machines in those days, I can tell you. We had to do all our travelling by myat-or more likely on our feet..."

"Yes!" The mercenary was almost crying with impatience by this time. "But can you describe the Uffjirian?"

"Well, he had a beard if that's any good. And it was curled up a bit—looked as if he'd put oil on it. Wore fancy clothes, too, no good for travelling but expensive—yes, they were certainly expensive. He was a nobleman by the look of him—hired a whole crowd of the village men and they all went off together somewhere. They ain't back yet."

"Have you any idea where they went?"

"Only the direction. They went off in the opposite direction to the one from which you came. Mounted, too, and although they wouldn't admit it, every one of them has a sword hidden in his blankets. They can't fool me, I have to look after their myats!"

The myat had been rubbed down and was in his stable by this time, attended by the two men, one an aged veteran with over a hundred years of fighting behind him and the other equally a veteran with not much more than twenty years behind him. They lived short lives on Zylor for most men died of a sword thrust by the time they were seventy or eighty. Their life span of 120 years was rarely reached.

That night, the mercenary sat in the corner of the
tavern, drinking and cleaning his heavy pistol. There were two other visitors at the tavern. A young man of seventeen years or so and his father. They were friendly men and the mercenary and he found mutual ground in that they were both veterans of the Findian/Kintonian wars. The mercenary had fought for the Findians and the man-Orfil-had fought on the side of the Kintonians. But there was no bad feeling between the men for at that time Orfil had also been a mercenary. Now he was a merchant-dealing in precious jewels-and he and his son were travelling to Aborgmingi, a small group of islands in the Shortani Sea. The mining of precious stones was unknown there, he said, and he found it worth his while to travel the distance over land and sea to sell them as they obtained prices which were over five times as much as those in Fria, his own country.

"Ride with us," he invited, "there is always a greater amount of safety if there is a greater amount of men and I would be glad of your company."

"I ride towards Shortani," said Sojan, "but whether I shall for long depends on circumstances."

The merchant knew better than to ask what "circumstances" they were for privacy means life on Zylor and those who ask too many needless questions are liable to find themselves in an alleyway keeping close company with a knife!

The three men retired to their respective rooms and the mercenary was glad to get some rest. Wearily he sank on to the not-so-soft bed and lay down to sleep.

In the morning he awoke at his accustomed hour and attempted to rise. He could not, for his hands were bound. He was strapped to the bed and the only thing he could move was his head. Looking down at him with a smile on his face was-Orfil the merchant, and his son. Only his "son" had donned her skirts again and was an extremely pretty girl!

"Well, my nosy soldier, you've put your nose into one game too many this time!" laughed Orfil, who seemed to be enjoying a great joke. The girl behind him was not so amused. Her whole bearing was tense and the hand that gripped the pistol at her
side gleamed white at the knuckles.

"Perhaps I should introduce myself," continued the man. "my name is Orfil. I am the Captain of the Spies Guild in Rhan. This lady prefers to remain unknown, although where you’re going the gods will know it anyway!"

"You're going to kill me then?"

"Yes."

"And am I permitted to enquire 'why'?"

"Certainly. I am afraid that I shall be forced to kill you—though I regret it, sir, for I like you. You see, you have been enquiring just a little too pointedly to be harmless. I suspect that you are more than a common mercenary—that perhaps you are in the pay of Uffjir—and if this is so, then it will be more of a pleasure to kill you!"

"I am no Uffjirian, you oaf! And I am not involved in any intrigue. I seek my War Lord's son who disappeared some time ago! Think not that I would sink so low as you!"

The smile vanished from the Rhanian's face and his right hand clenched on his long sword.

"Then I am sorry! You see Nornos Rique is in this right up to his lance-tip!"

And with that, he raised his sword. The girl turned away, and just as Orfil was about to deal the death thrust, the door opened slowly and he saw the face of the Uffjirian nobleman. Behind him were half a dozen burly swordsmen.

"Yit take you, Parijh!" cried the spy and then to the girl, "Quick, get behind me and open the window. I'll hold them back. There are myats awaiting!"

And with that he rushed upon the Uffjirian who, for a moment was so taken aback that he could hardly defend himself from the furious attack of Orfil's sword.

"Quick men," he yelled, "seize him, kill him, don't
let him escape!" But the narrow doorway would not permit more than one man to enter at a time and Orfil easily pushed Parih back and swung the heavy bar into position as the door shut.

"No time to slay you now," he panted as he clambered over the window ledge, "perhaps some other time ..."

The girl had by this time scrambled from the window and was waiting with the myats. The soft thud of their hooves was drowned by the yells of the man from Uffjir and the surly answers of his companions.

Silence fell as the men gave chase to Orfil and the girl. The mercenary still lay strapped to the bed. The door was barred from the inside and he had begun to think that he would soon starve to death when someone knocked on the door.

"Get me out of here!" he yelled.

"Is there anything the matter, sir?"

This was too much even for a hardened warrior. "Yes there is!" he roared. "And if you don't let me out right now-I'll tear the place down with my bare hands!" A rather vain boast considering his position.

Murmurs at the door and the retracing of steps down the creaking staircase.

He waited expectantly, hearing occasional voices. Then there were tramping feet on the stairway and in a few moments the door fell inwards, closely followed by two men with a battering log and behind them old Kerk.

"I said there was something up!" he exclaimed triumphantly.

It was a matter of minutes to untie the mercenary, for him to gather up his accoutrements, to pay Kerk and to find and saddle his myat. Then he was off, down the long forest track, following the trail of Orfil and his pursuers.

For three hours he followed a trail which was easily found. Once or twice he thought he heard
movements in the forest but, although he kept his hand ever ready on his sword, he was not attacked.

Then, just as he turned the bend in the trail, they were there. The Uffjirian's men, lined across the narrow path, swords drawn and pikes at the ready.

But the mercenary was trained to quick thinking and at the same moment as his heels dug into his myat's flanks, he drew sword, unhooked shield and brought his lance to bear as he thundered down upon his foes, his crimson cloak flying behind him like a vampire's wings soaked in blood, and a blood-curdling war-shout on his lips!

Taken aback, they wavered, but at the Uffjirian's shouts behind them, pushed forward to meet the charging lancer. Down went one with a brilliantly tufted shaft protruding from his throat. The lance was wrenched out of the mercenary's hands and his steed reared and snorted, flailing with its cloven hooves. His face was alight with battle-lust, he ducked beneath the guard of another man and dealt him a cut which put him down, shrieking and calling to some unknown god in an agony of death. He whirled his steed about, hoping to gain a little ground by retreating, but it was too late, for he was surrounded by a solid ring of pikes and blue steel. He caught blow after blow on his shield and the flat of his sword. One man lunged upwards with his heavy pike and the myat snorted in pain before his deadly hooves beat the man down.

Leaping from the wounded myat, the lone swordsman found himself surrounded by four of Parijh's men. He bled from a dozen superficial cuts and still he fought with the skill and ferocity of a trained crinja cat. Then there was a gap in their ranks and he was through, rushing for a tethered myat twenty yards away.

Howling like were-wolves, they followed him across the glade and reached him just as he cut the tethering rope of the myat with his sword and leaped into the high saddle. They attempted to cut at his animal's legs but a swift arc of blue steel drove them back. As he passed the body of the man whom he had first slain, he stooped and wrenched the lance
from the corpse and then he was away, down the long trail in the direction Orfil had taken. All his would-be captors heard was a grim laugh which echoed through the tall trees of the forest.

Turning in the saddle, the mercenary saw them run to their mounts and Parijh come from behind, scolding and cursing—among other things, the fine beast the mercenary had taken had belonged to the Uffjirian!

And it soon proved its worth for he easily outdistanced them and was again following Orfil's tracks—a trail which was to lead to the weirdest adventure in his whole career.

6. The Sea Wolves!

Two DAYS after his fight with the Uffjirian's men, the mercenary rode into the port of Minifjar in the country of Barj.

There were several ships in the harbour. Merchantmen mainly, but here and there rose the tall prows of warships.

Although their airships are motor-powered, the Zylorians have not found an engine capable of moving their ships, or for carrying them for very far and, since steam-power also is unknown, they still rely on sails and oars for motive power.

Most of the ships were equipped with both sails and oars but two of them were built for sails only. From every one of them, long barrels poked from strategic ports, for it was only a suicidal madman who would sail anything but the calm waters of the Asnogi Channel and the Shortani Sea unarmed.

There was one ship, a galley, which stood out from the others. Its tall prow triumphantly above the rest and its sails and paintwork were predominantly purple. Purple, like black on Earth, is the colour of death on Zylor, so it attracted much attention from the inhabitants of the small town.

The mercenary sought out the only presentable inn and bought a meal and a bed for the night.
As he lugged his equipment wearily up the flight of narrow stairs, he looked up and caught a glimpse of a familiar face—that of Orfil of Rhan's girl companion.

Evidently she had been watching him and the warrior kept a wary hand on his sword and resolved to make sure that his door was firmly barred that night.

But soon after he had dumped his belongings on the dirty bed, he heard the rattle of harness and, from his small window, he saw the spy and the girl leaving the walled entrance to the inn—they had none of their possessions with them which told the mercenary a great deal. They had gone for reinforcements. He sat on the edge of the bed pondering what he should do.

He had decided that it would be wiser to leave, when there came the sound of myat's hooves and a squad of Barjite Cavalry, fully armed with lances, swords, long rifles and pistols, clad in uniforms of blue, red and green with shining breastplates, helmets and leg greaves of bright steel. They clattered to a halt outside the inn.

"Thank Yit!" the mercenary murmured. For he recognised the captain of the mounted men as an old friend, who had fought beside him in an expedition Barj had made when bandits had been raiding their caravans of merchandise.

"Red," he cried, opening the window. "Red, you son of a crinja cat!"

Red, or as his men knew him, Captain Jeedvir, Vollitt's son of Chathja, turned. Then, as he saw who called him, a wide grin took the place of his previously astonished expression and he passed a hand through the shock of hair which gave him his nickname.

"Sojan! What are you doing in this particular bit of Hell?"

"And you? One of King Vixian's crack lancers commanding a coast patrol!"
"The king doesn't like me any more, Sojan," laughed the warrior. "Not since I pressed for better pay for the cavalry and nearly started a civil war at the last council!"

It was Sojan's turn to laugh. "You couldn't plead for better conditions for the underpaid infantry, I suppose!"

"What? And have them get the idea that they're up to cavalry standard!"

The rivalry between infantry and mounted divisions in Barj was very real and at times became a threat to the internal peace of that nation. The brawls between the better trained cavalry (generally inheriting the right to become an officer) and the recruited infantry were cursed in every town from Erm to Ishtam-Zhem, the capital. But Sojan was not concerned with this, he had an ally now, no need to run, he could stay and fight like a man.

"Looking for a fight, Red?" he said.

"Dying to be killed, why?" enquired Red, using an expression which was currently popular among fighting men.

"Because I have a feeling that we will be in one soon!"

"Good, I'll tell my men to be prepared."

"Thanks, I'll need some help, I think."

"Unusual for you to admit that!"

"Shut up, I'm coming down."

In the courtyard of the inn, Sojan told Red what he knew about Orfil and what had happened to him since he left the court of Hatnor to search for his ruler's son.

And as he finished, Orfil and a band of some twenty mounted men in seamen's clothes, rode into the courtyard. The captain's squad consisted of ten men-so they were outnumbered almost two-to-one. The seamen had no lances but the cavalry had left their rifles, pistols and lances with their myats' sad-
dles and other equipment. Now they were armed only with long sabres (or vilthors) and small battle-axes.

It took Orfil less than a second to take stock of the situation and with a curse, he bore down upon the group, yelling a blasphemous battle-shout so full of evil that it made Sojan's hair tingle. His men followed him, hardened sea-wolves these, all of them by rights fodder for the executioner's axe. Scarred, wild-eyed men in exotic clothes of many hues and nations. Black, green, white and red. From every nation on Zylor, they bore weapons which were equally varied—battle-axes, maces, pikes, hooked swords and broadswords, vilthors and blades resembling scimitars. All were there, and many so strange that they defied simple description.

Sojan blocked Orfil's lance thrust with his own long sword and unslung his shield from his back in a hurry. But not soon enough, for Orfil's lance stabbed again and flung the mercenary backward against a wall. Luckily, the lance tip broke on Sojan's breast-plate and Orfil swore to his dark gods as he wheeled his steed about and attempted to cut at Sojan with his broadsword. But now Sojan was up again, back against the wall, shield up and blade screaming as he cut past Orfil's guard.

But Orfil was swept away as the fight eddied back and forth across the courtyard. There, a green man of Poltoon went down with a lancer on top of him, stabbing again and again. Near him a huge red man, bearded, with one of his small horns broken and splintered, staggered towards his tethered steed spitting blood from a punctured lung—he never made the myat. A lancer was crushed by sheer weight of numbers as four howling, long-haired black men from Shortani bore him down and almost tore him to pieces. Everywhere was chaos and Sojan hardly knew who it was he fought, there were so many of them. Finally he singled out another red giant who whirled a shrieking twin-bladed axe around his head and laughed through his black beard all the time. He bled from a flesh wound in his left arm and his face streamed blood from a superficial sword cut, but he never seemed to tire. Sojan caught a blow of the axe on his shield which dented so much that it almost
broke his arm. Discarding it he skipped nimbly away from the arc of blood-stained steel, ducked beneath it and ripped upwards with a thrust that caught the giant in the throat and threw him groaning to the cobbles before Sojan lost sight of him as a fresh wave of sea-spoilers pushed towards him.

