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The Murex

THOMAS BURNETT SWANN



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Mr. Swann returns again with another delightful story based on the mythology of ancient Greece, this time dealing with the Amazons, a race of warrior women said to have come from the Caucasus and to have settled in Asia Minor.

THE MUREX

BY THOMAS BURNETT SWANN

o n e

DAPHNE

Amazons have no love for towns. Named for the island of which it is capital, the town of Aegina is small, with a single gabled megaron, a row of shops where the farmers sell their produce, an inn, a tavern, and a handful of stone houses set among olive trees. But the walls are high enough to shut us from the hills of Artemis, and the townfolk are just the sort who deserve to be penned like oxen in Augean Stables : bare-breasted courtesans smelling of myrrh and spikenard, effeminate shopkeepers with curled, scented hair, sailors in loin cloths who climb from the ships in the harbour to look for love. Even Amazons, however, even the Bears of Artemis, have to buy tools and weapons. Today we had come to town to barter sponges for axes. There were two of us, Loxo and I, both eighteen, and we faced the stares of the populace with our usual defiance. No one had ever attacked us in the streets ; they could see that we carried daggers as well as sponges. But the women whispered that our calves looked as hard as a man's, and the men complained that we cut our hair and hid our breasts behind our tunics of bearskin.

A young sailor, his loin cloth held by a clasp in the shape of a dolphin, snickered to a friend : " In the old days, they would

have made good fighters for the Cretan arena. Boys or girls, it was all the same to the bulls."

"Yes," smiled his friend. "If the bulls had won, who would have cared?"

Loxo stiffened beside me. A curving scar, the tusk mark of a wild boar, burned like a crimson eel above her eyes. I laid a restraining hand on her arm, though I understood her anger, we could not risk a fight within the walls. The whole town despised us: the women because we dressed like men; the men because we rivaled them in their games and wars.

Our hecklers, however, soon found a new diversion. A band of Myrmidons or ant-boys emerged ahead of us into the street. There were five in all, one of them a child of perhaps eleven, four of them close to my own age, small for men, yellow-haired and smooth-limbed, dressed in corn-coloured loin cloths. Their skin was bronze like the blade of a sword. Short amber wings, useless for flying, sprouted from their shoulders, and above their foreheads antennae quivered like sprays of wheat. You might have thought them comely until you knew their habits: how they lived in a nest under a mound of earth and ate mushrooms rather than hunt for meat. Worse, they were cowards who had never been seen to draw a bow and who ran if you touched your dagger.

Yet the Myrmidons had once been powerful. Their nest, it was said, had equalled the famous labyrinth of Crete. But seven years ago they held a feast on the seashore to honour their patron deity, Zeus, who, they believed, had created their race from ants at a time when Aegina needed new inhabitants. In the midst of their games, pirates swept from the gulf—hordes of them, black-bearded slavers—and captured the queen together with most of her people. Only a few of the boys, playing in the woods, escaped the raiders. Afterwards the boys returned to their nest and lived as they could with neither parents nor sisters. In subterranean workshops, they moulded figurines out of clay and came to town to trade them for tools and garments. They were cowards, and clumsy as well, and the townspeople thought them as droll as mimes or acrobats. To me they were merely disgusting, with timorous ways and unclean habits.

A goose squawked and zigzagged out of their path. A small girl bombarded them with pieces of dung. A seller of fish flicked at them with an eel. They quickened their pace and stared at the ground with furtive, frightened eyes. One of them, who seemed

to be the leader, stumbled and spilled a tray of figurines : wagons and boats and bears with slender snouts. He did not stop to recover the fragments. I felt a surge of contempt. Even retreat can be dignified. This was a rout.

Loxo watched them, and laughter welled like a growl from deep in her chest. "Daphne," she said. "Let's give them a scare with our daggers !"

I hesitated. "Why not follow them instead and find their nest ? The chase will warm us." The air was chill with the wings of the grey moth, autumn. "Then we can get help and pillage their nest." Like the fabulous ants of Arabia, they were said to horde gold and emeralds, electrum and lapis lazuli. But the treasure was less important than the fun of the chase and the fight.

She grinned. Her close-cropped hair quivered wirily in the wind. "You are right as always. You have the mind of a wolf."

The Myrmidons descended the down-sloping street of the marketplace, passed through an open gate, and entered the outer bailey, an empty courtyard which, in time of siege, bristled with farmers and their reeking herds. At the second and final gate, the guards allowed them to pass but feinted with spears as if to prick their heels. The smallest ant-boy squealed and jumped to escape the thrust ; his stubby wings whirred. Swaying with laughter, the guards forgot to heckle us. We followed the boys out of the hateful city.

Behind us the cyclopean walls of Aegina, rough and moss-grown, hulked against the sky, and granite lions crouched below the gate, as if they would like to roar. Smoke trailed upwards from the hearth in the megaron and merged with the lesser smoke from the houses. The entire town, men and animals, chattered and throbbed like a single noxious beast.

"Noise and filth and too many people," muttered Loxo. "Artemis should send an earthquake. Without their walls, they would die in weeks."

"A plague would be quicker."

The ant-boys looked behind them, cautious, stealthy, fearing pursuit. That was their way, the mark, perhaps, of the black and devious caves in which they lived. We let them see us head for the Bay of Coral. Once out of sight, we circled back from the bay and picked up their trail. Though clumsy in town, they seemed now to be walking lightly, but their toes left occasional marks in stretches of sand or tore the honeysuckle which rioted up the slopes.

The rocky fields arched upwards toward the Ridge of Zeus, which runs like a spine down the triangle of the island. Skirting boulders as big as round-built ships, we crossed a terraced vineyard and came on a group of farmers engaged in the vintage. To the shrill, insistent piping of a flute, they were treading the grapes into wicker baskets supported by concave, three-legged stools. One of the treaders looked at us brazenly, proud of his nakedness and seeking, no doubt, our approval. The sight of him disgusted me, though in truth he was lithe and firm, with skin which the sun had browned to the colour of bread. I glared at him and touched my dagger. He lowered his eyes and quickened his tread.

When we left the vineyard, the voices of the ant-boys rang ahead of us, clear and musical, like the bells which herdsmen fasten to their sheep. As they neared their nest, they seemed to be growing confident. Suddenly their talking stopped. We stood on a hill in a wood of ilex trees. Innumerable mounds lay below us like the plumeless helmets of Cyclops. One of them, I knew, tall as a house and riddled with passages concealed the entrance to the nest of the Myrmidons. But their tracks ended at the edge of the hill. With the help of their puny wings, sufficient, it seemed, for gliding if not for flying, they had managed to lose themselves among the mounds.

"They can't be far," I said. "We'll separate and explore the mounds. If you find them, signal."

I loved my friends, Loxo and the rest, but I much preferred to hunt alone with Artemis. These, like all the woods on the island, belonged to the goddess, the Lady of the Wild Things. Descending the hill, I felt her presence among the trees. A play of light seemed the flash of sun on her sandal, a stir of wind, the twang of her powerful bow. I had never seen her. She was wary of mortals, even Amazons. But sometimes I dreamed of dying in her arms. "Dearest Daphne," she would say. "Named for the maiden who became a tree to escape the kiss of Apollo. You also have come to me inviolate."

The woods were dry for the season. Crackling the undergrowth I moved quickly to keep warm and brushed against the ilex trees. Autumn was neither the time for the clustered white flowers nor the blood-coloured berries, but the deep-green leaves, curving into points like thorns, pricked deliciously into my skin. I seized a handful of leaves, drew blood, and laughed. The wounds of the forest were sweet.

But where were the Myrmidons ? I circled a mound and kicked at the base. The soil was hard, with no sign of an entrance. I felt like Hercules confronted with a thirteenth labour. A hundred mounds : which concealed the nest ? Circling another mound, I encountered a small hillock perhaps a foot in height, the home, I recognised, of Yellow Hill Ants. *They know*, I thought. They are friends of the boys. The large ones have hidden and the small ones are helping to hide them. Angrily, I stepped on the nest. The little yellow creatures fled from their broken citadel. I stamped among them with both sandals and felt as if I were raining blows on the dirty, elusive Myrmidons. Then I picked up a stick to complete my destruction.

The stick flew from my hand. One of the ant-boys faced me.

"You should not have hurt them," he said. His eyes were the colour of malachites washed by the sea ; angry and quite without fear. A fragrance enveloped him, a mingling of aromatic roots and wild thyme. His hands were smudged with dirt but somehow he did not seem dirty.

"Why not ?" I snapped. "They are only ants."

"They help the farmer by turning over the soil. They destroy the termites that nibble the columns of the great megaron. They work hard and bother no one. Can you say as much ?"

His words accused me, but his eyes had begun to soften ; they seemed about to laugh. Anger, I thought, is not his favourite mood. There was something playful and cublike about him. I remembered a cub I had found, years ago, in a tangle of grapevines. He had peered at me boldly through the vines, devoured three bunches of grapes, and then, licking his paws, sauntered into the forest with a vine trailing behind him.

"They tried to sting me," I protested feebly.

"Only after you stepped on them."

"It was an accident."

"No, it was not. You were feeling cross and wanted to step on something."

"You were watching ?"

"Not exactly. They called for help."

It had never occurred to me that anyone, even Artemis, could care what happened to ants. Deer and bears, perhaps. But ants—I was dumbfounded. I was also annoyed because I had let him put me in the wrong. I should have taken him prisoner. I knotted my fist.

"Don't," he said. "I'll sit on you and let the ants bite your toes. They would love a chance to get even—their tempers are as bad as yours—and they could use your sandals to thatch their new nest."

I relaxed my fist if not my intention.

"Look," he said, turning his back and kneeling beside the ants. "They are starting to rebuild. They will build the steepest slope to face the south-east. Thus, they can capture the morning sun and warm their nest. It is always true for this kind of ant."

Stiffly, I knelt beside him to watch the ants. With purpose and energy they went about their task, carrying sand, lifting twigs, working in unison. I almost began to like them. They worked together, hard, like Amazons, and I knew that they served a queen, though of course she was deep in the nest with her young.

"How long will it take them—" I began. I found myself talking to the air. He had gone the way he had come, invisibly and soundlessly. Now I was furious. I had wanted to ask him a question and he, a trifling Myrmidon, had left an Amazon crouched on her knees like a frog. Had I not grown fond of his ants, I might have stamped on the nest and called him back to me. As it was, I looked for his trail. A grass blade crushed to the ground, a faint redolence of thyme : he had moved lightly but not without leaving signs. I followed them for perhaps a hundred yards to a nondescript mound, seemingly like the others and overgrown with three-leafed melilot. Large stones mingled with the clover, and one of them at the base, though half concealed by spilling honeysuckle, appeared to be loose and moveable. Lifting the vines, I saw that the stone had scraped a groove in the earth. My heart jumped like a startled quail. I had found the door. Now he would answer to me !

I moved to another mound and emitted the low, resonant growl of a she-bear. Like a noiseless dryad, Loxo emerged from the trees.

"I have found their nest," I whispered in a voice so hushed that even antennae, I thought, could not overhear me. "We must go for help. Gorgo will want to lead us."

t w o

THE HOUSE OF MANY HALLS

It was night when we reached the camp. Sharpened elm-trunks, higher than a wolf can leap, enclosed our wattle huts ; rushes thatched the roofs and hides hung in the doorways. Walls of stone would have rooted us to the spot until we grew soft and settled into a town.

Gorgo came to meet us. "Daphne," she smiled, clasping my shoulder with strong affectionate fingers. She smelled as always of leather and fur. "Your eyes are as keen as a doe's. You have something to tell me."

I told her about the nest.

She laughed. "A doe did I say ? I should have said wolf ! I did well to make you my sister." On a barren hill near the town, I had been exposed as a child—a useless girl-baby, thin and feverish. Gorgo had heard my wails and brought me back to her camp.

In all, there were twenty Amazons. Some had fled from husbands in the town. Some like myself had been exposed by their fathers and found by Gorgo. Ranging in years from eleven to forty-nine, we joined each other in a passionate hatred for men, despoilers of women, and a ruthless will to surpass them at their own games and wars. We had taken an oath of celibacy in the shrine of Artemis : "Neither husband nor lover, father nor brother ; the forest forever, the chastity of stones." No Amazon lived or wished to live beyond her fifth decade. The rigors of the forest were too exacting.

"Bears of Artemis !" A single cry from Gorgo roused the camp. Padding restlessly within the walls, fretful with night and the need to cook and sweep, build fires and mend their tunics they sprang to her summons as if she had called them to battle. In a way, she had.

"Daphne has found us sport," she said. "She has found the nest of the Myrmidons." Like the rest of us, she had sheathed her body in a thick tunic of bearskin lined with leather. On her arms she wore guards of bone, instead of the gilt bracelets which hang like manacles on the wives in the town, and she carried a shield of bearhide stretched on a wooden frame. Like the rest of us, too, she had clipped her hair to a close, thick mat, since a woman fighting is vulnerable in exact proportion to the length of her tresses. She alone, however, before we left the camp, would

fasten the claws of a bear to both of her hands and leave her mark, the mark of our tribe, in the flesh of the Myrmidons. I looked at her with pride and a love which was partly fear. Gorgo, my queen ; Gorgo, who called me sister (" little one, snatched from the wolves ").

A growl of approval stirred the camp. Not since we drove the centaurs from the island, two years ago, had we fought a real battle. Of course the boys were cowards, and badly outnumbered, but we hoped, for once, to shake them out of their cowardice and give them a chance to act like warriors. Of all man's occupations, war alone, we believed, brought him honour ; only the warrior was tolerable in our eyes. The great Hippolyte did not disgrace herself when Theseus defeated her in battle ; not until she took him for her husband.

Gorgo explained her plan. " We will set forth before dawn. Daphne has said that the woods near the mound are dry. We will gather branches and thrust them, burning, through the entrance to the nest. If the Myrmidons rush from the mound, we will take them captive. If they keep to the mound, the smoke will overcome them. After it has cleared, we will enter and seize the nest. The boys should make good slaves—to sell in town or keep in our palisade."

"What do you think we will find ?" asked Loxo. In the red firelight, the eel-shaped scar glistened above her eyes.

"I've heard there is treasure," cried a girl named Hebe. "Emeralds and pearls and beaten gold—"

Gorgo glared at her. Only yesterday she had caught the girl admiring her reflection in a mountain stream. "Jewels and gold indeed ! You talk like a simpering courtesan. And Hebe, your hair is too long. Cut it before morning."

"What about the clay figurines ?" I put in hesitantly. "Are they forbidden too ? In the town we saw wagons and boats no longer than sandals. And bears, raised on their hind legs."

"You may keep a bear," smiled Gorgo, with the benignant smile she reserved for me, her favourite. "So long as he is not to adorn your person. Bears are loved by Artemis."

"Why not attack them now ?" asked our newest Amazon. She had come to us a week ago to escape a bridegroom who, she said, smelled of fishoil and left clammy prints on her body wherever he touched her. Not content merely to cut her hair, she had shaved her head until she resembled a eunuch from the courts of Asia.

"The Myrmidons 'hear' through vibrations as much as sound. They can move about freely in the dark. We cannot." She paused. "Now. I will need nine of you to accompany me. Daphne first. It was she who found the nest. Nana, Dike, Callisto . . ."

Loxo, for once, was overlooked. She called after us as we filed into the forest. "Daphne, bring me a Myrmidon. The little one, I think. I will train him to cook my venison."

We skirted the clearing where Orion, our sacred bear, was chained to his rock, and came, a mile from the palisade, to the shrine of Artemis, a small roofless enclosure surrounded by a stone wall, two feet in height. An oak tree, its bare branches hung with the skins of bears, rose in the centre like a fur-clad cyclops. The tree itself was our image of Artemis. Each of us presented a weapon for the benediction of the goddess—a bow, a dagger, a spear—and chanted in unison with Gorgo: "To you, huntress and virgin, we vow our weapons and our spoils. Walk with us in victory."

Behind us the growls of Orion, wakened by our passing, reverberated through the forest.

Gorgo sighed. "Poor Orion, he hasn't had a sacrifice since the king of the centaurs. If we take all five of the boys, perhaps we can spare him one."

In the red-veined dawn we stood before the entrance to the mound. As the chariot of Helios, the sun-god climbed the horizon, the leaves of the ilex trees flashed like the knives of hunters. Bees, aswarm in the melilot atop the mound, hushed our movements. Quietly we lifted the screen of honeysuckle and pushed the stone from the entrance. We tensed for a rush of Myrmidons or the whistle of arrows. No sound issued from the nest. We peered through the shadows and saw a passage opening into a large chamber. Gathering branches from the woods, we lit them with coals from a portable earthen brazier and thrust them through the passage. Soon, we knew, the branches would leap into flame and turn the chamber into a crackling Hades.

We listened for voices and the stir of feet; waited for panic-stricken Myrmidons to burst through the flames and feel the bite of our spears. We fed the fire; listened; waited. Was the nest deserted? Had I led my friends, after all, to the wrong mound?

Gorgo fretted. "Let the fire die," she commanded. "When the smoke thins, we will hunt them out."

Minutes later she led us into the nest. Our bright pine-knot torches revealed the room. Blinking and coughing in a haze of smoke, we saw that the dirt walls had been hung with tapestries purple and swirling orange and red like the heart of a volcano. Plaited rushes scattered the floor, and a large wooden column, carved in relief with a queen and attendant Myrmidons, supported the roof. Three funnel-shaped passageways led through the far wall. The room, like the boy I had met, smelled pleasantly of roots and thyme.

Gorgo did not hesitate. "This one," she said, leading toward the middle tunnel. Our torches, like huge lemon hyacinths, lit us a path and outlined the roof which arched above our heads. Small canals, doubtless intended for drainage, ran beside the path. The roof had been treated with a kind of resin whose glaze reflected our torchlight in a hundred facets. It was easy, and a little disconcerting, to imagine that an army was marching over us. The Myrmidons had built with cunning. But as warriors, I still thought them cowards. When would they show themselves?

A sudden downpour of water extinguished our torches. I stopped in my tracks and flailed the darkness above me, trying to shield my face.