The war-shout of his people was upon Sojan's lips and it rose above the screams and curses of the men, spurred Red and his men on to greater feats of magnificent swordsmanship until the sailors were driven back. Slowly, very slowly, they gave ground and just as victory seemed in the hands of Sojan and his allies, from the courtyard walls dropped scores of well-armoured axemen.

It was impossible to defend themselves against this sudden onslaught and the last thing Sojan heard as an axe haft fell on his helmet and blackness followed blinding light was:

"Take them alive. They will suffer more tonight!"

7. Sojan at Sea

SOJAN AWOKE with a piercing pain in his head which quickly disappeared. Looking about him he found that he was lying on a comfortable couch in a well furnished room which seemed to have an indefinable "something" wrong with it.

Then he realised what it was. Every article of furniture was clamped to the floor and the windows were small square openings in the walls, just below eye-level.

He was in a ship's cabin. Obviously one of the ships in the harbour—that was why the men who had attacked him had worn seafaring garb. Which ship though? He didn't know. Doubtless he would find out soon enough. Could it be the purple ship of death which swayed at anchor in Minifjar harbour? It was likely, this business was mysterious enough for anything.

He walked over to the port hole and looked out. No, the purple ship could be seen from there. Then what ship was this?
He went back to the couch after trying the door which he found locked as he had expected.

He waited an hour-a long hour-until the bar on the door was lifted with a creak and the door swung open.

To his surprise, he found himself staring into the face of Parijh, the Uffjiirian who said:

"Welcome aboard the Sea Crinja my friend!"

But the man who stood behind Parijh caught the adventurer's attention most of all. It was his War Lord's son, Nornos Rique of Hatnor!

"Shiltain!" swore Sojan when he saw him.
"What-?"

"Explanation later, Sojan, we were lucky to rescue you. Right now you're not very welcome. My fault, I suppose, for giving no hint that I would be going-but there was no time."

"But how did I get out of Orfil's hands?"

"It's a long story-too long to relate here. Meanwhile, we sail for the Sea of Demons!"

"What?"

"We're sailing dangerous waters Sojan, for we play a dangerous game in which the whole planet is at stake. Do you want to come on deck?"

"Thanks."

The three men climbed the long ladders to the poopdeck. Nornos Rique shouted orders as sails were set and men moved to their oars. All the men were well built fighting men.

Sojan looked back to where the huge purple galley swayed at anchor like a dead ship becalmed in the terrible weed jungle of the Black Ocean. She gave no signs of following and soon the sails were billowing, oars creaked in unison and they were on the open sea, bound for the mysterious Sea of Demons.

Like all ships, there was continual movement aboard. Men scurrying up and down the rigging,
guns oiled and cleaned, the shouts of the mate giving orders.

The ship comprised three decks. Two raised fore and aft and a middle deck which was little more than a raised platform over the oarsmen's pits on port and starboard. In the centre of this deck there was another slightly raised platform measuring about thirty feet upon which was the single mast. At the base of this mast a drummer sat-beating out a steady rhythm which was followed by the oars who took their timing from the drum.

On this platform, also, was the heavy artillery and something which Sojan had never seen before-harpoon guns, twelve of them, five a side and another two fore and aft.

It was obvious that peaceful trading with the tribes along the Shortani coast was not the object of this particular voyage.

Suddenly, Sojan remembered his comrades.

"What happened to my friends?" he asked.

"They're all aboard the Purple Arrow, that cursed ship of Death you saw in Minifjar harbour," answered Rique. "You see, Sojan, we only had time to free you before we were discovered. My men and I swam across and boarded her silently last night. We finally found you and, judging by your snores, you were in a drugged sleep. There were four others with you but they were so much dead weight that we could only take you and secretly leave knives in their shirts with which to aid themselves if they have the chance. I'm sorry, Sojan, but it is too late to go back for them now even if it were practical."

"You are right, of course, Rique," answered Sojan, "but I would that I could help them!"

Now the tall Sea Crinja was in open waters, beyond sight of land. Bound for the terrible Sea of Demons where few ships ever sailed-and returned. And, in the days they sailed towards their destination, Sojan pieced together the ominous tale of the Old Ones and how the Priests of Rhan sought to conquer Zylor
with their evil aid.

It seemed that word of the plot was brought to Uffjir first. This country lies due North of Rhan on the Shortani coast and is generally better informed about the island of Mystery as it is sometimes called than is the rest of Zylor.

The Uffjirian monarch, King Ashniophil, had feared to make public the news as it would very likely force the Rhanian priesthood into swifter action. Instead, he had sent a messenger to enlist Nornos Rique's aid as, if the worst ever happened, Hatnor was the most powerful country on the whole planet. Nornos Rique, naturally, had not thought it wise to notify his father at once as he knew the other's aptitude to make quick, but sometimes hasty decisions and this is what Uffjir was trying to prevent.

Unfortunately, at the time of the messenger's coming, the Princess Asderma had been with Rique and had overheard everything. She threatened to betray Nornos Rique to the Rhanians unless he paid her a fabulous amount of money.

Knowing that even when she had the money, she would be dangerous, Rique decided to go into hiding. He had had to kidnap the girl and ride for Rhan in an effort to come to terms with the rulers or, if this failed, destroy or capture their leaders and their strange unhuman allies.

After several detours, he finally reached Minifjar but not before the Princess had escaped and fled to Orfil who had promptly ridden for Minifjar himself where a ship (one of the purple fleet of the Rhanian Theocracy—or Priest Rulers) awaited him in case just such an emergency as this should occur. The mercenary's questions had aroused his interest when he had overheard them at the inn and he had taken Sojan prisoner. Only to be foiled by the Uffjirian messenger who was acting as a rear-guard for Nornos Rique. The rest Sojan knew.

Now it was a race to get to Rhan first.

8. The Sea of Demons

IT WAS a race to get to Rhan first. The Purple Arrow would take the comparatively safe way there by sail-
ing down the coast of Poltoon until safer waters were reached (namely the Poltoonian Ocean) and back to Rhan via these waters.

The Crinja, however, would attempt to sail through the Demon Sea, cutting off a considerable part of the distance. They knew little of what they had to fight against. The Arrow did not know of their plan and was relying on the greater speed to catch the Crinja and either destroy it or beat it to Rhan and have it destroyed then. If the Crinja could reach Rhan first, it would have several days start and the fate of the world would be decided in those days. Why the Arrow had not sailed earlier, they knew not, but guessed that they were waiting for someone.

It was a day's sail until they would reach the Demon Sea and in that time, Sojan got to know his companions better.

Parijh, the Uffjirian, proved to be a humorous man. Cheerful in the face of every danger they had had to meet. When necessary, he was an excellent swordsman, but preferred to keep out of what he called 'unnecessary brawling'. This often gained him a reputation of cowardliness but, as he said, it was an asset rather than otherwise, for what better opponent is there than the one who underestimates you?

Sojan had to agree with this statement and a strong feeling of comradeship and mutual respect grew between them as they sailed ever nearer to the Sea of Demons.

Nornos Rique himself captained the Crinja. Rique was a tall man with a face that, though not handsome, had a dependable and rock-hard ruggedness and eyes of steel grey.

The mate was, as is usual on Zylorian naval craft, either privateer or part of an authorised Navy, a cavalry captain by the name of Andel of Riss who, although inclined to make independent decisions without consulting anyone first, was a good man in any kind of fight, and worth four of any man in the crew, who were all fine men and who admired him and respected him as only seamen can respect a man. They would also prove this in a fight with man or the elements.
The custom of placing cavalry men as seconds-in-command of ships is not as strange as it seems and the custom evolved thus:

At one time in the not-so-ancient history of Zylor a strong rivalry developed between seamen and landsmen. It became so bad that if a war came, the land forces could never rely on the naval forces—and vice versa.

It was the idea of assigning landsmen to learn the ways of the sea and naval officers to get to know the cavalry and infantry that saved them from chaos, and nowadays the two forces worked together in perfect harmony.

Later, on the evening of the third day out of Minifjar they were sailing a sea which was similar to any other sea but which, according to the maps, was the feared Sea of Demons.

"We'd better anchor here and sail on at daybreak," Nornos Rique decided, and he gave the order to drop anchor. The anchor chain rattled down for several seconds before stopping with a jarring clank.

"Water's too deep, sir! Anchor won't take!" yelled Andel.

"Then we daren't drift. Ship oars and set sail on your course."

"Yes, sir!"

Night fell forming an atmosphere of decay and death which could almost be smelled or touched. But apart from this, nothing happened save a faint scraping from time to time along the side of the boat which was attributed to some heavy sea-weed or a piece of drift wood.

The twin suns rose and the green dawn came, sending shadows and atmosphere scurrying over the horizon. The sea was green and shone like dark jade with some of jade's intangible mistiness.

Oars smashed into it, ploughing it in bright foam-flecked furrows, and the monotonous beat of the
drum began.

Sojan and his comrades ate breakfast in an atmosphere of gloom.

"It's this confounded sea!" suddenly roared Andel, rising from his chair and crashing his fist into his open palm. "Yit! By the time this voyage is over, there'll be men's lives lost and most likely we'll all be on the bottom!"

"Calm down, Andel, we'll come to any danger when we get to it," Nornos Rique said.

Andel grunted sullenly and subsided.

Two depressed hours followed until:

"Yit take us!"

This oath was followed by a piercing scream which tailed off into a choking gasp.

The four men rushed on deck. Most of the crew were at the starboard rail, staring downward to where a red foam flecked the white.

"Turn back, sir, you must turn back!" One hysterical seaman rushed towards Nornos Rique screaming.

"Calm down, and tell me what happened!"

Fear was in the man's eyes. A terrible fear bordering on madness. He babbled out his tale.

"A-a thing,-sir-it crept up on Mitesh and-oh, sir-it grabbed him by the throat and jumped overboard!"

"Is that all?"

"It's enough, sir!" muttered another of the men.

"What did this 'thing' look like? Who saw it clearly?"

"I did, sir."

It was the man who had commented a second before.
"Well?"

"It was a kind of green and brown. Scaly. By Yit, sir, it looked like a man might look if his mother had been a fish!"

"You mean this animal was-human?"

"Not human, sir. But it had a man's body sure enough. And his face was pointed, like, sir. And his eyes-his eyes were green, like the rest of him, and seemed to rot you when he stared at you!"

"All right. Thank you. Take this man below and give him something to drink!"

"Yes sir. Do we turn back?"

"No! You all knew there was danger!"

"Danger, yes sir, but not from-from devils!"

"Get below-we sail on!"

Back in their cabin, Sojan spoke.

"I've heard old folktales, Rique, about occurrences such as this one. Now I know why the ancients called this the 'Sea of Demons'."

"Do you think they are-organised in any way?"

"I've never heard of them being anything but in large numbers!"

"Perhaps this was a warning, then?"

"I think it might have been."

"We'd better set all guns in readiness. Those harpoons will come in useful. I had them mounted in case of meeting any of those large saurians that inhabit the Poltoonian Ocean. But it looks as if they'll be needed for a different 'game' now!"

The ship's oars began to creak again. But was the beat of the drum less sure? Were the oars a heartbeat slower? It seemed to the men standing on the poopdeck that this was so.

Towards the middle of the day, the atmosphere of
death grew and suddenly from the sea on four sides of the vessel the weird inhabitants of the Sea of Demons rose and attempted to board them.

But this time they were ready and the guns sent forth a steady stream of deadly missiles, driving the shrieking horde back into the sea.

"They went quickly enough!" yelled Andel jubilantly.

"Too quickly. They'll be more wary next time and they'll be back at night for sure!"

And night did fall and with it strange sounds which rose from the water and chilled the blood of the men on board.

But this time the crew were prepared and their searchlights stabbed the gloom, picking out the grotesque figures of the sea-people.

The crew moved forward, their yells mingling with the strange hissing cries of the sea-people. Sabres flashed in the searchlight glare and the blood of seamen and the man-like monsters mingled on the deck, making it difficult to get a footing.

The ship was a contrast of glaring light and total blackness. Men leaped from shadow into blinding gleam or disappeared into murky darkness. Men's breath was streaming in the cold night air. Men's battle cries pierced the shadows where light failed. And Sojan and his companions were in the thick of it, their swords lashing this way and that at their inhuman adversaries. Sojan's war-cry spurred on the men and slowly, then swiftly, they pushed them back and the body of the last monster to invade their ship crashed over the rail to splash into the murky waters below.

There was an audible sigh from the sweating men.

"We've pushed 'em back once, lads, and by Yit, we'll push them back from here to Rhan if needs be!" cried Sojan. With the thrill of victory still in their hearts, their pulses tingling with conquest, the men's voices rose in assent.

A brief count found two sailors suffering from
wounds where the talons of the sea-people had ripped them, while three more men were missing, obvi-
ously dragged down by the sea-people.

"We should reach Rhan in a day," said Nornos Rique.

"Or the bottom," broke in Andel gloomily.

But the monotonous day ahead was broken only by the screaming of sea-birds as they passed the outlying islands of The Immortal Theocracy of Rhan as it was called. This "immortal theocracy" was little more than Rhan itself and a group of four islands inhabited mainly by primitive tribes, most of whom dwelt in the interior, anyway, and had probably never heard of Rhan.

As they neared Rhan, Sojan felt misgivings. Would they succeed in carrying out their plan? Or would their perilous journey be in vain.

It was with these odd questions in his mind that he followed his friends down the gangplank and down a series of narrow lanes to a private house owned by a society known to those few holding positions of trust in the Hatnorian Empire, as the "Friends of Hatnor." These "friends" were generally native Hatnorians carrying forged or, as in some cases, real papers giving assumed names as well as assumed nationalities.

Three long knocks and two short ones three times repeated gained them admission.

As they walked along the narrow corridor to the main living room they began to feel just a little more secure, even though they were deep in the heart of the enemy's city-Jhambeelo.

But as the door swung open and friendly light flooded into the dark corridor they were taken aback!

"Hullo, Sojan," grinned Red. "I don't think I've met your friends?"

"By Yit! Red, how did you get here before us?" cried Sojan.

"Simple. I flew!"
"What? No airship could make the distance."
"You're quite right. I didn't come by airship. Banjar, here, brought me!"

For the first time, the comrades noticed what appeared to be a hunchbacked, rather tall, man with piercing blue eyes and aquiline features. Dark-haired, with a swarthy complexion.

"To snap the bow in half," said Red, using a term common on Zylor which means roughly-"To cut a long story short," "Jik, Wanwif, Selwoon and myself succeeded in staving a rather large hole in the bottom of the Purple Arrow. Naturally enough, it was not long before we were beginning to regret this as the water was rising steadily in the hold. Then, as we were all good swimmers, I thought that the only way to escape drowning would be to enlarge the hole and get out that way. So in turns we widened the hole and, with a great deal of difficulty, pulled ourselves under the keel of the boat and up into the open water. We lost Wanwif, I'm sorry to say. He didn't make it. Well, after that we found that we would have been better off drowning in the ship as there was no sight of land. I learned afterwards that we were in the Black Ocean and this didn't help as the stories I've heard of the Black Ocean are anything but cheerful. But believe it or not, after swimming in a Westerly direction for an hour or so, we were picked up by a little fishing vessel, oared only, manned by some natives of Yoomik which is the largest of the Rhanian group next to Rhan itself.

"The people looked after us but soon we got weary of hanging around their village and decided that an exploratory trip into the interior of the island would be the only thing to break the monotony. We trekked for several days until coming upon the village of Banjar's people-the Ascri.

"The Ascri at one time were enslaved by the Rhanian Priesthood and still bear a grievance against them. It was Banjar, who, when he had heard that I believed you were going to Rhan, suggested that he fly me there. We landed at night and made our way here. Banjar's people are advanced in many of the crafts and sciences and they have an asset which
helps them tremendously. Show Sojan and his friends your asset, Banjar!"

Banjar grinned and stood up. Unfolding a pair of huge wings.

"My people, I believe, are descended from the ancient winged mammals who used to live on Zylor. Just an off-shoot of evolution, I suppose. But one which has proved of great help to my people who can travel great distances at great speeds and although we are few in number, we can elude any enemies by leaving the ground and escaping that way. As my friend says, 'It is a great asset!'"

Formal introductions were made and food eaten but when this was finished Sojan spoke to Red.

"Have you managed to find out anything which might prove useful to us, Red?"

"I have indeed, my friend, I have found out something which, with your courage and skill and a great deal of luck, will save the world from chaos!"

9. Prisoners in Stone

RED'S PLAN was simple enough. Members of the secret society of the "Friends of Hatnor" had found an ancient plan of the Great Temple which was both chief place of worship and the centre of the Priesthood's rule in Rhan. There were three tunnels leading into it. Old sewers, long since disused. Two were cul-de-sacs, having been walled up. But in the last, the walling had been a hasty job and the bricks used to seal it had collapsed. However, these tunnels were still guarded at the other end. Some said by Palace Guards—but others said simply that they were guarded by "something". Even if the foe was human it would take an incredibly brave man to venture the rotting tunnels.

"Why not an army?" asked Andel. "Surely a great many men would be safer than one?"

"Safer, yes, but certainly not so secret. Every action we make must not be detected by the Priesthood—otherwise we are lost. We can only make a very wide guess at what power these Old Ones wield and it is our aim to stop them using it-not
bring it down upon our heads—and the rest of the world's heads, also."

"I see," said Parijh, "then let me be the one to go. I offer not out of heroics—which are extremely bad taste in any case—but I am more accustomed to stealth than these sword-swinging barbarians with me." He grinned.

"Ho! So that's what we are, are we?" roared Andel. "I'll have you know ..."

But the comrades would never hear the rest of Andel's forthcoming witticism for Red broke in: "Be a bit quieter, Andel, or you'll have the whole of the Rhanian Soldiery on our heads."

"Sorry," said Andel.

"No," continued Red, "I think Sojan should go. He is better for the job than anyone else. He has barbarian training, he is cat-footed, lynx-eyed and can hear a sword sing in its scabbard a mile away. I think he will succeed in getting through more than any other man in our company!"

"Then it will be I, that's settled," said Sojan with satisfaction. "When and where do I start?"

"You start now, and I will lead you to the entrance of the tunnel. I suggest that you take a rifle, an axe, your shield and your long sword. Half-armour would be advisable, also."

"Then I shall take your advice," Sojan laughed and proceeded to don half-armour. This consisted of greaves for his legs, and a breastplate and helmet.

Then he was ready and prepared to follow Red down winding backstreets to a small turning near the Great Temple. Here, Red lifted a rusted cover to reveal an equally rusted ladder leading down into darkness.

"Good luck!" was all he said as Sojan slipped down into the gloom and sought about for hand- and foot-holds on the ageworn rail. Then the lid was replaced and Sojan found himself in utter darkness.
Down he fumbled, sometimes missing footing where one of the metal bars had rusted away, once nearly falling when his groping hand instead of closing on solid metal closed on damp air. But at last he was on the uneven floor of the disused sewer, peering into the gloom. He followed the wall along for what seemed an eon, stumbling over fallen bricks and refuse. At last he sensed an obstruction ahead and he unsheathed his sword and felt the reassuring butt of his heavy pistol in his hand. On he went, past the fallen wall until-suddenly—there was no more tunnel. Or so it seemed. His right hand, which had been groping along the wall touched nothing. But after the first brief shock he grinned to himself. This was the right hand turn of the tunnel. Soon he would meet the Guardians.

And meet them he did for, with a soul-shaking shriek, two of the mysterious guardians were upon him. Huge reptilian things, red-eyed and red-mouthed with teeth reaching a foot long and razor sharp.

Sojan, shocked by their sudden attack, took a step backwards, hitched his rifle to his shoulder and fired straight into the mouth of the foremost beast. It shrieked again but still came on. Hastily he dropped the rifle and replaced it with his heavy axe and long sword. But before the beast reached him it had stumbled and fallen with crumpling forelegs, writhing in a fit of agony which ended with one abrupt shudder of death.

The other monster was checked for a moment, sniffed the corpse of its companion and then voiced another spine-chilling shriek which was half hiss and half human cry. Sojan met it with sword lashing and axe whining through the air about his head. Back went the monster but it returned in an instant, clutching at Sojan with its claws which almost resembled human hands—though hands with six inch steel talons on the ends of each finger. Sojan stumbled backwards, his axe cutting and hacking at the hideous thing, his sword slashing into its throat again and again until at last it was down in a death agony that lasted minutes.

Pausing to wipe his weapons clean of blood and to
pick up his rifle, Sojan moved on down the tunnel, feeling a little more cheerful now that he knew his foe and had conquered it.

And, abruptly, he was at the end of the runnel and a similar steel ladder, in better condition, leading upwards. Warily he clambered up. Rifle, axe and shield strapped across his broad back and his sword firmly clenched in his teeth.

There was a metal cover here, too, and he lifted it cautiously to be blinded for a moment by the sudden gleam. He had been so long in darkness and the semi-darkness of the tunnel that he blinked hard for several seconds until his eyes became accustomed to the light.

Silently he eased his body through the narrow hole and just as softly replaced the cover. He was in a lighted corridor with torches on either side. The corridor was short and had a door at each end. Which door? He decided immediately to take the door which led farthest away from the tunnel. At least he would be a little deeper into the Temple and nearer the Inner Room in the centre which housed the Old Ones.

Gradually he pushed the door until it swung open.

He thanked the Gods of Light, Yit and Corrunj, that they had not been locked.

Down another corridor he sped, cat-footed as ever, wary hands on sword and rifle. His armour glinted in the torchlight and his shadow loomed black and huge on the wall.

Most of the priests would be at rest, he knew, but it was equally certain that guards would be posted at strategic points and absolute caution was necessary. He had a rough plan of the Temple printed in his mind but the maze of corridors which he was following and which ran deeper and deeper into the heart of the Temple were complicated and were probably or more recent origin, for the map had been very old.

But cautious as he knew he must be he was certainly not slow. For every heartbeat counted. He had to reach the chamber of the Old Ones somehow and discover who-or what-they were and what their
motives were for allying themselves with the evil Priesthood of Rhan.

The murmurs of voices. The laughs of men. The clank of sword-scabbard against armour. At last, a guarded entrance. Was he near the strange sanctuary of the Old Ones?

The men's backs were to him. This was not the time for heroics, for a cry would mean discovery; and discovery he must avoid. He raised his rifle and brought it down on the head of one guard while with his other hand he chopped at the back of the other man's neck. They both collapsed without a murmur. Looking up and down the intersecting corridor to make sure he had not been seen, he grabbed the two bodies by their loose clothing and pulled them back into the shadows. No time to hide them. And no time to hide himself. For the clank of steel-shod feet resounded down the corridor. He hugged the wall and prayed to his ancient gods that he would not be discovered.

Sojan heard the steps come nearer and nearer, and then, miraculously, fade away again. Risking discovery, he peered round the wall and saw another passageway. Down it strode two guards and one of the infamous High Priests of Rhan, the rulers of the place. Cat-footed as usual, he followed them. This corridor was not very well lighted but, unlike the others, it had doors set in the walls.

Sojan hoped that one of these would not open.

Suddenly the priest stopped.

"Wait here," Sojan heard him say. No time to think, now, he must act. Into the nearest apartment and pray to Yit that it was unoccupied.

Luck! The rooms were empty. These, Sojan could see, were the apartments of the High Priests. No monkish sparsity of furniture here-these rooms were lavishly furnished and decorated. Grinning, Sojan bounced down on to the bed and breathed a prayer of relief. Then he was up again and taking in his surroundings. On one wall hung several of the long flowing robes which the High Priests wore.
One of the customs of these men was to go veiled-to give them a little more security from the assassin, Sojan guessed-and also to enable them to slip from the Temple and mingle with the people without fear of being recognised. This was one of the reasons why the people of Rhan were so easily kept in subjection by the evil priest-Rulers.

But there was a chance, though Sojan knew it was a slim one, that he could don one of these robes and enter the Inner Chamber and meet the mysterious Old Ones face to face.

Quickly he slipped into the robe, stuffing all but his sword and pistol under a nearby couch, and hoping that they would not be discovered. His sword and pistol were well hidden by the folds of the robe and he could keep his armour on.

Out now, and down the passage, past the lounging soldiers who sprang to attention and saluted him with the usual Zylorian salute-clenched fists against temples and a short bow from the waist.

Sojan acknowledged the salute by a curt nod of his head. The veil hid his features entirely, and if he was unmasked by some mishap-only the other High Priests would know whether he was a fraud or not. So, comparatively safe, Sojan moved along the corridor towards the huge, metal-studded door which was the portal to the Inner Chamber.

It was unlocked, and the guards on each side of it stood away respectfully as Sojan opened it.

At first he could see nothing, the room was lit by one torch which cast shadows everywhere. Then, from one corner of the large chamber, a voice spoke. It was a voice of infinite weariness, full of lost hope and the knowledge of an eternity of despair.

"Why trouble us again, Priest, we have promised to do your bidding? And we keep our word-if you do not."

Sojan realised that instead of the evil forces he had expected, here were prisoners; slaves rather than allies of the Priesthood.

"I'm no priest," he said, "if I knew who you were
I might help you even!"

"Is this another trick, Priest," murmured the voice, although this time there was a little hope in it.

"No trick. I'm a sworn enemy of the priesthood of Rhan. I represent the rest of Zylor, who have no

wish to become enslaved by the Rhanians. Yet rumour has it that you are allied with them." He squinted into the darkness. "Who are you—or what?"