"Back to the entrance," cried Gorgo. It was then that the net fell on our heads. A spider web, I thought, with the horror of utter helplessness. I clawed at the strands. I felt the heat of bodies and expected the legs of a spider to pin me against the earth, or the black mandibles to fix me in their venomous bite.

I rolled and thrashed and somehow managed to disentangle myself. A body grappled me to the floor. It was smooth yet muscular, with, thank Artemis, two arms instead of eight. We wrestled, I parried hands from my throat; I tumbled, rose, and ran toward the outer passage.

I had lost my direction. I did not reach the passage. I lurched rather than stepped into a huge chamber, as large as our palisade, and found myself in a forest of enormous mushrooms. I could see their shapes and colours in the light of torches which hung from the earthen walls: mushrooms with slender stems and coral-coloured caps like the delicate parasols with which the ladies of Troy shield their complexions from the sun; mushrooms whose thick white stems were as broad as their moss-green caps; mushrooms clustered together like yellow octopuses; mushrooms straight and slim like Egyptian obelisks or low and delicately pronged like stars. Some were as tall as a woman and others

crouched at my feet like fat-brown snails, waiting to be stroked. A musky and altogether delicious scent pervaded the air.

Animals huddled around a copper brazier—several dogs, old and flea-bitten ; a female bear with one good eye ; and a creature as large as a cow which I saw to my horror was in fact an insect, long, slim, and green, with antennae and two pairs of wings. The animals stirred and the dogs began to bark. I disliked the dogs at once—a man's beast—but I liked the bear (the only animal I refuse to hunt). She looked at me without resentment, her single eye amiable and curious. I moved toward her ; the dogs seemed too old to be dangerous. Then I heard footsteps and ducked into the nearest passage. The light in the chamber behind me dwindled into darkness. The floor was smooth and easy to walk in the dark, but I dreaded a net from the roof or the thrust of spears from unseen walls.

I came at last to a second gallery and, warmed by the glow of braziers, felt like Theseus returning from the underworld (though of course I was still in Hades). This time, it seemed, I had found the Myrmidons' workshop, with a small kiln, not yet fired for the morning, and a table where fresh clay was heaped in low, moist bowls. On a second table figurines lay in various stages of completion, some of them not yet painted, some of them stained with umber and ochre : a one-eyed bear, a model, no doubt, of the beast in the chamber of mushrooms ; a chariot drawn by two horses ; a lady with snakes in her hands. I looked with shame at the lady. A fertility goddess, to judge from the snakes, perhaps Aphrodite, the hateful one, who seduces women into soft, man-pleasing ways.

I did not hear him until he spoke. "Stepper-on-nests !" he said, and came toward me, smiling. "You are harder to catch than a swallow." What a fool he was, striding to meet me with his smooth, soft limbs—he still had his baby fat !—and his foolish smile. All his life he had nested in the earth or skulked through towns, while I had hardened my body by hunting deer and diving for sponges. I seized the snake goddess and flung her at his head. Missing, I drew my dagger and barred his path.

"Ant-boy," I cried. "You won't escape me now !"

I scarcely saw him move. Not even lions are so quick ! Like an unexpected wave, he struck me to the floor. Then, straddling my stomach, he held both of my wrists. Helpless, I loathed him. A mere smooth boy, he had managed to down an Amazon.

"You led your friends to our nest," he said, more in statement than accusation. "And then you broke my goddess."

"I wanted to break your skull."

"Aphrodite will not be pleased." (It *was* Aphrodite!) "But at least it wasn't my bear."

"I wouldn't have broken your bear."

"What did you want from us?"

"Whatever we could find. Tools, figurines—"

"We would have traded them for sponges. No, I think you wanted to fight us."

"And if we did?"

"It's a meddling kind of fun. You've frightened our aphids. They'll give sour milk for days. And as for me, I ought to be firing the kiln instead of sitting on an Amazon."

All this time I could scarcely breathe. His nearness was disconcerting. I felt as if tons of earth had pressed upon my chest—sweet-smelling, yes, but urgent and inescapable.

"If I let you up, will you promise not to attack me?"

I snarled at him: "I'll promise nothing."

Nevertheless, he rose and helped me to my feet. He recovered my dagger, thrust it into his loin cloth, and pointed toward a corridor to the left. "Walk ahead of me," he directed.

"And let you knife me?"

"We could have knifed the ten of you when we dropped our net. You'll find your friends unharmed outside the nest."

"You think we won't return?"

"I think not. You didn't attack us this time, you walked like mayflies into a trap-door spider's house. As for the fire you built, the smoke thinned out in the tunnels and did no harm at all. It's a very large nest." He seemed to consider. "I might, I suppose, keep you to wait on me. Milk the aphids and cook my mushrooms. And of course," he added wickedly, "perform the other functions of a woman." He looked like a small boy who has whispered a naughty word to his sister. Stocky and merry-eyed, pleased with himself and hoping to shock me, he waited for my reaction.

I flung my words like poison. "I would kill you while you slept!"

He looked ashamed and chastened. He had not expected such vehemence. It was easy to wound him, and his vulnerability, somehow, did not seem a weakness.

In the first chamber, his brothers were waiting for us. They smiled at me with kindly interest. The leader—they called him

Lordon—was taller than his brothers (though all were rather short), with eyes the colour of amber netted from sea-caves. His eyes, when he smiled, remained a little sad, as if, like amber, they had seen shipwrecks and drowned divers and dolphins torn by sharks. Of the three remaining brothers (besides my captor) two were twins, with a faint blonde fuzz on their chins which they hoped, no doubt, to coax into manly beards. The last and youngest brother—Keles, I heard them say—looked at me with huge round eyes as if he had never seen an Amazon or even a woman. He circled me warily, as a hunter circles a boar caught in a net; he peered at my leather armlets and shook his head at my close-cropped hair. I could not be angry with him. I wondered, in fact, how a sister would feel with five such brothers. But I must not let them guess my womanish fancies.

“Lordon,” pleaded my captor. His name I learned, was Tychon. “Let me keep her! At least for a little.”

The impudence of the boy! I tried to despise him. I pictured him firing his kiln and mixing clay. A lowly craftsman, lower than a warrior by many degrees. And yet he had moulded bears which had warmed my heart. More, he had overcome me in a fair combat. My breast still throbbed from the weight of his chest, but the throbbing was very different from pain: a burning without fire, a pressing without pressure.

“Why this one?” Lordon asked.

“She’s so pretty,” he blurted. “She’s not like the rest. They all look the same. But this one has grey eyes and yellow hair—what there is of it—and she smells like honeysuckle.”

By Artemis, he made me sound like a courtesan, a sailor’s wench. “No,” I protested, “I—”

But he had not finished. “And her bosom,” he beamed. “It smells like two lovely ant mounds!”

“Are you going to let him insult me?” I protested to Lordon. “I’m almost as flat as a shield!”

Lordon examined me, and what he saw, I fear, was not a shield. “What would you do with her?” he asked thoughtfully.

“He said he would make me milk his filthy aphids,” I shouted.

“I would bring her honey,” said Tychon, “cupped in water lily pads. I would bring her a bed of rushes, fresh every morning, and light the room with glowworms.”

One of the twins hurried to his support. “We would *all* wait on her. Keles could light her brazier and make her sandals of antelope leather.”

Keles nodded and muttered under his breath, "And a hat."

But Lordon shook his head. "In truth we could never trust her. No, Tychon, we must send her after the others."

He turned to me. "You may come again—as a friend."

"Did you catch my name?" Tychon asked as I bent to leave the nest.

"Tychon."

"Yes. It means 'good luck.'" He hesitated. "You know, I wouldn't *really* have made you milk the aphids."

The baby! There were tears in his eyes. "My name is Daphne," I said.

The Amazons, robbed of their weapons and looking as if they had wrestled with ill-mannered octopuses, were waiting for me.

"I heard you swap names," cried Gorgo. "Isn't it enough to have them take our spears? Now you want to make friends."

How would it feel, I wondered, to sleep in a bed of rushes, with five affectionate brothers to wait on me? Or one brother?

t h r e e

THE MUREX

The next afternoon as I dove for sponges, I thought about everything but Tychon: of the new bow I had cut from a linden branch; of a scarlet sponge I had found in a bed of coral; of the frigid water and how it nibbled at my body with little serpent mouths. But as soon as I finished a thought, back crept Tychon, like a bear to a honey pot, and I had to drive him away with a blow to his snout. He came with a merry bound and left with trailing steps and a woebegone, backward look.

There were five of us diving in the Bay of Coral. Like the male divers on the opposite coast, we wore no garments and carried neither hooks nor knives. We liked the feel of the sponges in our bare hands; we liked to tear them, suddenly and sharply, from the rocks to which they clung and, rising to the surface, heap them as high as the gunwales in our boat. Usually I worked with Loxo. Today, however, I did not want to answer her questions—about our raid on the nest, about Tychon and his brothers. I looked toward the beach. She was placing sponges, fresh from the sea, in a crawl or pond where the useless parts could rot and leave resilient skeletons; rinsed and dried, they would then be ready for use. An Amazon in the boat was

squeezing water from a large, lavender sponge. The others were under the surface. No one was watching me. With a quiet, slow glide, I skirted a promontory and swam from view.