"We are the old inhabitants of Zylor. We lived here before ever the shining ships of humanity sprang from distant planets in a desperate attempt to reach another habitable planet. They thought that the end of their world had come. As it happened their world did not die, but it was too late then, they had taken all their knowledge out into space with them, and in the long journey from Galaxy to Galaxy much of their knowledge perished, for the journey took centuries to complete.

"By the time the new generations reached this planet, their ancestors had died and Man had to start again, almost from the beginning. These Men, who called themselves "Lemurians" lived peacefully with us for many hundreds of years and we helped them as much as possible, for we are a very ancient race and had more knowledge than ever the ancestors of the Lemurians, although of a different kind—for while Man concentrated on improving his body, we concentrated on improving our minds and could control mighty elements with our wills. Eventually the Men became frightened of us and sent us away (there were only a few of us living in far-flung colonies then; now we are even less)."

"But how did you become the slaves of these priests?" asked Sojan. "What happened?"

"Although there were many men who feared us and called us Things of Evil and similar names, there were others who began to worship us for our powers, calling us gods and setting up altars and Temples to us.

"Just as some men are foolish, some of our number were foolish and began to think that perhaps
they were gods after all. They dwelt in the Temples and had sacrifices made to them and took part in meaningless rituals. The priests soon found their weaknesses, however, and decided that they could rule the people if they frightened them by telling them of the wrath of the gods and so on. They succeeded in capturing us and imprisoning us. I was one of the foolish ones, our contemporaries have long since left this planet in search of another, uninhabited by Man, with whom they cannot live in peace.

"You may have read in your history scrolls of the mighty Theocracy which dominated the world at one time. Rhan is now all that is left of the Theocracy—a remnant of a great and terrible nation! The people rose against their oppressors, country by country, until the evil Priesthood was driven back, further and further, to seek refuge on this island, the original capital of the old Imperial Theocracy. It was here that the cult, based on worship of us, was spawned and, if you can help us, it is here that it will die. Otherwise a new Black Age shall cover the world in a cloak of death!"

"But," cried Sojan, "if you do not wish them to rule Man then why do you help them? Why do you lend them your powers to destroy the great Nations of Zylor?"

"They have promised us freedom, O, Man! Freedom after thousands of decades. Freedom after eons of despair. We would follow our brothers, we would travel the infinite lengths of Space and Time were we once released. We would see Suns and Planets, green things. Seas and Plains. For us these things are worth more than life. We are of them more than Man—for we, like the planets and the stars, and the grass that grows for ever, are almost immortal. We have no bodies, as Man knows bodies, no senses as Man interprets senses—we are Minds. You can see that the temptation is great! We were not strong-willed to begin with, we were proud of Man's petty ceremonies. Now that he offers us Light and Freedom again, we must accept. Unless there is another way."

"There may be another way," Sojan said. "If you
will but tell me how you are imprisoned, perhaps I can release you!"

"There are certain minerals, rare and almost unknown, which have the properties that lead has compared to radium. Radium cannot harm or pass through lead. Similarly, although we can pass through most minerals and life forms, we are imprisoned if we enter a certain precious stone. We can enter it, but by some strange trick of nature, our beings cannot pass back through it. Thus we were enticed, centuries ago, into these blocks of ermtri stone. The only way in which we can escape is by someone outside boring shafts into the blocks and thus cutting channels through which we can pass. Do you understand?"

Dimly Sojan understood, though his brain was shaken by the effort of trying to imagine beings so utterly alien to Man, yet in some ways akin to him. He picked up the torch and cast its light towards the centre of the hall. There on an altar, covered by a crimson cloth, rested five large blocks of some dark, cloudy blue substance. Like-like blue jade. It was a stone that Sojan, who had travelled the whole of his planet almost, had never seen—had never, what is more, heard of—not even in legends.

"I understand," he said, "what tool will cut it?"

"Steel, sharp steel will bore into it. Have you steel?"

"Yes. Will it hurt you?"

"No, it will leave no impression."

Wiping sweat from his forehead and hands, Sojan moved towards the blocks. He drew his sword and clambered up on to the altar. Placing the sharp point of his blade on top of the first block, he turned it round and round. Feeling it bite deeper and deeper into the strange substance he became aware of a strange tingling which seemed to flow up his sword and into his body, he couldn't define it but it was not unpleasant. Suddenly there was a dazzling burst of green and orange brightness and something seemed to flow from the hole that he had bored, flow out and upwards, lighting the room. He heard no words, but in his mind there was a great sense of joy-of
thanks. Then, one by one he saw the other blocks, broken by the same strange power, open and the green and orange brightness flow from them.

Then they took on a slightly more solid shape, until Sojan could make out eyes and circular bodies. These, then, were the Old Ones. Perhaps in a million, million years, man too would have succeeded in being able to form the atoms of his body into whatever shape he desired. Perhaps, these beings once were Men? That would explain the strange kinship Sojan felt for them. A kinship which his Lemurian ancestors felt also, before their witnessing of such alien powers changed their finer feelings into those of fear and hate.

"Before you leave," Sojan begged, "I crave one request as a price for your release."

"Anything!"

"Then when I am out of this building and safely at sea, destroy this place of evil so that the power of the priests will be shattered for all time and such an evil can never rise again!"

"Gladly we grant you this. We will wait here until you are at sea. But tread carefully, we cannot help you to escape."

Thanking them, Sojan turned about and left, sword in hand. But in his exultation he had forgotten the soldiers outside and they stared in amazement at the sword in his hand and the sweat on his face. This did not seem to them any High Priest.

Taking quick stock of the situation, Sojan spoke to them.

"I-I had a little difficulty with one of the bolts on the interior," he lied, "I had to use this sword to loosen it . . ."

With a puzzled look, the men bowed and saluted, but there was doubt in their eyes.

"A priest would not go unveiled for anything," he heard one of them murmur as he entered the room which he had left previously. "He doesn't seem a priest to me! Here you, stop a minute!"
But Sojan had bolted the door and was hastily donning his weapons again. The men began to bang on the door and more men came to see what the noise was about.

"That's no priest," he heard someone say, "The High Priest Thoro is conducting the Ceremony of Death in the Outer Temple! He won't be back for hours!"

"Batter the door down you fools," came a voice that was obviously that of one in authority, probably a High Priest.

Anxiously, Sojan looked for another exit. There was only a curtained window.

He parted the curtain, and looked outside. It was still dark. He looked down. A courtyard scarcely ten feet below. With luck, he thought, I can jump down there and escape as best I can. He put a foot on the ledge and swung himself over, dropping lightly to the grass of the courtyard. In the centre of the courtyard a fountain splashed quietly—a scene of peace and solitude. But not for long. He saw a face at the window he had so recently quit.

"He's down there," one of the soldiers shouted.

Sojan ducked into the nearest doorway, opposite the room he had left. He ran down a short, dark corridor and up a flight of steps. No sign of pursuit yet. Panting heavily he ran in the direction he knew an exit to be. It would be guarded now, he knew, for the whole Temple was by this time alert. And so it was. With his usual good luck, Sojan had succeeded in making the exit unchallenged. But there would be no such luck here, with five huge soldiers coming at him.

Again he had no time for heroics. His pistol came up and two of his would-be killers went down. The other three were on him now and his sword cut a gleaming arc about his head. His battle-axe shrieked as if for blood as he carried the attack towards his foes instead of they to him. Nonplussed for a second, they fell back.

That falling back was for them death, for now
Sojan had some kind of advantage and he made full use of it as he drove blow after blow, thrust after thrust into the men.

Bleeding himself from several wounds, Sojan came on, down went one man, then another. Now the last warrior, fighting with desperation hacked and parried, and sought an opening in Sojan's amazing guard.

None came, the man sought an opening too often, lunged forward-and almost pinioned himself on Sojan's blade. Back he tried to leap, clumsily. A perfect target for a whistling, battered axe to bury itself in helmet and brain.

Leaving his axe where it had come to rest, Sojan fled the Temple. His heart pounding, he finally reached the house where his friends waited.

"Come," he cried, "I'm successful-but we must make the ship immediately, all of us, else we all die. I don't know what they intend to do."

His companions realised that there was no time for an explanation and followed him wordlessly.

A frantic race for the docks. One brief skirmish with a City Patrol and then they were on board. Up anchor, out oars, castoff.

And as the ship sped from the harbour they looked back.

There came a blinding flash and then a deep, rolling roar as the great Temple erupted in a sudden burst of flame. Then, as they peered back at the city, there was blackness again. The Temple was not burning-there was no Temple now to burn-it had been dissolved.

As they watched, Sojan and his friends saw five streaks of blue and orange flame rise skyward and rocket upwards and outwards-towards the stars.

"What was that?" gasped Nornos Rique.

"The Old Ones," smiled Sojan. "I'll tell you a tale which you may not believe. But it is a tale which has
taught me much—as well as giving me a valuable history lesson!"

The voyage back was not a boring one for Sojan's companions as they listened to his strange tale.

But what of the Purple Galley you ask, what of Orfil and the Princess who betrayed Rique? That, readers, is a story which is short and sad. They, too, attempted to sail through the Sea of Demons in pursuit of Sojan and his companions.

But they were not so lucky.

10. The Plain of Mystery

THE WIND tore at the rigging of the tiny air-cruiser as it pushed bravely into the howling storm.

Four men clung to the deck rails whilst a fifth strove to steer the tossing gondola.

"Keep her headed North!" yelled Nornos Rique to Sojan.

"At this rate we'll be tossed on to Shortani unless the wind shifts!" he yelled back.

Parijh the Uffjirian grimaced.

"I've been meaning to go home for some time!" he called.

"You'll be home for your own funeral unless someone gives me a hand with this wheel!" cried Sojan.

Sojan, Nornos Rique, Parijh, Andel and Red, the five men who had saved their planet of Zylor from the evil priest-rulers of Rhan some months ago, were returning to Hatnor after being the guests of honour at several banquets held to celebrate their triumph. Sojan, Rique, Andel and Red had been uncomfortable about the whole thing, only Parijh, always glad of the limelight, had enjoyed himself thoroughly.

The storm had sprung up quickly and they were now battling to keep the little dirigible into the wind which drove them steadily southwards.

"Wouldn't it be better to land, Sojan?" Andel
shouted.  

"It would be, my friend, if we knew where we were. There's every likelihood of getting out of this trouble into something worse."

Suddenly there was a loud snapping sound and the wheel spun throwing Sojan off balance and on to the deck.

"What was that?" yelled Parijh.

"Steering's gone! We can't attempt to repair it in this weather. We'll just have to drift now!"

The five trooped down into the tiny cabin. Even there it was not warm and they were all depressed as they shivered in their cloaks and attempted to get some sleep.

Morning came and the storm had not abated. It lasted all through that day, the wind ripping into the ship and sending it further and further South.

"There's never been a storm like this in my memory!" Nornos Rique said.

The others agreed.

"Further North," said Andel, "they're quite frequent. Lasting for days, so they say."

"That's true," said Sojan.

By midnight of the next night the storm finished and the sky cleared of the clinging cloud. The stars, their constellations unfamiliar to Earth eyes, shone brightly and Sojan took a quick bearing.

"We're over Shortani all right," he muttered. "Well over. In fact, I believe we're near the interior of the continent."

Beneath them the scene was one of peace rather than that of death and mystery. Great plains, watered by winding rivers, lush forests, rearing mountains, proud-like gods looking down upon men. Here and there herds of strange animals could be detected for the moons were very bright. They were drinking and did not look up at the airship gliding
silently above them.

In the morning Sojan and Andel set to work on repairing the broken steering-lines whilst the others looked down at the peaceful-seeming country beneath them.

All the time they worked they drifted further and further into the interior.

"If we drift much further Sojan, we won't have enough fuel to get us out again. Remember, we only had enough for a short journey!" Parijh called up to him where he was working on the steering gear.

"Yit take us! I hadn't thought of that," cried Sojan. "But there's nothing we can do until this steering is fixed. Work as fast as possible Andel or we'll be stranded here!"

But repairing the steering wires and readjusting the rudder, especially sitting in the rigging with only a flimsy safety line between you and oblivion, isn't easy and it took Sojan and Andel several hours before the motors could be started up again.

"There's not enough fuel to make it back to Hatnor," Sojan said. "But if we're lucky we'll make a civilised country on the Shortani coast!"

Now there was nothing they could do but hope and the men relaxed, watching the wonderful scenery beneath them and speculating on what kind of men, if any, lived there.

Red, who played a Zylorian instrument called a rinfrt-a kind of eight-stringed guitar, sang them a song, based on an old legend about these parts. The first verse went something like this:

"There's many a tale that has been told Of Phek the traveller, strong and bold! But the strangest one I've ever heard- Is when he caught a shifla bird."

"What's a shifla bird?" enquired Andel curiously.

"Oh, it's supposed to be as big as an airship and looks like a great lizard."
His companions were amused at this story, and all but Sojan, who was looking over towards the West, laughed.

"Don't worry too much," said Sojan calmly, "but is that anything like your shifla bird?"

And there, rising slowly from the forest, was the largest animal any of the adventurers had ever seen. Earth men would call it a dragon if they saw it. Its great reptilian jaws were agape and its huge bat-wings drove it along at incredible speed.