It was then that I saw the thrashing beyond the first reef. I shaded my eyes from the glare; the sky was cloudless, the sun bright if not very warm. No, it was not a shark, nor one of the playful dolphins which sometimes dove with us among the sponges. Dimly I recognized the large, elongated dimensions of a hippocampus or giant sea-horse. A man was riding him. A Myrmidon. My heart leaped in admiration. Not even an Amazon could ride such a skittish stallion. He waved and, without hesitation, I swam to meet him.

"Daphne," Loxo called, suddenly rounding the point. "Don't swim out there!"

Artemis! I thought. Can I never escape the eyes and ears of the tribe? I give a boy my name and Gorgo scolds me; I go for a swim and Loxo calls me back! "Don't worry," I shouted. "I won't get close."

The hippocampus, though he kept a generally upright position with his tail below his head, moved in great leaps and lurches, foamed under the surface, and then erupted from the waves like dolphin. The Myrmidon seemed at home on his back. Yes, it was Tychon (as if I had ever doubted!). Clinging by his knees, he waved both hands and laughed. Hair fell over his ears like spilling grain and his wet wings fluttered dry in the wind. A creature of light, he seemed, Phaeton fallen from the sun but much at home in the sea.

He saw that I was out of breath. "Take hold of my waist," he cried. (A merry brother, with schemes afoot, giving his sister commands.)

I hesitated.

"Do you want to swim back to shore?" (The brother, short of patience but not affection.)

I seized his waist—his stomach was hard and muscular under the smooth skin—and locked my legs around the tail of the hippocampus. Tychon prodded his mount, lightly. The hippocampus pricked his ears and craned his neck, like a horse with a wicked urge to bite his rider (in this case, his second rider). His head, I should say, was three feet long. Gnarled from the sea, shaking foam from his mane, he might have been a wild stallion slaving at the mouth. I had tamed wild horses, but not scaly ones with tails instead of hooves. I gauged the distance to shore and the speed with which I must swim to elude his jaws.

"You're safe on his back," Tychon grinned. "Here, he can't get to you."

"Get to me?" I repeated. "You mean he really bites?"

"Bites!" cried Tychon. "He can take a chunk from a shark as wide as a discus."

I tightened my grip around his waist. The water was chilling in this, the fall of the year, and my body felt as stiff as a root encased in ice. Only Tychon seemed warm.

With a lunge which almost unseated me, we began our journey. I closed my eyes and leaned against Tychon's back to protect my face. Child of the sun, he warmed my limbs from the little serpents of cold. The creaming spray no longer stung my cheeks and the sound of our journey became a far, faint whirr. We have left the water, I thought, and mounted the air. Our stalwart Pegasus is climbing the afternoon and returning Phaeton to his father, the sun. I will warm myself against our return to the sea.

When I opened my eyes, I looked for the fiery stallions of the sun. No, we were still in the water. Our mount had carried us into a small inlet surrounded on three sides and most of the fourth by tall, pronged cliffs, like the combs of titanic roosters. Tychon slid from his back and drew me after him into the shallow water. With a friendly pat he dismissed the hippocampus, who looked at my foot with a kind of wistful hunger and churned through the mouth of the inlet.

"He's a little jealous," Tychon laughed.

"Would he *really* have bitten me?"

"If I had turned my back. They are like children. They think they can get away with anything if they aren't seen."

"I'm glad he didn't get away with my foot," I muttered.

We waded ashore on a small, rocky beach. Pine trees leaned from the cliffs like little girls, tumbling hair before them in giant somersaults. Wild lavender pressed against jagged rocks, as if to hide their edges, and maidenhair ferns ruffled in a breeze no stronger than the eddy of a halcyon's wing. An arm of the sea and a corner of the land, mingling salt and verdure, had met in sweet apartness. It was as if we had hushed ourselves into one of those glass scent bottles blown by Phoenician craftsmen.

"I had been watching you for some time," Tychon admitted. "I thought you would never notice me. I didn't dare ride closer."

"You shouldn't have come as close as you did. Gorgo is furious after yesterday." I wondered what I would tell her about our ride. I ought to be diving for sponges.

"But it's been a whole day since I last saw you!" From his tone he might have been saying, "But it's been a whole year!"

I suddenly remembered to be embarrassed. I was quite without garments. In all my years of diving, never once had I felt embarrassment, though passing fishermen had often stared at me. Now I felt shamed and vulnerable.

"You must turn your back," I said, hurrying to cover myself with vines and flowers. I blushed as the soft materials assumed the lines of a tunic. An Amazon wearing rosemary instead of furs!

"You needn't have dressed on my account," he said, and I saw that his loin cloth, twisted and shrunken by the water, could hardly be called a garment. "But the flowers become you. Much more than a bearskin." With deft fingers, he placed a jonquil in my hair.

"Yes," I said wryly, shaking the jonquil to the ground. My hair was too short to hold the stem. "And they will fall apart when I move."

"That is the beauty of flowers. They are brief and slight."

Did he mean to compliment the flowers for their own beauty or for what they would show of me when they disintegrated? It was just the kind of ambiguous remark I had been warned to expect of men.

"Artemis wears bearskins," I said loftily.

"When Aphrodite was born of the foam, the winds clothed her with anemones."

"I serve Artemis."

"She is not the only goddess."

"The strongest, though."

"If you mean her body, you may be right. I'm sure she has muscular calves from all that hunting she does."

I changed the subject. "You rode the hippocampus skilfully. I've never been able to ride one by myself."

"He gave me a few ducks when I first tried to break him. Now we are used to each other."

"You ride well," I said with puzzlement, "and yesterday you fought well. But in the town—! You and your brothers skulk through the streets like lepers. Stand up to the people. They are the real cowards. Show them as we do what it means to be proud!"

"Proud?" he cried. "We are Myrmidons!"

"You mean you have wings and antennae and a copper colour to your skin?"

"Yes."

"And no one has ever told you that these are pleasing?"

"Our mother told us. 'You are different,' she said. 'But difference may be a badge instead of a brand.'"

"Well then—?"

"The pirates came. And after they were gone we began to see ourselves as the Aeginetans saw us. And to be ashamed. Not afraid of fighting, you understand. But afraid that we had no justification to fight. They lived in houses, we lived in tunnels. They were white-skinned, we were copper."

"But you have wings!"

"Puny wings. The clumsiest bird has better."

Perhaps, I thought, there is use after all for those inconsequent women—wives and mothers—who stay at home while their men march off to war. It is the men who fight, but the women who make them feel that they fight bravely and then return like kings. Men have no need for mirrors of silver and bronze. But for women to mirror their valour?

"Well," I said. "I am telling you now. You are not ugly. In your way, you are even comely. Your hair, for example. If I were to let mine grow, I should want it to be like yours. Like something out of the woods—the yellow stripes on a bee—and yet as soft as"—I struggled for words, Amazons are not orators—"as the dust on a butterfly's wing. And your body. The skin is a bit too smooth, of course, forgive me if I say girlish, but the colour is pleasing to the eye, and muscles hide underneath like—like lobsters under a calm bay!"

He looked at me strangely, as if he were weighing my words and trying to see himself as I was seeing him. "When I watched you gather sponges," he said at last, "I thought of something, a long time ago. Do you know what my mother did with sponges? She soaked them in honey and let me suck them dry. My brothers and I were often hungry. It was good to be hungry. We knew we would soon be fed."

I thought of him as a child, and the queen, his mother, with tall translucent wings, handing him honey-soaked sponges. Then, in my thought it was I who handed him the sponges.

Womanish fancies again! "Sponges are meant for soldiers," I said crossly. "And athletes. To dip in a stream after a long march and squeeze in the mouth. Or after a game, to bathe the skin with oil."

He laid an object in my hand : a murex shell, with delicate coilings and a mouth of purple shading into rose. From just such shells the men of Tyre extracted their famous dye, beloved by kings.

"It has come a long way," I said. "The mouth is chipped."

"It has lived in twilight with starfish and coral. Now it has come to the sun. Keep it."

I did not wish to make light of his gift. I closed it in my hand as if it were a cat's eye, the stone which Egyptian children stroke for luck.

"You have shut it from the sun," he said.

"What should I do with it?" I asked, genuinely perplexed.

"Nothing," he laughed. "It doesn't have a purpose. It *is*." Then, for the first time, he used my name. "Daphne," he said. That was all. I had always liked my name for the sake of the Daphne who fled from the arms of Apollo. But it sounded strange on his lips, no longer mine. He was calling a stranger out of the deeps of me, as a necromancer whistles the white-faced spirits of the tide. I wanted to remind him that Daphne was an Amazon who dove for sponges ; that he must not look for another Daphne, who might indeed inhabit the sea-caves of my heart, but was better left hidden. She might prove dangerous in the light, a demon with eyes like clouded agates and hair whose silken cords could strangle both of us.

He laid his head on my shoulder so quickly that I felt as if an arrow had pierced my skin. I stiffened and held back a cry as I did on the hunt, when an animal wounded me.

"Sweet flowers," he said. "Rosemary. And Daphne."

His hair was as soft as I had imagined (dust on a butterfly's wing), and even after his swim he smelled of thyme. His head seemed a little corner of sunlight. I tried to pretend that he was a small child, like the helpless girl, myself, that Gorgo had saved from the hill. She had breathed into my lungs to restore life and warmed me in the cradle of her arms. Still, he was not a child and assuredly not a girl, and I could not bring myself to lay a mothering hand on that wing-soft, treacherous hair. A boy-man, he was, and a threat to every Amazon. But now he was falling asleep. I did not wish to disturb him. Slowly the tension drained from my muscles, as after a hunt when Gorgo rubbed me with olive oil. A sweet drowsiness ran through my veins like honey.

He was not asleep. He was waiting. His lips burned me as if they were living coals, and he caught my body in the hot enmeshment of his arms.

"Daphne," he cried, and this time, openly, brazenly, he summoned that other one, the sea-spirit, to rise from the deeps with her silken, strangling tresses. He had tricked me out of my armour. I felt like a woman of the town bought for a sailor's pleasure (and paid with a murex ?). I felt unclean, like the carcass of a deer, stripped of its pelt and left to rot in the forest. I cried out, once, and shuddered from his arms. He did not try to hold me.

The Amazon boat had entered the mouth of the inlet. My friends had heard my scream. I splashed through the water, trailing flowers and vines, and fell against the gunwale. Loxo gave me her hand, and I fell like a weighted net on a pile of sponges. Three Amazons invaded the beach. Tychon did not resist. He gave his hands to their thongs and walked ahead of them to the water and the black boat with its tall, back-curving prow.

Loxo leaned beside me. "I had to bring them," she whispered. "I was afraid for you. I told them he took you by force."

I scarcely heard her. Tychon crouched in the bow—even his wings were bound—and shook as if with fever that blows from the marshes.

"I only meant to kiss you," he said.

I turned away from him.

"You said I was not—uncomely. That I should be proud of myself."

Still I said nothing.

"Perhaps you were right to cry out. I kissed you so clumsily. I had meant to go to sleep, but you smelled like rosemary and—your beauty stirred me."

I struggled for words. He had wronged me, of that I still felt convinced, but I must have tempted him in my inexperience. Now his life was in danger, and I was to blame.

"Of course," he continued, "I had wanted to kiss you from the first—"

Loxo struck him across the mouth. "We don't want to hear your filth." She struck him for my sake, before he could compromise me. But I wanted to knock her from the boat.

four

THE CIRCLE OF THE SACRED BEAR

I gripped the arm of a paddler. "You are not to land," I said. "First you must let him go."

"But he tried to violate you!"

Loxo broke in hurriedly. "Daphne has always been tender-hearted. She pities the brute, Olympus knows why."

The boat struck sand and quivered to silence. Prodded by a spear, Tychon rose to his feet and clambered over the gunwale. He fell into shallow water and floundered like a dolphin marooned by the tide. Loxo held me when I moved to help him. Finally, he regained his footing and, flanked by Amazons who had followed him into the water, climbed the beach between rows of drying sponges.

Gorgo came towards us with giant strides which snapped the undergrowth and spun pebbles ahead of her sandals. Her long sinuous limbs looked as hard as the rocks she dislodged, and yet she was beautiful, in the way of rocks which the sea has worn to a smooth, hard core, or the rare new metal, iron, hammered by blacksmiths to a ringing power. Like the other Amazons (except Loxo), she assumed that Tychon had taken me against my will.

She clasped me against her breast. "Daphne, little sister."

I will tell her what has happened, I thought. She has always loved me. Perhaps she will understand.

"Gorgo," I began. "I must tell you—"

She caught my head between her hands with an urgent pressure, half loving, half punishing. "My poor Daphne. You see what comes of talking to an ant-boy. You gave him your name, and the very next day he lay in wait for you."

"No," I said quickly. "I wanted to go with him. I went as his friend."

She flinched as if I had struck her with the flat of a sword.

"Are you trying to say that you are wanton?"

"He has only kissed me. You must not punish him."

She slapped me across the mouth with stinging suddenness. "And what about yourself, you cheap little whore from the town? Shall you go unpunished? Your father knew what he was about. I should have left you to the wolves." She tore the leather girdle from her tunic and bound my hands.

"You are hurting her," said Tychon. In spite of his fetters, he spoke with angry command. "Loosen her bonds at once."

Gorgo laughed and shoved me toward the woods.

No one could stop him when he lunged at her. She bent like a snapping mast and fell beneath him to the ground. When she tried to rise, he kicked at her ankles until the others held him. Swaying, she climbed to her feet.

"Have you ever felt the claws of a bear?" she hissed.

"Bears are my friends," he said. "They have never clawed me."

She raked her fingers down his cheek.

"Tychon," I said as we moved into the woods. "I have brought great harm to you." His hands, I saw, had turned as pale as foam. I wanted to loosen his fetters. With a sponge soaked in olive oil, I wanted to bathe the rivers of blood from his face.

He smiled. "The stones of the gods can be turned to bread."

His name was Orion. Chained to his rock, he could cover the circle freely, but he could not reach the Amazons around its perimeter. He was large, thick, and shaggy, with the mottled brown of an old, beached ship and with festering wounds which lodged like barnacles in his fur. He hated his chains and us who had chained him, hatred burned in his eyes and stirred in his chest like an angry crawling of bees. Three Amazons had died to capture him. We had never tried to befriend him. The beast of Artemis, we thought, should not be coaxed and softened like some sleek dog of the town. We had found him a killer and given him reason to kill.

Except for a guard in the palisade, the entire tribe had gathered to watch the sport. They looked like the linden trees among which they stood. Some of the trees were young, but their trunks had been scarred by woodpeckers, mildew, and storms. The Amazons also boasted scars, a welt across an arm or calf, a jagged star purpling a forehead; the slash of coral, the mark of a well-aimed arrow. Till now I had felt ashamed of my own unblemished skin. My wounds had left no scars to wear like plumes. But now, for the first time, I wanted to say to my friends: "You have made yourselves hard like the forest, scarred like trees, more cruel than a chained bear." I was proud to stand fettered and aloof from such a company. And yet I was glad that they had brought me with them. Though they wanted to watch my anguish when Tychon died, perhaps I could help him, if only to die.

I watched them take their places : the girl who had left her husband because he had smelled of fishoil (a little love, I thought, would have made an excellent perfume) ; beside her, Hebe, the vain one who had wanted jewels and gold. Having cut her hair, she seemed to have forgotten her wish for adornments ; she fingered her dagger as lovingly as if it were silk from the East (but it did not become her like silk ; in cutting her hair she had shed her beauty). Only Loxo seemed troubled. My guards were careful to keep us separated, but once she smiled to me through the trees. She had risked her safety to remain my friend, but soon, I knew, she would join the others in screaming for the kill. Not even our friendship could make her pity a Myrmidon.

It was time for the game. The Amazons were restless. To amuse herself, Hebe was hacking notches in the trunk of a linden tree.

“ Bears of Artemis ! ” Gorgo’s cry shook them to attention ; also Orion.

She stood at the edge of the circle, smiling ; knelt ; and with slow, deliberate movements, deposited the carcass of a freshly slain deer.

The acrid odour of blood pricked my nostrils. To the far more sensitive nose of Orion, the scent must have seemed a delicious and urgent summons. But the bear was cautious. He could not believe his luck. Not often had the Amazons been kind to him. At last, trailing his chain, he shuffled toward the prize. At the limits of the chain, he could touch the edge but not the whole of the deer. He swiped impatiently with his paw and brought away tantalizing shreds of meat. Licking the paw, he surveyed the carcass : how could he seize the whole succulent feast ?

Meanwhile, a pair of Amazons had quietly entered the ring with Tychon between them and chained his leg to the same rock which held the bear. They released his hands and hurried out of the circle. Once they had reached the trees, Gorgo stabbed the carcass with her spear and jerked it completely beyond the reach of the bear. Orion reared to his full height, roaring horribly, and tautened his chain until it rang like a hundred quivering bows. Behind his back, the Amazons went into action. They began to pelt him with small stones. But as soon as the outraged beast could turn to face them, they ceased their harassment and blended among the trees. Instead of the Amazons, the bear saw Tychon.

He looked at the boy and then at the woods. He was not stupid. The many stones, the one apparent enemy : there must be others,

hidden in the trees. His little eyes darted from side to side. He sniffed the air. He smelled the Amazons, not singly but all at once : their sweat and frenzy, their excitement made palpable. He could not get at them among the linden trees, but Tychon reeked of their touch, Tychon, barring his path.

"Tychon," I screamed. "The bear is a killer !"

The Amazons tensed to see them begin to fight. They shouted bets.

"He'll use his chain," said one. "Tangle those massive legs."

"Or blind him with sand and stones !"

Or start to run, I thought, doggedly, desperately, around and around the inescapable circle, until he fell from exhaustion. They wanted to see him crushed in a last, inexorable hug : Tychon, the Myrmidon, who had lived in the earth like an insect ; Tychon, the man, who had made an Amazon subservient to his lust. Though I understood their hatred, of him and of me, I hated them for their sport. I did not want my friend to die for their pleasure.