"It seems there was some truth in the legend," muttered Red, licking dry lips and automatically fingering his pistol at his belt.

"There's always some truth in legends," said Sojan, "however incredible."

The thing was almost upon them now, obviously taking their cruiser for some kind of rival. It was as big as their cruiser although its body was about half the size whilst its wings made up the rest of its bulk. It was a kind of blueish grey, its great mouth a gash of crimson in its head whilst wicked eyes gleamed from their sockets making it look like some supernatural demon from the Zylorian "Halls of the Dead"

"Drop, Sojan, drop!" cried Nornos Rique as the men stood for a moment paralysed at this sight of something which they attributed only to the story scrolls of children.

Sojan whirled, rushed over to the controls and pushed several levers which opened valves in their gas-bag and caused the ship to lose height quickly.

The shifla swooped low overhead, barely missing them and causing them to duck automatically. Suddenly there came a crashing of branches, the ripping of fabric and the harsh snap of breaking wood. The ship had crashed into the forest. The men had been so busy trying to escape from the danger above them that they had forgotten the forest beneath them.

Sojan lifted his arm to shield his face and flung himself backwards as a branch speared through the
ship as if it were a fish and nearly speared him at the same time. Eventually the noise stopped and, although the ship was swaying dangerously and threatening to fall apart any moment, sending the men to destruction, Sojan and his friends found that they had only bruises and scratches.

Sojan's barbarian instincts came to the rescue. Cat-footed as ever he clambered out of the wreckage on to the branch which had almost killed him.

"Quick," he yelled, "after me!"

His friends followed him quickly, Parijh panting with the effort. They moved cautiously along the branch and finally reached the trunk of the tree. Down they clambered, easily now for the tree was full of strong branches and it was only a drop of four or five feet to the ground.

Sojan looked up to where the airship dangled, its great gasbag deflated, the gondola smashed and torn.

"When that falls," he said, "we'd better be some distance away for it's likely that the engine will explode."

"There go our supplies and rifles and ammunition," said Nornos Rique quietly.

"We've got our lives—for the present at least," Sojan reminded him. "We'll have to head steadily Northwards and hope that we don't strike a mountain range. If we are lucky we can follow a river across a plain. Several plains adjoin civilised or semi-civilised territories don't they, Parijh?"

"One of them runs into my own country of Uffjir, Sojan, but there's one chance in fifty of making it!"

"Then it looks as if we'll have to chance it, Parijh," Sojan replied slowly, looking over towards the East. "But at least we shall be able to ride. There-see?"

They looked in the direction in which he was pointing. About a mile away, a herd of myats grazed placidly.

"Fan out—we should catch them easily if we
organise properly," Sojan called.

Slowly, so that they would not disturb the animals, Sojan and his friends closed in on the myats. Once trapped they were easily caught for, unlike most animals used as beasts of burden, myats were bred originally for the sole purpose of carrying man.

Now that they were mounted, the friends made good time in the direction in which they were headed. Some days later Sojan caught sight of a strange gleam in the distance—as if the sun was glancing off a highly polished surface.

"Head in that direction," he called to his companions. "There seems to be a building of some kind over there!"

And sure enough, it was a building. A great glinting domed construction, rising hundreds of feet, so it seemed, into the air. It was built of a similar stone to marble—but what was it? And why was it standing alone in such a savage wilderness and (this troubled the companions more than anything) were there men using it now?

"The only way to find out who or what is in there is to go nearer," said Andel.

"You're right," agreed Sojan. "Let's go!"

They forced their steeds into a quick trot.

They dismounted silently and made their way cautiously to the wide entrance of the place, which seemed to be unguarded.

There were windows high above them, seeming to be set in rooms situated at different levels in the building. Part of the roof was flat but most of it rose in a magnificent dome. Although there were no signs of corrosion at all, the men got the impression that the building was centuries old.

"There seem to be no stairs in the place," mused Sojan, looking around him at the gleaming marble halls which they had entered. To his left were two sheets of shining metal, seemingly set into the walls for no reason. To his right was an archway leading
into a room just as bare as the one in which they now stood.

"Wonder what these are?" Red said, brushing his hand across one of the metal sheets.

Instantly there was a faint hum and the sheet of metal disappeared upwards, revealing a small-was it a cupboard?

Red stepped warily into the alcove, sword in hand. At once, the sheet of metal hummed downwards behind him.

"By Yit. He's trapped!" cried Sojan.

He brushed his own hand across the metal, but nothing happened. For several minutes he tried to open the metal door but it seemed impossible. How Red had done it, they could not tell.

Suddenly from the outside came a yell.

Rushing into the sunlight they looked up-and there was Red, looking very cheerful, grinning down on them-from a window of the tenth storey, the one nearest the roof.

"How did you get up there?" called Nornos Rique.

"The 'cupboard' took me up! It's a kind of moving box which lifts you up to any storey you wish. Though I had to go all the way up. There were lots of buttons to press, but I dare not press any of them. After I'd got out, the doors closed again. I tried to get back in but the doors at that end wouldn't move. It looks as if I'm stuck here for life."

He didn't look as if he was particularly worried about the prospect.

Comprehending, Sojan rushed back into the great hall and again passed his hand over the metal "door." It hummed upwards. He didn't step in immediately but waited for his friends to join him.

"The ones who built this place must have been wonderful engineers," remarked Sojan. "And by the way, I recognised the language in which the directions for the operation of that thing were written-it's
old Kifinian!

"What?" exclaimed Parijh. "You mean that the ancestors of the Kifinians built this?"

"Obviously. Otherwise how do you explain the language?"

"From what you learned at the Temple of Rhan, Sojan," mused Nornos Rique, "the ancestors of the entire planet, so far as human beings like ourselves are concerned, came from another planet thousands of years ago—perhaps this was built before the race spread and degenerated. But what could it be?"

"I think I know," answered Sojan. "Notice how the whole area around the building is entirely treeless—a flat plain—a few shrubs, now, and other vegetation, but for the most part flat. This place was a landing field for airships of some kind. We have, as you know, similar landing fields all over the civilised parts of Zylor. This place was a control station probably."

Suddenly Red who had been standing by the window called to his friends.

"Look, down there!" he yelled. "Savages, hundreds of them!"

Below them swarmed a silent mass of strange near-human creatures. They all carried spears and broad-bladed swords. They were covered in short, matted hair and had long tails curling behind them.

"We seem to have violated taboo ground, judging by their actions," said Parijh who knew the people better than the rest, for his race occasionally traded with them. "They won't enter themselves, but they will wait until we come out—as come out we must, for food."

"The best thing we can do," said Andel, "is to look around this place and see if there is any other way out."

"Good idea," agreed Sojan, "if you see any more of those metal plates, try to open them."
They split up and each explored a certain section of the floor. Soon they heard Andel call from the centre of the building. Rushing to the room from which he had called they were astounded to see a large, opened panel. This one revealed a kind of bridge spanning a drop which must have gone right down to the foundations of the building. The bridge led to a huge, streamlined shell of gleaming metal fitted with triangular fins.

They stepped on to the bridge and moved single file across it until they reached a door. Scowling faintly, Sojan deciphered the ancient hieroglyphics on it.

"Here we are," he said, pressing a button. "To Open." And open it did.

"It's obviously an airship of some kind," said Andel, who was the most mechanically minded of the five. "Probably a ship similar to the ones in which our ancestors came to this planet."

"You mean an airship capable of travelling-through space?" said Sojan.

"Perhaps," said Andel, "but also travelling from continent to continent probably. If only we knew how to operate it!"

They finally managed to find the control room of the ship. All around them were tiers of dials and instruments. Working quickly, now that the script was becoming more familiar to him, Sojan deciphered most of the captions on the instruments. Set on the main control panel were levers marked, "Automatic, Emergency, Poltoon, Automatic, Emergency, Jhar", etc. The names were those of continents.

"We can't stay here all the time," said Sojan. "If we stay we will starve to death, if we go outside we die, we might as well risk it." So saying, and without waiting for his friends' advice he pulled the lever marked Poltoon and stood back.

There came a gentle hum as the door through which they had entered closed. Another hum grew steadily louder and the entire roof of the building opened out letting in the sunlight. Then a hiss and a
rumble like thunder and Sojan and his companions were thrown to the floor. Still the rumble increased until blackness overcame them and they lost consciousness.

Sojan was the first to recover. Looking through the forward porthole he saw a sight which to him was terrifying. The velvet blackness of outer space, stars set like diamonds in its ebony beauty.

There was another rumble from the depths of the ship. With animal tenacity he sought to cling to consciousness. But it was no good. He collapsed once more on the floor of the ship.

He awoke a second time to see a blue sky above him and green vegetation beneath him. His friends rose on shaky legs.

"We're not much better off, it seems," grinned Sojan-cheerful now. "We're in the Poltoonian Wilderness. The nearest civilised land is Tigurn. See over there are the remains of a port similar to the one on the Shortani plain."

He pulled another lever. Immediately the port-holes disappeared and they had the sensation of moving downwards at great velocity. A high pitched whine and they stopped. A panel slid open and a small bridge moved outwards over a drop of some five feet above the ground.

"There was probably a landing stage at this point," said Sojan with the air of an ancient professor delivering a lecture. "Anyway," he laughed, "we can drop the last few feet."

When they reached the ground they stood back.

Then the faint purr of machinery and the doors closed. Another sound, not quite so smooth-the chug-chug of an airship motor. The companions turned and saw several large airships of standard pattern circling above them. They flew the banner of Pelira, a country which had allegiance to Hatnor. Flying low, the captain of the airship inspected them, saw that they were not the strange monsters he had expected and landed his craft lightly fifty feet away.
from them. They ran towards it.

The look of astonishment on the captain's face was ludicrous. He immediately recognised the companions who, since their conquest of the priest-rulers of Rhan had become national heroes.

"What-what- ?" was all he could get out at first.

"How're you fixed for fuel, friend?" laughed Sojan.

"We-we've got a full tank, sir, but how . . . ?"

"Then head for Hatnor," grinned the adventurer.
"We'll explain on the way."

11. The Sons of the Snake-God

"WHO SEEKS to set foot in Dhar-Im-Jak?"

A harsh voice rang across the harbour to the merchantman Kintonian Trader, which ran at anchor there.

The captain cupped his hands into a megaphone and roared back at the soldier.

"Sojan Shieldbearer, late of the court of Nornos Kad in Hatnor, mercenary swordsman! Seeking employment!"

"I've heard of him. Very well, we need good sword arms in Dhar-Im-Jak, tell him he may land!"

Traani, captain of the Trader, called down to Sojan who sat sprawled in his cabin.

"They say you can land, Sojan!"

"Right, I'll get my gear together."

Ten minutes later, a tall figure stepped on to the deck of the ship. His long fair hair was held back from his eyes by a fillet of metal, his dark blue eyes had a strange, humorous glint in them. Over a jerkin of green silk was flung a heavy cloak of yellow, his blue breeches were tucked into leather boots. Upon his back was slung a long and powerful air rifle, on his left arm he carried a round shield. From a belt around his waist were hung a long vilthor and a pistol holster. Sojan the Swordsman was looking
for work.

Later that day, in an inn near the city centre, Sojan met the man to whom he had been directed when he had told the authorities of the harbour what kind of employment he was seeking.

"You're looking for employment in the ranks of the regular military, I hear? What qualifications do you have?" he said.

"I was commander of the Armies of Imperial Hatnor for nearly a year. In that time I succeeded in stopping a rising in Veronlam, a similar rising in Asno, I organised the Poltoonian barbarians when Nornos Kad was deposed and restored him to his throne. I and four others were instrumental in utterly destroying the would-be conquerors of Zylor—the Rhanian Theocracy. I have been involved in several minor border wars, but of late things have quietened down and I thought that I would try my luck somewhere else. I heard of the impending war between the city states of Dhar-Im-Jak and Forsh-Mai and decided that I would like to take part."

"I have heard of you, Sojan. Your remark about Rhan jogged my memory. I feel that you would be a great asset to us. We need more professional soldiers of your calibre. As you know, both Dhar-Im-Jak and Forsh-Mai have been on friendly terms for hundreds of years, neither of us had any use for regular armies. Then about a year ago this new religious cult took over the ruling of Forsh-Mai and quickly formed an army of soldiers, spies, trouble-makers and all kinds of undercover men. It was only recently that our own spies brought us the news that, as we suspected, Forsh-Mai was preparing to march into Dhar-Im-Jak and take over our republic."

"Have you any idea when they intend to attack?"

"In two weeks time, no less, I'm sure."

"Then we must work fast. I would be grateful to know what kind of command you intend giving me?"

"I shall have to discuss that with my superiors. I will naturally let you know as soon as possible."
Edek rose, downed the last of his drink and, with a short nod, left the inn. Just as Sojan was rising, there came a scream from the alley outside. Sword out, he rushed for the door to see a girl struggling in the grip of several burly fighting men. They were obviously bent on kidnapping her and Sojan lost no time in engaging the nearest hireling. The man was an expert swordsman, his thrusts were well timed and it was all Sojan could do, at first, to parry them. The man's companions were still holding the girl who seemed to be making no attempt to get free. The clash of steel was music to him and a grim fighting smile appeared on his lips. Suddenly he felt a hard blow on the back of his head and the lights went out.