Tychon held out his hand and began to speak. Orion paused in surprise. Enemies fled him or charged him. No one had ever waited for him, talking. His brown head swayed on the hill of his shoulders. He smelled of stale blood and the fresh carcass he had ripped with his claw. Tychon's words were unintelligible to me and probably to the bear. But his tone was eloquent : low, firm, hypnotic. He was asking for friendship without abasing himself. He was wooing, with dignity, an old, angry, and suspicious animal. How small he looked ! The cub that had plagued my thoughts, the undefended young crying out in the oldest language of earth for the sufferance of age.

When Orion struck him, he whirled in the air as if he had sprung from a board, like one of the black-skinned acrobats from Libya. Only the green enormity of his eyes confessed his pain and astonishment. Beating his wings too late, he fell to the ground, groaned, and closed his eyes. The bear moved toward him, slowly, still curious, still puzzled by the puny man-thing which had stood in his path and then, without protest, permitted himself to be thrust into silence.

The Amazons cheered and pressed toward the fallen boy. Like the old Cretans at the bullring, when a fighter had missed his step, they looked for a kill. No one, I thought, was watching me. I moved toward the circle.

Gorgo caught my shoulder. Her fingers knifed through my tunic.

"You will go to him *there*?"

"Yes. Let me go." Her strength was formidable.

"No matter," she said with cold weariness. "You have left me already."

I staggered across the circle to kneel beside him. I could not touch him with my fettered hands. For an instant, no more—there was no more time—I pressed my head against his heart. The animal's claw had raked his body and wounds swam on his chest like moist minnows. But I heard his heartbeat.

I rose to face the bear. I could not fight him. I could only lead him from Tychon. I felt the heat of his breath and smelled the stench of blood. I shouted once—"Orion!"—and veered around him, narrowly missing the serpent-quick sweep of his paw.

I listened in vain for the thud of his padded feet, the low, angry rumble from his chest. Had I failed, after all, to lead him away from Tychon? Like Eurydice, and with as much at stake, I looked over my shoulder.

Incredibly, a second bear had entered the circle. With a spasm of hope as sharp and sudden as pain, I recognized the one-eyed pet of the Myrmidons and knew that the brothers had sent her. To the Amazons, however, *her coming must seem an accident*: she had blundered out of the forest into their circle. What a *game* they were now to have, they must have thought, with *two* victims and *two* bears! When the bears had dismembered Tychon and me, they would doubtless turn on each other and fight to the death.

But the bears ignored their victims and approached each other with more curiosity than wrath. Warily they circled and sniffed and then, to the jeers of the outraged Amazons, they began to make friends. One had the weathered hide of a barnacled ship and one had a single eye which gave her the look of a brown cyclops. But male and female, they were drawn to each other by the curious chemistry of the forest, which had always baffled me in animals as well as in people.

The Amazons had come for a kill and not a courtship. They began to pepper the animals with stones. When the stones were ignored, Gorgo sprang in the circle, whooping, and prodded Orion with the tip of her spear. He snapped it out of her hands and, growling annoyance at the interruption, returned to his

female. For all the notice that he paid to Gorgo, she might have been a mere chattering squirrel.

In the furore caused by the bears, I had lost no time in creeping back to Tychon. For lack of hands, I prodded him with my toe, gingerly.

"Daphne," he said blinking. "The bear—"

I pointed to the second animal. "Your friend has come. Can you free my hands? I'll try to break your chain."

By now the Amazons were frantic with disappointment. Their game had been spoiled. No one, neither man nor bear, had been killed or even mauled. They must, it seemed, contrive their own excitement.

"Daphne is letting him go!" cried Hebe. How ugly she was as she ran at me with her dagger! She should never have cut her hair.

She stopped in her tracks and began to slap at her arm. Feathered objects, like large, vicious bees, whistled from unseen weapons and then, with the sound of knifeblades puncturing ripe pomegranates, bit into flesh. Hebe, struck again, sank to the ground with a look of immense astonishment and remained balanced on her knees even when she lost consciousness.

Like sculptured sunlight, the Myrmidons possessed the woods. Were there only four, and one a child? They seemed all places at once, a host instead of a handful; they seemed to step from the sunbeams of the late afternoon; to walk with light through the green woods; to walk as light. I saw the blowguns at their lips. I saw the feathered arrows sing to their targets. I saw their victory.

Lordon cut my fetters. Together we lifted Tychon to his feet, while Keles pounded his chain between two rocks to shatter the links.

Gorgo watched us. An arrow drooped from her leg, and she walked with laboured steps, as if she were wading a stream. Gamely she snatched a bow from a fallen comrade and fitted an arrow, but her arms lacked the strength to draw the cord. She dropped the weapon and fell against the trunk of a tree. There was no recognition in her drugged, pain-filled eyes.

Some of the Amazons had fallen to the ground and others were trying to escape through the linden trees, dragging comrades, reeling and slapping at wounds. Loxo was helping a dazed, torpid Hebe across the circle. There was no danger to them from the bears. Orthanes, one of the twins, had broken Orion's chain,

and both animals had sauntered into the forest with lordly unconcern for the foolish man-things battling behind them.

Through green-walled corridors, the Myrmidons glided, bronze, incredibly young, moving as if in a child's dream of valor, where enemy arrows are harmless and the hurled spear turns on the thrower. Birds shrilled in the treetops—swallow and dove, woodpecker, owl, and jackdaw—the multitudinous voices of the forest cheering her champions, who had rightly defeated those interlopers, the Amazons, the hunters without hearts. Once (it was only yesterday ?) I had loved the jagged stone and the ilex tree which had speared my hand ; I had loved the hardness and cruelty of the forest but not her frailty, the wolf and not the deer.

I strengthened my hold on Tychon's arm. "Are you in pain ?"

"A little," he admitted.

Without breaking our march, Lordon stooped and lifted him in his arms.

"In the nest," he said, "I'll brew you peppermint leaves in aphid's milk. Our mother, you remember, thought it the best of remedies." Impulsively he pressed his cheek against his brother's hair, smearing himself with blood. I understood that men could be manly in tenderness.

"What about bergamot leaves ?" I said, hesitant to speak and yet appalled by the prospect of drinking milk from the large green insect I had seen in the cave of mushrooms. "Mixed with honey, they will give you strength."

"Peppermint, bergamot, honey, and milk," said Tychon happily. "I think I shall need attention for several days."

When Lordon tired of his load, Conisalus and Orthanes took their turns. Even Keles asked to carry his brother.

"But who will carry *you* ?" laughed Tychon.

"I was big enough to shoot three Amazons," snapped the boy. His brothers, I learned, had not intended to bring him to the fight. He had followed them from the nest and fought with the courage of a seasoned warrior.

"And you broke my chain. No one doubts your courage. It's a matter of size."

"Well," said Keles, "with Daphne cooking, I ought to grow fast."

Cooking indeed ! It was all I could do to broil the haunch of a deer. As for vegetables, sauces, bread—! "Lordon, how did you know about Tychon's capture ?" I asked hurriedly.

"We saw your boat from the shore, and Tychon in it. Since we weren't strong enough to attack the palisade, we waited until you gathered at the circle. We sent our bear ahead of us to make a distraction. In the midst of the woods, however, she balked. The scent of Orion must have frightened her. We had to coax her with promises of honey. Thus, Tychon was wounded before she arrived." Lordon paused. "You needn't worry about your friends, Daphne. We tip our arrows in formic acid, milked from ants. They burn, for a little, and paralyze, but they aren't fatal."

"You had good reason to kill us."

"If you had killed Tychon—" he began. "But as it was, we arrived in time, and we tried to understand you. You are much like us, in your way. You have no men. We have no women. It makes you fretful at times, as it does us."

"What if they follow you to your nest?"

"We have already changed the entrance. The old one is sealed with stones."

"How can you trust me, Lordon? I was to blame for Tychon's capture."

He did not press me to explain my guilt.

"The Amazons aren't your people any more. We know that, Daphne."

"No. They are not my people."

"Will you miss them?"

"Loxo. Not the rest. Though the life seemed good at the time. Free and courageous."

"There are other virtues than courage."

"I shall have to learn them."

"You know them already," said Tychon. I had thought him asleep in the arms of Orphanes. He raised his hand and touched my cheek, as lightly as a leaf falling from a tree.

I loved him. I would have died for him. But a great sadness, for what I had lost and, more, for what I must lose, stirred in me like the grey moth of autumn. I felt the wings and a chilling dust of snow . . .

five

APHRODITE

A week had passed since the rout of the Amazons.

"After we have eaten," said Tychon, "I will give you the treasure."

"In the town they think it's gold," said Orthanes, like a small boy with a secret. "It isn't."

"Nor pearls," said his twin, Conisalus, fingering the faint stubble on his chin, as if to coax it into a beard.

"It belonged to our mother," Lordon explained. His sad, amber eyes looked much too old for his face. Of all the brothers, only Lordon had seen the attack of the pirates. Hidden at the edge of the beach, he had watched helplessly while they took his mother. He had wanted to go to her. She had seen him and shaken her head : go back to your brothers. "Before it was hers, a Myrmidon found it in a cave near the sea. Hidden, we think, by Egyptians who never returned."

We sat on three-legged stools and ate from a table of oak and linden wood. Through a doorless opening I saw the flicker of a hearth and smelled the sweet opulence of an oven. Keles served us from clay platters : black mushroom steaks, cut into portions to accommodate our fingers ; honey cakes sprinkled with poppy seeds ; anchovies flavoured with the carrot-like silphium plant ; eels and oysters, chestnuts and amethyst grapes. We spoke of several subjects, Tychon's ribs, bruised but unbroken, the rout of the Amazons, the one-eyed bear which had not returned from the forest. But always the treasure poised on their lips and rang on the air like the luminous name of a god. The treasure . . . its price unspoken . . . its very nature left to my imaginings. I respected their reticence. A chariot of beaten bronze or worthless stones, gathered from the beach : either could speak with eloquence of Tychon's love. The treasure, it seemed, was to be his nuptial gift. Accepting the gift, I accepted also the man.

I loved him. I had seen his need for a woman to mirror his valour. But the grey wings still shook their dust of snow. I drank freely of aphid's milk mixed with wine : to drown the moth. I talked until my voice echoed from the umber roof and a stranger seemed to be shrilling down at me like a woman of the town. One of the aphid cows, tethered beside the oven, loosened herself and blundered into our midst to beg for sweets. I made a show of

feeding her honey cakes and asked the brothers if they would teach me how to milk. When a very embarrassed Keles drove her from the room, I felt the silence as if it were tangible, a chill and pervasive mist.

Tychon also seemed ill at ease. He was badly bruised but his pain, I knew, was not from his wound. He understood my fear. He passed me an eel and watched anxiously while I chewed and pretended to relish the somewhat muscular meat.

"Will you have a honey cake?" he asked, only to find that I had fed the last crumb to the aphid cow. I wanted to reassure him but I could not bring myself to take his hand. I felt like a dry sponge, parched for a gift of moisture.

At the end of the feast, we drank a libation of unmixed wine to Agathodaemon, the Good Spirit, wiped our fingers on pieces of bread, and rose heavily from our stools. Keles, munching an eel, hurried to remove the platters.

"Come," said Tychon. "It is time for the treasure."

"Keles will need help," I said. "He has been too busy to eat."

"My brothers will help him. Besides, he has already eaten. Didn't you notice the shortage of honey cakes?"

We began our descent of a low, winding corridor which opened on either side into high-domed chambers, some of them empty, some of them furnished with couches, braziers, and tripods.

"Once," said Tychon proudly, "they were all in use. They will be again." Dust had not gathered on the chests of citron wood, nor rust on the swords which hung from the resin-lacquered walls.

The air grew cold like the shaft of a deep-throated well. Icy pearls of moisture dropped from the roof and stung my skull. I shivered, wishing for hair in a thick, protective crown. I felt as if we were coiling into the heart of a giant murex. In the light of our torch, the smooth walls flickered a roseate purple, and a low, incessant murmur, like the roar of the sea in a shell, bubbled out of the earth.

"The voices of the dead," said Tychon. "Calling Persephone down from the sunlight."

"Why does she answer them?"

"She is half in love with death."

I reeled against him. A knot of snakes, like the head of the Gorgon Medusa, writhed in our path.

He allowed them to slither across his sandals. "They bring good luck. The Good Spirit, you know, is often a serpent."

Yes, I thought, and Aphrodite twines them in her hands. Whatever you say, to me they are gross and phallic.

The room of the treasure was small and bare except for a chest of blue faience ribbed with ebony.

He lit a torch which leaned from a niche in the wall. "I will leave you now. Whatever you find is yours." He must have seen my doubts. "Daphne," he said. "You needn't accept the treasure. You can stay with us as our friend."

I tried to smile. "If the treasure speaks for your heart, I have no wish to refuse."

Alone, I remembered the snakes. Still, I was glad to be left with the treasure. It is hard for an Amazon to show her feelings. I wanted time in which to phrase my gratitude. I wanted also to still the turbulent moth. It was not that I felt, any longer, a repugnance for Tychon. His wings were not strange to me, nor the silken antennae, nor the copper body with the sweet roundness of a boy and the sinews of a man; not strange but dear. But the fear of giving myself still haunted me. It was not enough to lie flaccid in his arms. I had seen his hurt when I thrust him away on the beach. I must reassure him, by a passionate, total giving, that the same moon controlled our tides.

Now, in the heart of the murex, I stood before the chest and watched the blue faience ripple like smoke. I raised the lid, fearfully: serpents were known to watch over buried riches. Hopefully: I had heard of the royal treasuries at Mycenae and Troy, the daggers with golden handles, the swords whose electrum hilts glittered with black niello; the bronze shields which Hephaestus, the smithy god, had hammered into scenes of Ares and Aphrodite, Theseus and the Minotaur. I raised the lid.

I found neither serpents nor weapons, but a gown, a mirror, a headdress, a casket of jewels and vials—possessions, I judged from their richness, of a royal bride. Two women before me had owned them: an Egyptian princess and Tychon's mother. I fought down an impulse to close the chest. In the town, I had watched the courtesans jangle their bracelets and flutter their kohl-darkened eyes. Was I to bedeck myself with jewels and paints?

I looked at my face in the silver disc of the mirror. I saw an Amazon with close-cropped hair and grey, unfeeling eyes. I did not like her. It was she who had fought the centaurs, those blameless men of the woods, and driven them into the sea. It was she who had watched, unmoved, the deaths of men and

animals. I touched my hair, stiff and close against my head, and seemed to be touching the stubble in a frozen field. I lifted the headdress, lightly, as if it could feel my touch, and settled it on my head. Cascades of real Egyptian hair, black as obsidian, soft as linen, enveloped my shoulders. A circlet of lotus flowers, carnelian and feldspar, like a little garden springing from the black earth, clung to the tresses. My own hair could not have held such a rarity (not even a jonquil, I remembered).

The gown was bold and simple. Its foam-white linen fell to my sandals, and a long sash, woven with birds of lapis lazuli, flared below my knees. My shoulders and the valley between my breasts remained in brazen nakedness, and I thought it wise to suspend a pectoral of carnelians around my neck. In vials of alabaster I found unguents and pastes. The kohl, I knew from my observations in town, was intended for the eyes; the carmine for the lips; the red ochre for the cheeks (and also, I knew, to paint the nipples). I thought it best to limit my experiments. With a slender stick of ebony I touched my lips with carmine.

In the area of dimmest torchlight, I looked at my altered face and raised the mirror to smash it against the wall. Something—that other Daphne?—held my hand. I moved into the light. I straightened the headdress and smoothed the carmine on my lips. In place of the cold-eyed Amazon the sea-spirit smiled at me, confident, almost insolent, and yet with affection. Her grey eyes had caught the lapis lazuli of my sash and turned the birds into stars. As I looked in the eyes, I seemed to hear the thunder of the sea and to whirl in the coils of a murex, and yet I whirled toward daylight and not toward darkness.

“Go back,” I cried faintly. “Go back.” She did not change her expression. Was she really so terrible in her moods and secrets? Perhaps I could come to like her.

I heard footsteps above me. The mirror fell from my hands. I felt—how shall I say?—a soft burning as if the myriad feelers of the sun were creeping across my skin.

I swayed to meet him, my warrior and my husband. I gathered in armfuls the marigolds of his hair and breathed drunkenly his redolence of thyme, as if I had thrown myself in a sun-warmed meadow to tumble with flowers and steal their warmth and softness. I held him without shame. I held the warmth of him, the summer and the manliness, and now he was not a meadow but a boy, lovelier, even, than flowers, lordlier than the sun. The grey moth autumn shuddered into silence.

I saw his brothers behind him, except the youngest. Poor Keles, left to finish the chores !

"Lordon, Orthanes," I cried, "Conisalus ! You see, I have found the treasure."

No one spoke.

I remembered my headdress and pectoral and the carmine staining my lips. I felt the insolent thrust of my breasts. I began to be ashamed. Was I unlovely to them, vulgar and gauche or, worse, ridiculous ? They were used to the Amazon, not the sea-spirit.

"I—I am not accustomed to such finery," I said to Tychon. "Perhaps it doesn't become me."

"Become you ?" he cried. "Your beauty has taken our tongues."

Then, for the first time, I knew that beauty reflected in the eyes of a man returns to enfold the woman, like a mantle of light.

He knelt at my feet. "My queen," he said. "My beloved bride."

His brothers knelt in turn. "My queen," said Lordon, Orthanes, and then Conisalus. "*My beloved bride.*"

I thought : the goddess has punished me, Aphrodite, the implacable, because I came late to love. She has sent me love like a rain of fire and boulders ! They have given me the treasure together. Brothers in flesh, brothers in courtship, they have come together to claim their bride. Like the winged male ants in their nuptial flight with the queen.

I thought : the dead, crying to Persephone from the vaults of the earth, cry also to me, "Come into the darkness ; the dead cannot desire you."