He regained consciousness in a small room, barred on both door and windows. Standing over him were two men; one held a water jug in his hand with which he was dousing Sojan.

"So our hard-headed mercenary is at last awake; I see!" The tone was gloating. The man's face did not belie the impression his voice gave. His thick black locks and beard were curled and oiled.

Upon his fingers were heavy rings, his nails were tinted with gold. Sojan looked at him in disgust. The bejewelled fop signalled to his companion to throw some more water at Sojan. Instantly Sojan rose and knocked the jug flying across the small cell.

"If your manners were as fine as the silks you wear, my friend, I should take you for some sort of man!"

The fop's face twisted for a moment and he half raised his hand. Then he smiled and dropped the hand to his side.

"We'll allow the wolf some time in which to cool the heat of his temper as water seems to be no use," he murmured. "Come Yuckof, let us leave this place—it smells!"

Sojan signalled to the guard who was locking the door.
"What place is this, friend?"

"You're in the Castle of Yerjhi, swordsman, we caught you nicely didn't we? That ruse in getting a girl to pretend that she was being captured was Lord Yerjhi's idea. He's a clever one. You'd be better off to be a little more civil to him, he is thinking of employing you."

Several hours later, Yerjhi returned with the same escort.

"Now, Sojan," he smiled, "I can understand your annoyance at being locked up in this place-but it was the only way in which we could--um--convince you of our sincerity when we offer you fifty thousand derkas to take command of our armies and lead them to glorious victory for the State of Forsh-Mai. We, the Sons of the Snake, will conquer all. Everything will be yours. What say you man, is that not a fair proposition?"

"Aye, it's fair," Sojan's eyes narrowed. He decided to bluff for a while. "Fifty thousand you say?"

"That and any spoils you can take for yourself when we loot Dhar-Im-Jak!"

"But what's this 'Sons of the Snake' you mention? Do I have to join some secret society to wield a sword for fifty thousand derkas?"

"That is a necessary part of our offer, Sojan. We are, after all, doing this for the glory of Rij, the Snake, Lord of the World and the After World, Master of Darkness, Ruler of the ..."

"Yes, yes, we'll forget that for a moment. What does it involve?"

"First a meeting of all the major disciples, myself, the General-in-Command (who will take orders from you while the conquest is in progress), my major-domo, the two priests who invent-hmm-who spread the Truth of the Snake."

"But why this mumbo-jumbo-if you want to conquer your enemy, why not just do it? I can't understand what you're trying to do."
"Then briefly I will explain. The two cities have been at peace for hundreds of years. Men and women from the states have intermingled with each other, intermarried. Apart from the names and boundaries, we are practically the same people. We need an excuse, man, don't you see? We can't send a man to march against his brother or even son unless he thinks that there is something worth fighting for. This, my dear Sojan, is a-hmm-Holy war. Quite legitimate. We are-how shall I put it?-spreading the Word of the Snake God with the Sword of Justice! Part of our indoctrination campaign, actually, that last bit."

"Right! I'll join." Sojan had hit on a daring plan. "When do I become an initiate?"

An hour later, Sojan stood in a darkened room. In front of him was a long table and at it sat men dad in robes decorated with serpents.

"Let the ceremony begin," he intoned.

Now was the time to act. They had given Sojan back his sword along with his other equipment and he now drew it. With the blade humming he downed the two nearest men. Three left, three wary men and led by one who had been described as the finest swordsman in Shortani.

Luckily only two of the men were swordsmen-the other was almost helpless. In the fore Yerjhi, cowl flung back and his face a mask of hate.

"Trick me would you," he hissed. "We'll show you what we do to dogs who try to turn on Yerjhi!"

Sojan felt a lancing pain go through him and he felt the warm blood as it trickled down his left arm. With renewed energy he launched himself at Yerjhi who was taken off guard for a moment. Clean steel pierced a tainted heart and the man toppled backwards with a short death-scream.

With the fake "Sons of the Snake God" exposed for what they were, what amounted to civil war was averted and the two cities resumed their friendly relations. Once again Sojan had done a major service for a cause in which he believed.
12. The Devil Hunters of Norj

THE LAST rays of Zylor's second sun were just wan-
ing when Sojan reined his myat and stared down
into the green valley below.

He glanced at the crude map before him.

"This must be the Valley of Norj. It seems to be
unexplored according to the map. Strange that no
one has ventured into it."

Strange it was; for, even in the dusk, Sojan could
see that the valley was lush and green. A river
wound through it and brightly plumed birds sang
from the branches of tall trees. A seeming paradise.

"It will make an excellent place to camp," thought
the mercenary as he guided his mount downwards.

Later that night, he made his camp in a small
natural clearing in the forest. His myat was tethered
nearby and his campfire glowed cheerily. The night
was warm and full of forest smells.

After eating his meal, Sojan climbed between his
blankets and was soon asleep.

It was just after midnight when the strange noises
awakened the warrior.

There they were again-a peculiar hissing screech
and the pounding of hooves; the cries of-men, and
the vicious cracks of whips.

Sojan raised himself on one elbow, hand reaching
for his sword. The myat stirred uneasily and swished
its great tail from side to side.

The noises drew nearer and then subsided as they
fell away towards the West of the valley.

Sojan did not sleep any more that night but kept a
watchful eye open. The rest of the night was un-
eventful and in the morning, Sojan cooked himself a
big meal which was meant to last him the day, for
he intended to investigate the noises he had heard
the night before.
Riding slowly, with eyes always scanning the ground, Sojan soon found the tracks that the inhabitants of the valley had made. There were two distinct sets of tracks. One similar to those of a myat although with subtle differences, seemingly lighter. The others were entirely unfamiliar. Three-toed tracks like, and yet unlike, those of a bird—and considerably larger. The beast that had made them as obviously a quadruped of some kind, but other than that Sojan could not tell what kind of animal had made them—there were fourlegged birds he could think of—and none of these he had heard about were as large as this.

There had been at least ten riders, and it seemed that they had been chasing one or perhaps two of these bird-beasts. Probably some kind of hunt, thought Sojan, yet what kind of men were they who hunted at the dead of night?

Sojan rode on, following the tracks in the hope that he would find some clue to the mystery. He came across a steep inclination, the tracks ended here in a flurry of mud and-blood. Then the tracks of the beasts the men had been riding continued, and they had ridden for a short while parallel with the bluff and then forced their animals to ride up it.

Sojan did the same, the beast slipped occasionally and nearly slid back but eventually it reached the top. From there Sojan saw a strange scene.

A battle of some kind was going on between two groups of men. Near a squat black-stoned tower, five men, one mounted, were endeavouring to check a horde of armoured warriors who rushed from the tower. Beasts similar to Sojan's myat but hornless and almost tailless stood waiting.

The mounted man held the tethering reins of the other four animals while he cut at two of the armoured men with a battleaxe held in his right hand.

Although the mounted man was clad in armour, the other four were dressed only in jerkins of coloured cloth and divided kilts of leather. They were unshod and carried no sheaths for the weapons, mainly swords, with which they defended themselves. It seemed to Sojan that they were attempting to escape
from the armoured warriors, one of whom, dressed more richly, and darker than the other, stood in the rear and urged them on in a language which was unfamiliar, yet strangely familiar, to Sojan's ears.

But there was no time to ponder over this now; the men needed help and Sojan, in a more curious than chivalrous mood, intended to aid them and perhaps find some answer to the mystery.

His long spear was out, his shield up and he forced the myat into a wild gallop down the hill, screaming to his gods in a barbarian war-shout.

His savage thrust caught the first of the armoured warriors in the throat and stayed there, the spear jerking like a tufted reed in a storm. His sword screamed from its scabbard as he pushed deeper into the melee of cursing men.

Taking this chance of escape while the enemy were still confused, the other men quickly mounted their beasts. Sojan was still in the thick of it, sword lashing everywhere and dealing death with every stroke. One of the riders looked back, saw the mercenary still engaged and spurred his own beast back to where Sojan fought.

Grinning his thanks to Sojan he covered the mercenary's retreat with his own slim blade then followed.

Howling, the warriors attempted to pursue on foot, were brought back by their leader's frantic cries and scrambled round the back of the building.

The armoured rider called to Sojan in the familiar, yet unintelligible tongue, and pointed towards the East. Sojan understood and turned his myat in that direction. Behind them their pursuers were whipping their steeds in an effort to overtake them.

Deep into the forest they rode, leaving their enemies far behind. For perhaps three hours they detoured until they reached the end of the valley where a sheer cliff rose. Brushing aside some shrubbery, the armoured man disclosed an opening in the base of the cliff.

Ducking their heads, the six rode through, the last
man replacing the camouflage.

The passage ended in several connecting caves and it was in one of these that they stabled their mounts and continued on foot to the cave at the far end. Here they slumped into chairs, grinning with relief at their escape.

The leader, the man in armour began to speak to Sojan who stood bewilderedly trying to understand the language in which they questioned him. Vaguely he began to realise what it was—it was his own tongue, yet so altered as to be scarcely recognisable. In an hour he could understand most of their speech and in two he was telling them how he had come to the Valley of Norj.

"But I am curious to find out who you are—and why men hunt giant four-legged birds at midnight," he said. "Who were the men from whom you escaped?"

"It is a long story to explain in a few words," said Jarg, the leader, "but I will first attempt to tell you a little of the political situation here, in Norj.

"There are two distinct races living here—men like ourselves—and another race whom I scarcely like to define as 'men'. Ages ago our people reached this valley after a long sea voyage and trek across Shortani. We came to this valley and settled in it and it was not for some time that we learned that another people lived at the far end of the valley. A race of grim, black-haired and black-eyed men, who hunted at night with steeltipped flails and who remained in their castles during the day. They did not trouble us at first and eventually we became used to the hunts, even though they sometimes passed through our fields and destroyed our crops. We were secure, we thought, in the valley and there was no man curious enough to venture too near the black-stoned castles of the Cergii.

"But soon men and women—even children—of our people began to disappear and the hunts became more frequent for the Cergii had found a new sport—a different quarry to the Devil-birds which they breed and release at night to hunt with their
whips. It was then that the mangled bodies of our tribesmen began to be found-lashed to death.

"They were capturing our people-and hunting them! So it was that we declared war upon these beasts, these whom we had never harmed nor attempted to harm.

"Over the years traitors to our race went over to the enemy and became their warriors-you saw some of them today-our once great race dwindled-and became fugitives, living in caves and-if captured-the quarry of the Hunters of Norj. Still we carry on warfare with them-but it is hit and run fighting at best. The four you see here were captured recently and it was more by luck than anything that I managed to bribe a guard to release them. I came last night with weapons and myats-you see that the breed had changed as has our speech. Unfortunately the timing was imperfect and the first sun arose before we could make good our escape. We were seen and would all be dead or captured had it not been for you."

"There must be some way to defeat them!" cried Sojan. "And if there is a way-I swear that I will find it!"

Sojan and the fighting men of Norj, some sixty in all, stood in the main cave, waiting for nightfall.

Plans of Sojan's attempt to overcome the Cergii, who hunted men with steel-tipped flails, had been discussed and Sojan and Jarg, the leader, had reached a decision.

The Cergii were few, it seemed, about ten in number. They were immortal, or at least their life-spans were incredibly long and the race had gradually dwindled to ten evil sorcerer-warriors whose only pleasure was the midnight hunts.

At dusk, Sojan rose, went over the final plan with his friends, and left, heading Eastwards towards the castles of the Cergii-some twenty in all, mostly in an advanced state of decay-only one which housed the Cergii and their Norjian slaves and hirelings.

The tiny Zylorian moons gave scant light and Sojan
found it difficult picking his way through the rubble of the ruined outbuildings.

There came a faint scuffling behind him; a sound which only a barbarian's senses could have heard.

Sojan ignored it and carried on.

Even when the scuffling came nearer he ignored it. The sudden blow on the back of his head was impossible to ignore, however, and a blind sense of survival set him wheeling round, hand groping for his sword hilt before blackness, deeper than night swam in front of his eyes and he lost consciousness.

He awoke in a damp-smelling cell, only lit by torchlight which filtered through a tiny grille in the wall. The cell was obviously on a corner for the large barred door was not in the same wall as the grille.

Peering through this door was an unkempt warrior clad in dirty armour and holding a spear.

He glared short-sightedly at the mercenary with half-mad eyes. His mouth gaped pen showing bad teeth and he chuckled loudly.

"You're the next game for the Hunters of Cergii," he cackled. "Oh! What a feast the beasts will have tonight."

Sojan ignored these words, turned over and attempted to ease the pain in his aching head.

After many hours in which he attempted to get some rest, Sojan was jabbed roughly awake by the guard's spear butt.

"What is it now?" he enquired as he raised himself to his feet and dusted off the straw in which he'd been sleeping.

"Heh, heh!" cackled the man. "It's almost midnight-time for one of our little hunts!"

Sojan became tense. He had a plan based on the knowledge that if he was captured he would most certainly be forced to partake in one of the hunts of the Cergii-as the quarry.
"Very well," he said, trying to sound as frightened as possible.

The courtyard was dark and gloomy, one moon showing through a gap in the ruins. The strange smell of an unknown animal came to Sojan's nostrils and he gathered that these were the "hounds" of the Cergii that Jarg had told him about.

He heard the stamping of the myats' hooves and the jingle of harness and, as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, made out the vague outlines of tall mounted men.

"Is the quarry ready?" called out a voice as dead and cold as the ruins around them.

"Yes, Master, he is here!"

"Then tell him that he will be given quarter of an hour's start-then we will be upon his scent!" the voice went on.

The guards stood aside and Sojan was off-along a route already planned nights ago. His plan was a daring one and one which called for a great deal of courage. He was acting as a human snares for the Hunters.

Down a narrow forest trail he ran, the trees and grasses rustling in the cold night breeze, the sound of small animals calling to each other and the occasional scream as a larger animal made its kill.

The air in his lungs seemed to force itself out as he ran faster and faster. The time was getting short and he had several more minutes yet until he could reach the agreed spot.

Sounds-not the sounds of the forest, but more ominous-began to reach his ears. The sounds of cracking whips and thundering hooves as the Hunters and their silent hounds rode in pursuit.

Faster and faster he ran keeping his eyes open for the landmark which would afford him comparative safety.

At last it came into sight, just as the cracking of
whips and pounding hooves seemed to be on top of him. Past the tall rock he ran, into a tiny gorge flanked on each side by towering rock walls.

Up the side of the cliff he scrambled as the Hunters entered the gorge. Then:

"Now!" roared Sojan, and as he did so sixty death-tipped arrows flew down and buried themselves in the bodies of many of the Cergii.

Their curses and frantic screams were music to Sojan and his friends as they fitted new arrows and let fly at the sounds.

Sojan leapt down the rocks again, a long sword in his right hand.

A shadowy rider loomed out of the darkness and an evil face, white teeth flashing in a grin of triumph, aimed a blow at Sojan with his own blade.

Sojan cut upwards, catching the rider in the leg. He screamed and tumbled off his steed, putting it between himself and Sojan.

He came upright, limping rapidly in the mercenary's direction. Sojan ducked another savage cut and parried it. Down lunged his opponent's sword attempting to wound Sojan's sword-arm. He again parried the stroke and counterthrust towards the man's chest.

Following up this move with a thrust to the heart, the mercenary ended the evil hunter's life.

Most of the Cergii were now either dead or mortally wounded and it did not take Sojan and his friends long to finish off the job they had started.

"Now for their hirelings!" yelled Sojan, goading his myat in the direction from which they had come; his sword dripping red in the moonlight, his hair tousled and a wildness in his eyes.

The sixty riders thundered down the narrow forest trail towards the castles of the dead Cergii, Sojan at their head, voicing a battle-cry which had been shouted at a dozen great victories for the men whom
Sojan had led.

Straight into the courtyard they swarmed, catching the soldiers entirely unawares.

Dismounting, they crashed open the doors of the castle and poured in.

"Guard the doors!" yelled Sojan. "And all other exits—we'll exterminate every traitor in the place!"

His first call was in the dungeons—for there he knew he would find the man who had been his jailer during the previous day.

The half-crazed warrior cringed when he saw Sojan enter sword in hand. But one look at the tall mercenary told him that he could expect no mercy.

Drooling with fear he yanked his own sword from its scabbard and swung a blow at Sojan which would have cut him in two had it not been deflected by Sojan's blade.

Coolly Sojan fought while his opponent became more and more desperate.

Slowly the warrior was forced back as Sojan's relentless sword drove him nearer and nearer the wall.

His madness gave him immense stamina and gradually he began to fight with more skill.

"Heh, heh!" he cackled, "you will soon die man! Think not that you escaped death when you escaped the Cergii!"

Sojan smiled a grim smile and said nothing.

Suddenly the maddened warrior wrenched a spear from the wall and hurled it at Sojan. It plunked heavily into his left arm causing him to gasp with pain.

Then his eyes hardened and the warrior read his fate in them.

"You'll die for that," said Sojan calmly.

Almost immediately the warrior went down before a blurring network of steel and died with an
inch of steel in his throat.

Sojan returned to the main hall of the castle where his friends were finishing off the rest of the Cergii's warriors.

"Well," he laughed cheerfully, "I must be off!"

Jarg turned. He saw the wound inflicted by the madman's spear.

"You can't ride in that state, Sojan!" he cried.

"Oh it will heal," Sojan smiled. "It is only a superficial cut! But you have work to do, restoring your farms now that the Cergii are vanquished. I should like to stay—but this is an interesting continent with lots to see. If I hurry I might be able to see it all before I die!"

With that he strode from the room, mounted his myat and cantered off, up the steep track which led out of the valley of Norj.

"There goes a brave man!" murmured Jarg as he watched him disappear over the hill-top.

JERRY CORNELIUS
AND CO.

New Worlds—
Jerry Cornelius

NEW WORLDS began as a magazine founded by SF enthusiasts in the middle 1940s. A consortium published the first few issues. This consortium consisted of, among others, Bill Temple, Ted Carnell, Leslie Flood, John Wyndham, Frank Arnold and Steve Frances. Later Maclarens took it over (though the company remained independent as Nova Publications Ltd.), and published it for the best part of its career with Ted Carnell as editor. Ted published the first Ballard stories and the work of then-starting authors like Brunner, Aldiss, Roberts, etc. In 1964 the circulations of the magazines (Science Fantasy was also edited by Ted) were very low and Maclarens decided to fold the titles. David Warburton of Roberts and Vinter Ltd., heard they were folding and decided to buy them. Ted wanted to edit his new anthology
series, New Writings in SF, and so recommended me as editor. Warburton wanted two editors (wisely), one for each of the magazines. I chose New Worlds and Kyril Bonfiglioli became editor of Science Fantasy. My first issue, in a paperback-style format, but a magazine in all other respects, appeared for May-June 1964 (number 142). We ran as a bi-monthly for a short time and then went monthly with issue 146. Many people expected me to opt for the editorship of Science Fantasy, since most of my work had previously appeared in that magazine, but in fact I was interested in broadening the possibilities of the SF idiom and New Worlds, being a much more open title, seemed the best place to do it. My first editorial stated pretty much the policy I have followed ever since, though perhaps I'm a little more sophisticated now. Also I was naive in thinking there were a lot of authors who shared the sense of frustration which Ballard and I had felt for some years. I tried to find good young authors and follow what one might call a policy of enlightened conservatism-publishing the best of the old and the best of the new. There were a lot of outcries when we started dealing with explicit sex (never an important issue to us) and so on, also when the first Ballard fragmented narratives began to appear with The Atrocity Exhibition, also with the rather astringent criticism of "Golden Age" masters of SF, etc., but gradually readers began to realise that there was value in the new stuff and it didn't take long before they were criticising the newer stuff in its own terms. We were crusading but we weren't thinking in terms of tabu-breaking and so on, because the restrictions here had never been as marked as they were in the US. We were seriously attempting to find new ways of dealing with new subject matter and we always placed substance before style. People have since confused our "revolution" with a stylistic revolution, but our principal aim was concerned with substance and structure—it had little to do with what Judy Merril and Harlan Ellison, for instance, later came to term the "new wave" in US SF. We were specifically out to perpetuate, if you like, the European moral tradition in literature. We hardly "rejected" the US pulp tradition, because it had never much influenced us anyway. Some of the writers, indeed, were quite conservative in their tastes and styles—Disch, for instance, who became closely
associated with the magazine (and still is). While having no prejudice against it (and admiring much of it) we had little in common with the aims apparently represented in the work of the newer (or re-generated) US writers like Ellison, Delany, Zelazny, Lafferty or Silverberg. We also, of course, published most of those writers at some stage, and were pleased to do so, because we always strove for a broad representation of the best work of its kind. I feel we published some of the best work done by them—Zelazny's *For A Breath I Tarry* (later reprinted, I think, in *Amazing*) and several others: Ellison's *Boy and His Dog*, Delany's *Time Considered as a Helix*, etc. But our main raison d'être became the publishing of what some would call "experimental" work and when, in 1967, Roberts and Vinter suffered severe financial set-backs (not over the SF magazines), Brian Aldiss was responsible for suggesting to the Arts Council (responsible for encouraging and maintaining the arts; a government-financed agency) that they help us. Thanks largely to the enthusiasm of Angus Wilson, then chairman of the Council, and letters from various distinguished critics and academics (rallied by Brian) we received an award which, while not enough to support us in any way-save as a "little magazine"—gave us the moral support we needed and I became part-publisher, putting my own money into the magazine and going to the large, "glossy" format we then adopted. Unfortunately the two business partners I had to begin with showed themselves over-cautious and pulled out so that the magazine schedules were thrown into confusion. During 1967-8 we followed an erratic schedule culminating in the banning of two issues by the two major British distributors and the banning of the magazine in South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, etc. All of these areas were fairly crucial to us and if it hadn't been for advertising we should have had to fold. Also the newspapers came out in our favour and the ban was technically lifted. It was at this time that a Question was asked in the House of Commons about public money being spent on a "pornographic" magazine and it seemed for a while that we would lose the grant. This blew over and I became sole publisher of the magazine. Foolishly, I didn't form a company to publish the magazine, so that I became personally responsible for the debts. From 1968 to 1971 I published *New Worlds*. In 1970 it emerged that
the distributors had been receiving large quantities of New Worlds and had deliberately refrained from distributing them without telling us because they wanted to avoid any further newspaper publicity. Effectively we lost the income on six months' issues and I suddenly found myself owing over £3000, which I didn't have. This was at a time when, thanks particularly to Charles Platt who was editing the magazine and running the business affairs, New Worlds had become viable. I was forced to wind New Worlds up, publishing a last "Subscription Only" issue (No. 201) in 1971, as an independent company. Tom Dardis of Berkley expressed an interest in doing New Worlds as a Quarterly and Anthony Cheetham was very enthusiastic about doing it through Sphere in this country, so I did four issues for Berkley who then decided that sales didn't merit their continuing the series. I decided, though the Sphere sales were on the increase, to cut back to two issues a year for the time being, since the Sphere advance alone wasn't sufficient to cover what I wanted to do and we're still partially financing the British editions through subsidiary income derived, for instance, from my editing fees for the Best of New Worlds series and so on. And, of course, I'm still paying off the creditors for the large size issues.

The daily routine? It varied, depending on who was publishing the magazine or, for that matter, who was editing it, since I didn't, of course, edit it for the whole time. The early days were fairly quiet, with just Lang Jones and myself doing the whole thing from an office I had in Southwark. Later I began to work from home, going into the publisher's office about once a week, and later still Charles Platt joined the staff as art editor and much improved the appearance of the paperback size issues. That period, too, was the only time I was actually getting paid to do it! By and large I tend to set one or two days aside for reading. Lang Jones is our best copy-editor and he would tend to do that (and still does) after I'd done the rough copy-editing. We never change stories without consultation with the author and the author's viewpoint is always respected. Where we have changes to suggest we tend to Xerox the manuscript, make the suggestions on the Xerox and send them to the author for his or her comments. If the author disagrees we'll discuss alternatives until
we're both satisfied. This extends even to titles. The office always ran on democratic lines, with every editor being encouraged to encourage authors who suited his particular taste. This meant, of course,

that I'd sometimes publish stories I couldn't stand or that I would include stories others didn't like, but we reached a fairly satisfactory compromise ("I'll put this story in I think is brilliant because you're putting in that story you think is brilliant.") I don't believe there's such a thing as objective literary judgement for someone running a magazine and it seemed the best way of ensuring the representation of as many different kinds of writing as possible. The special "New Writers" issues we have done have largely been the work of people like Jim Sallis, Graham Hall, Mike Harrison, Graham Charnock and Charles Platt. Through most of the magazine's career there was always something of a "commune" feel about the day-to-day editing, with authors and staff getting together to discuss specific stories or general policy. The issues about which I am happiest, I suppose, are the first few of the 1967-8 large size issues where my own policies found their strongest expression. To me, these were the best issues—say from 173 to 176 where we got a good balance between science and art features, artwork, good "conventional" fiction and good "experimental" fiction. Particular issues came after that which I particularly liked but not as a "run." I enjoyed doing the special 201st issue (labelled our Special Good Taste Issue and containing a distinctly Victorian feel!). The last thing I can think of to say about the day-to-day running of the magazine was that it filled the minds of a fairly large group of us for a long time—i.e. social life for many of us was centred around the magazine. It dominated our days. A rather heady and hectic love affair in which the magazine could be seen from time to time as either an inspiring mistress or a vampiric femme fatale. Certainly the publishing problems dominated my days and nights for several years.

I think we accomplished a fair amount. Without doubt we altered the attitudes of many publishers towards the newer ideas we were promoting. We encouraged many authors to do their best and/or most interesting work. Many authors, for instance,
claimed that without New Worlds they would have given up writing or that they would have become cynical about their writing or that they wouldn't have put so much work into something. Aldiss, Ballard, Disch, Sladek, Roberts and others have all said, at different times, that New Worlds encouraged them to do their best work. We were responsible for interesting many critics, academics and journalists in what might be called the SF renaissance. I think we achieved an enormous amount. If what we were trying to do has been misinterpreted in America this has largely been because most people received their impressions at second-hand through, say, the Judith Merril Year's Best and England Swings anthologies. Judy did a lot to publicise New Worlds and was a good friend, but her interpretations were often somewhat at odds with our views! New Worlds became a banner in Judy's own crusade-and Judy, after all, started the ball rolling in the US. If the issues became clouded in rhetoric about "new wave speculative fiction" or "The New Thing", it wasn't much to do with us. Harlan Ellison followed Judy with Dangerous Visions and I think it's fair to claim that again, if obliquely, New Worlds supplied the impetus. I think, however, that battles are being fought in the States which have been over in this country for some years-everyone's settled down to doing their own thing. There was never any danger of one idea superceding another but it was necessary to make room for other ideas and that, if nothing else, is what New Worlds achieved. And our influence, if that isn't too pompous a phrase, extended well beyond the SF world in this country, if nowhere else. We know many rock musicians who've claimed that New Worlds gave them the impetus they were looking for, for we know artists, non-SF writers and poets who think the same. A lot of our ideas-and, indeed, our contributors-turned up in the pages of the "alternative" press. We still meet readers of the large size New Worlds who tell us it was the only magazine which gave them any hope or spoke to them in a vocabulary which made sense to them. And we have possibly influenced the vocabulary (both in terms of ideas and language) of SF-broadened its possibilities. Failures? We claimed too much for what we were doing in the early days and are only now beginning to see the results. We never licked the distribution problem—until it was too late—and so never reached as many
readers as we might have done. We failed completely to convince the majority of fans that we felt writers like Heinlein were short-changing them with bad writing and simple-minded notions. We failed to improve the standard of writing in SF, which, in the main, remains abominable. On the other hand we offered an alternative to readers who couldn't face that kind of writing and, of course, we still do.

We've certainly failed to convince the majority of US publishers concerning the merits of typical New Worlds fiction for they plainly prefer to publish the sensationalistic and poorly-conceived SF they have always published— and their preference doesn't appear to be dictated by commercial reasoning. We've failed, perhaps, to produce a large market for the kind of fiction we like best, but we have produced a large enough one to make publishing that fiction a viable proposition (which it wasn't even five years ago). And, by and large, we've failed to get across to most SF fans the seriousness of our intentions, the purpose of our intentions. This again, perhaps, is because our particular point of view has been obscured by interpreters. Certainly New Worlds' policy has little to do with what most US fans would identify as the "SF New Wave".

Which, I suppose, almost brings us to Jerry Cornelius.

Jerry Cornelius began as a version of Elric of Melnibone when, in late 1964, I was casting around for a means of dealing with what I regarded as the "hot" subject matter of my own time—stuff associated with scientific advance, social change, the mythology of the mid-twentieth century. Since Elric was a "myth" character I decided to try to write his first stories in twentieth-century terms. The Final Programme was written, in first draft, in about ten days in January 1965. It began as a kind of rewrite of the first two Elric stories, The Dreaming City and While the Gods Laugh. By doing this I found a style and a form which most suited what I wanted to write about. I was elated. I borrowed as much from the Hammett school of thriller fiction as I borrowed from SF and I think I found my own "voice" as a writer. Influences included Ronald Firbank and, to a minor extent, William Burroughs (two not dissimilar figures in my estimation). I felt, at the time, that I
had at last found a way of marrying "serious" fiction with "popular" fiction and I had always believed that science fiction was the form which could most easily act, as it were, as the ideal environment in which this marriage could take place. (This, incidentally, was the idea which was behind much of the New Worlds policy). SF knew how to cope with much of the subject matter and was a vital and popular form but was largely unable to deal with the traditional and sophisticated moral questions found in the best fiction, largely because its accepted forms had denied any attempt authors might make to incorporate these questions-the form as it stood distorted and simplified the problems. Just as Ballard found his remedy in the form he used for Atrocity Exhibition and the later stories published from 1965 onwards, I felt I'd found my remedy in the form I used in The Final Programme-by using a character who accepted the moral questions without discussing them (the dialogue tends to take for granted the reader's familiarity with the questions and doesn't detail them-doesn't spell them out) and by supplying the reader with a straightforward dynamic narrative which he could enjoy for its own sake. The plot, while being unimportant, was supplied for those who required a plot to keep them reading. Moreover, I prefer, in the main, books with a straightforward plot, too, so I was trying to produce something I'd enjoy reading. I was very pleased with the book and thought that everyone else would enjoy it, too, if only for its ironies and sensations. A couple of British publishers asked to see it and surprised me with their strong reactions-I'd written the book to shock, they said, and I wouldn't get anywhere like that. It hadn't occurred to me that the book would do anything but amuse (if nothing else). I despaired, became cynical, put the book aside. A copy went out automatically to my, then, agents, Scott Meredith. In 1967 the book was bought, enthusiastically, by George Ernsberger, then an editor at Avon. Parts of it had been published in New Worlds in 1965 and 1966 as an experiment in cutting up chunks and putting them in a different order (a mistake, I now think). By this time I had begun what was eventually published as A Cure For Cancer. I had started the book using another character's name and hadn't got very far when I realised that this was effectively a sequel to
the Jerry Cornelius novel. I put what I'd written aside and thought about it all, eventually conceiving the notion of writing a tetralogy of books about Jerry, each one expanding upon the various moral questions raised in The Final Programme. I visited New York in 1967 and told George Ernsberger about my scheme and George, was, again, enthusiastic. Eventually, in 1968, I had a contract from Avon for the remaining three books. By this time The Final Programme had been bought by Allison and Busby who were equally enthusiastic and had also bought Behold the Man in its novel version. They, too, were pleased with the tetralogy idea and guaranteed to publish them in England. It gave me the necessary encouragement to carry on with A Cure For Cancer which took, in all, some three years to write, appearing first as a serial in New Worlds. In 1968, The Final Programme was published, at the time when Jim Sallis had come over to work on New Worlds. Jim read the book and was very enthusiastic about it. When Lang Jones was commissioned to edit the big hardback anthology for Hutchinson, The New SF, he asked me for a story and I decided that I would try to write a Jerry Cornelius story (this was The Peking Junction)-developing some of the techniques I was beginning to feel happy with while working on A Cure For Cancer. Jim Sallis asked me, then, if I had any objection to his writing a Jerry Cornelius story since, in his opinion, the JC stories were a form in themselves. I had none, of course. He wrote Jeremiad, which was published in New Worlds. Taking up part of a theme I'd put into my second JC short, The Delhi Division, he expanded from there and wrote an entirely different story. Taking up part of his theme I wrote it back into Delhi Division, which he'd so far only seen in rough draft. The Delhi Division was the first JC short to appear in New Worlds and was quickly followed by Jeremiad. Once this had happened several others who had enjoyed The Final Programme felt that they'd like to do a story about Jerry, so shortly afterwards there appeared stories by Brian Aldiss, Norman Spinrad, a poem by Lang Jones, and other stories by M. John Harrison, Maxim Jakubowski and one other by me The Tank Trapeze. (Most of these were eventually published in a book called The Nature of the Catastrophe (Hutchinson, 1971). In the meantime I had also begun a comic strip for It, then the leading underground paper in Britain, with Mal
Dean, who had illustrated many of the JC stories. The It strip sent up many of the current obsessions of the underground—the mysticism, the political naivete and so on. We began to alternate, with Mike Harrison and Richard Glyn Jones taking up our themes and us taking up their themes turn by turn. The strip ran for about a year in It as The Adventures of Jerry Cornelius, The English Assassin. Part of the strip was also published in The Nature of the Catastrophe. In our terms we found a cool way of dealing with hot material. The essence of the stories is their irony, their attempts to concentrate as much information as possible into as small a space as possible, their obsession with contemporary imagery, their strong reliance on metaphorical imagery drawn from many disparate sources—pop music, astronomy, physics, cybernetics, etc. They are, ideally, deeply serious in intention. Unfortunately many critics have missed the serious points of the stories, even if they’ve found the stuff entertaining. Sexual ambiguity, for instance, is taken for granted in the JC stories—a fact of life—but critics continue to see that element, among others, as "daring". In this country, at any rate, the stories receive their most intelligent responses from that section of the public most at ease with what's these days called the "alternative" society, was earlier called "beat" and before that called "bohemian"—i.e. people who by and large do take certain things for granted which are regarded as shocking by the average middle-class person. I'm not here suggesting that this is good or bad, but it is a fact. Judy Merril, for instance, regarded The Final Programme as an "evil" book. Other people have expressed similar reactions. I find them almost impossible to understand. Perhaps people will get a better idea of the JC novels when the whole tetralogy is complete. The English Assassin will be out in England this year, after three years in the writing. I don't know when the last book, The Condition of Muzak, will appear—probably in a couple of years, maybe three or four. I'll just have to wait patiently until then. At present, while having reservations about the first two books, I'm very satisfied with Assassin—it's the first book of mine I've been able to proof-read without wincing all the way through. Presumably Holt Reinhardt, who did Cure, will be doing Assassin in the States sometime next year. I haven't had any information
either from Avon or from Holt, as yet. Maybe Final Programme will get its points across better as a film.

The rights have been bought and the script written and it's being produced by the company who did Performance (which has something in common with Final Programme). I heard Jagger turned down the JC part as being too freaky and I don't know if the film ever will be made, but it would be interesting to see how the public reacted to it. I think the JC stories have matured considerably since Final Programme-becoming better written and more complex-and it does disappoint me when people don't enjoy them or find them obscure. I remember the delight I felt at producing a book which I was sure everyone would find at very least entertaining. I was puzzled when some people reacted in a puzzled or even antagonistic way. My own wavelengths changed somewhere at some time. These days, for instance, I can't understand SF-I read the words and they no longer mean anything to me, even when written by a writer I used to enjoy. So I suppose I can appreciate how people feel when they find a JC story they can't focus on. It isn't incidentally, anything to do with radical alterations in life-style on my part. It just happened at some point. Ho hum.

(Letter to reader)

In Lighter Vein

A Note on the Jerry Cornelius Tetralogy

PART of my original intention with the Jerry Cornelius stories was to "liberate" the narrative; to leave it open to the reader's interpretation as much as possible-to involve the reader in such a way as to bring his own imagination into play. The impulse was probably a result of my interest in Brecht-an interest I'd had since the mid-fifties.

Although the structure of the tetralogy is very strict (some might think over-mechanical) the scope for interpretation is hopefully much wider than of a conventional novel. The underlying logic is also very disciplined, particularly in the last three volumes.

It's my view that a work of fiction should contain nothing which does not in some way contribute to the overall scheme. The whimsicalities to be found
in all the books are, in fact, not random, not mere conceits, but make internal references. That is to say, while I strive for the effect of randomness on one level, the effect is achieved by a tightly controlled system of internal reference, puns, ironies, logicjumps which no single reader may fairly be expected to follow.

Thus, in a scene in Condition of Muzak (the end of the section called "Outcast of the Islands"), there is a short discussion about the Japanese invasion of Australia and Jerry makes a reference to big egos and Hitler. Shakey Mo then asks if he was a character in a children's comic and then immediately asks if Hitler wasn't a police chief they'd met in Berlin. The first reference is to Big Ego (a cartoon ostrich in The Dandy or The Beano); the second reference is to an earlier story of mine (a "key" story, in my view) called The Pleasure Garden of Felippe Sagittarius (where Hitler was a rather pathetic police chief in an imaginary Berlin), leading to a reference to the fact that the historical Adolf Hitler doesn't exist in this world.

All this happens in a couple of sentences or so and should give the effect, among others, of time in a state of flux, men in a state of introverted confusion, close to fugue, and so on. But its internal logic is straightforward: the two characters know exactly what they are talking about. To "explain" all this, to editorialise, would be to break the mood, break the dramatic tensions, and ruin the effect I was trying to achieve. The apparent obscurity should not confuse the reader because the narrative should be moving so rapidly that he shouldn't care if he doesn't understand every reference. Similarly, if he was watching a richly textured film, he would not expect to perceive consciously every detail of every scene, dialogue, music, etc. They are maintained primarily by a complicated series of prefiguring images which are developed as the book progresses.

(Note to bibliography)

The Stone Thing

1975

A Tale of Strange Parts
Our 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, Soulsnatcher, Orphanmaker, Eyeblinder, Sorrowswower, 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' 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, Cwlwwymwn Rootripper, whose ambition upon the old and weary Earth had been to make widows of all wives; Cwlwwymwn the Striker, whose awful feet had trampled whole cities when men had first made cities; Cwlwwymwn 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 doomladen 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 arch-enemy, 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 Cwlwwymwn, screaming, vengeful, limping Cwlwwymwn, following always.

And Catharz rode on, rarely stopping, scarcely ever dismounting, anxious to claim his own vengeance on the sorcerer, and the foot of Cwlwwymwn, 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 Cwlwwymwn 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' 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," said she. "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 Cwlwwymwn Rootripper limped after him still, 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 little 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 travelled 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, Xympwell 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."

(From The Outcast of Kitzoprenia
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