I looked searchingly into their faces, expecting—pride ? arrogance ? lust ? What I saw was a radiance richer than torch-light ; what I saw was love. They were giving more than a treasurer ; they were giving me the place and sovereignty of that great queen, their mother, and promising to serve me as their fathers had served their mother.

Was the goddess, after all, implacable ? *The stones of the gods can be turned to bread.*

"My beloved husbands," I said. Together we climbed the corridor toward the sun.

This is the third novelette in the quartette dealing with Elric's final influence in the great battle between Order and Chaos. Here, the forces of Order are almost beaten, but Elric, himself a part of Chaos, still hopefully fights on against impossible odds.

SAD GIANT'S SHIELD

BY MICHAEL MOORCOCK

*Thirteen times thirteen, the steps to the sad giant's lair ;
And the Chaos Shield lies there.*

Seven times 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.

o n e

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 Lern 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 Lern'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 Lern, under the command of Elric of Melnibone, talked of strategy and tactics in the full knowledge that more than these were needed to beat back Jagreen Lern's unholy horde.

Desperately, Elric 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, Elric and his allies went about the preparation with heavy souls and a sense of the futility of such action. And, in the back of Elric's mind, was the constant knowledge that even if he won against Chaos, the very act of winning would destroy the world he 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, marvelously, 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 Meibone 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, Elric had been riding the length and breadth of the eastern kingdoms of Ilmiora and Vilmir, 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. Elric 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. Elric tugged *Stormbringer* from its scabbard and black fire flickered 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.

Elric 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 teeth gleaming. "I have so few carriages of that type that I must only use them 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," Elric pointed at a richly decorated house on the far side of the square.

Inside, Elric 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, Elric 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 ?" Elric 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, the 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," Elric said cheerfully.

"Not altogether. Jagreen Lern's fleet has set sail again—and they head 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. I'll ride for the 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, Elric," Sepiriz warned him gravely. "Have you heard of the Ships of Hell?"

"I've heard of them—do they not sail the depths of the sea, taking on board dead mariners as crews?"

"They do—they're things of Chaos and far larger than even the largest mortal warship. You'd never withstand them, even if you did not have the theocrat's fleet to fight as well."

"I'm aware the fight will be hard, Sepiriz—but what else can we do? I have a weapon against Chaos in my blade here."

"Not enough, that 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?"

"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 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?" Elric 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 sheer 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* hands Elric!"

"I'm becoming used to the burden my friend. How would I recognise this shield?"

"By the eight-armed 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, Sepiriz."

"Very well, Elric. Since so little of your destiny is in your own hands, we should allow you to take just one decision at times," Sepiriz smiled sympathetically.

"Fate is kind," Elric commented ironically. He rose from his seat. "I'll begin the journey straightway, for there's no time to lose."

t w o

With his milk-white hair streaming behind him and his red eyes blazing with purpose, Elric lashed his stallion through the cold darkness of the night, through a disturbed land which awaited Jagreen Lern'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 Jagreen Lern's as the kings of the conquered lands chose his command rather than death—and placed their peoples under his 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, the land heaved like the sea, or the sea flowed like lava, mountains changed shape and trees sprouted ghastly blossoms never seen on 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 Lern and his 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, Elric'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.

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-agra*, 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 Elric knew what the name signified. The fortress had been there long before the present races came to

dominance, even before Elric's ancestors had begun their conquerings. *Ma-ha-kil-agra*—the Fort of Evening, where long ago, a lonely race had come to die.

As he arrived in the courtyard, Moonglum, the Eastlander, came rushing from the entrance of a tower.

"Elric! We have been awaiting your arrival, for time grows scarce before we must embark against the enemy. We have sent out ship-borne spies to estimate the size and power of Jagree Lern's fleet. Only four returned and all were uselessly insane. The fifth has just come back, but—"

"But what?"

"See for yourself. He has been—altered, Elric."

"Altered! Altered! Let me see him. Take me to him." Elric nodded curtly 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 Elric 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 well," Elric 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.

Elric felt pity for the man, but he was not nauseated or horrified like Moonglum, 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 then 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 hand and some of the streamers seemed to jerk and wave in unison.

Elric spoke quietly. "What magic wrought this drastic change?"

A kind of chuckle came from the lopsided face.

"I entered the Realm of Chaos, lord. And Chaos did this, it 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 Lern—great waves of warships, squadrons of invasion craft, thousands of transports, ships mounting great war engines, fire-ships—ships of all kinds, bearing a multitude of standards—the kings of the south left alive have sworn loyalty to Jagreen Lern 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 slower 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 he *has* managed to bring more supernatural allies to his standard,” Elric mused. “ Those are the Ships of Hell, Sepiriz mentioned . . . ”

“ Aye—and even if we beat the natural craft,” the messenger said, hysterically, “ we could not beat both the ships of Chaos and the stuff of Chaos which boils around them and did to me what you observe ! It boils, it warps, it changes constantly. That is all I know, save that Jagreen Lern and his human allies are unharmed by it as I was harmed. When this change began to take place in my body, I fled to the Dragon Isle of Melnibone, which seems to have withstood the process and is the only safe land in all the waters of the world. My body—healed—swiftly, and I chanced another sailing to bring me here.”

“ You were courageous,” Elric said hollowly. “ You will be well 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 mirroring the horror in my brains !”

“ I will see to it,” Elric promised. He remained brooding for a few seconds before nodding farewell to the spy and leaving the room.

Moonglum met him outside.

“ It looks black for us, Elric,” he said softly.

Elric sighed. “ Aye—perhaps I should have gone to seek the *Chaos Shield* first.”

“ What’s that ?”

Elric 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 captains await you in the conference chamber.”

“ I will see them in a short while,” Elric promised. “ First I wish to go to my own room to collect my thoughts. Tell them I’ll join them when that’s done.”

When he reached his room, Elric locked the door behind him, still thinking of the spy's information. He knew that without supernatural aid no ordinary fleet, no matter how large or how courageously manned, could possibly withstand Jagreen Lern. And the fact was that he had only a comparatively small fleet, 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 regret 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 grimoires that, in the form of scrolls, tablets, books and sheets of precious metals engraved with ancient symbols, littered his room. The Elementals had 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 flung it on the 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.

Elric 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 tells 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 Elric 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 Elric of Melnibone 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, Elric."

Recognising the soft voice, but astonished nonetheless, Elric turned quickly towards the source and saw his wife, Zarozinia 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 angrily : "When did you come here ? Why ? I told you to remain in your father's palace at Karlaak until this business is done, if ever!"

"If ever . . ." she repeated, dropping her arms to her sides with a little shrug. Though scarcely more than a girl, with her full red lips and long black hair, she bore herself as a 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 he 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, lifting her head defiantly, "when he 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 opportunity to discover if he does !"

Elric paced the room in agitation. "As I love you, Zarozinia, believe that I would be in Karlaak 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 we'll meet again in joy—not in misery as we now must !”

He crossed to her and took her in his arms. “ Oh, Zarozinia, 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 here 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 we'll 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, Elric, can you answer ?”

He shook his head. “ Since you ask the question in malice, I'll not make the attempt to answer it.”

She cried suddenly : “ Oh, Elric ! I have 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 Karlaak, I beg you.”

“ If you wish it.”

She walked back into the small chamber which joined the main one.

t h r e e

"We talk only of defeat!" roared Kargan of the Purple Towns, beating upon the table with his fist, his beard bristling.

Dawn had found all but a few of the captains retiring through weariness. Kargan, Moonglum, Elric's cousin Dyvim Storm and moon-faced Dralab of Tarkesh, remained in the chamber, pondering tactics.

Elric 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 Lern. 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 mainland nations of Vilmir and Ilmiora.

Moonglum shifted his position, grunting slightly. "And if they drive us back, then back we must go, bending rather than breaking, and returning from other directions to attack and confuse them. It's in my mind that we'll have to move more rapidly than we'll 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," Elric 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 the Sighing Desert and the Weeping Waste to bury large quantities of food and such things 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 Dyvim Storm, pursing his aesthetic lips and raising a slanting eyebrow.

"Ay—but some things cannot be faced or considered—for if we are totally engulfed by Chaos at the outset, then we'll 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. "I'll 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 cloth-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 funeral 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 stare 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 leather 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. 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 otreodos. *Stormbringer* 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, Elric's ancestors were Dragon Masters over all that remained of the dragon kind. Elric, himself, was chief master—though now only his cousin Dyvim Storm knew the dragon speech and spells, the rest having perished in various ways since the Sack of Imrryr years before when Elric, 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 undercivilised allies of ours with our elegance. Have no fear that I shall live to survive this day's battle—for Fate has not finished with me yet and protects me as a mother would her son—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 the bright sun.

All were dressed in their finest martial glory, though none could match Elric. 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 Elric commanded a million eldritch warriors. Now a bare handful of Imrryrians 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 Storm was equipped in a close-fitting dragon helm, its protecting pieces fashioned to represent the entire head of a dragon, scaled in red and green and silver. His armour was lacquered yellow, though the rest of his dress was black, like Elric's. At his side was *Stormbringer's* sister-sword *Mournblade*.

As Elric rode up to the group, Dyvim Storm turned his heavily armoured head towards the open sea. There was little inkling of encroaching Chaos on the calm water or in the clear sky.

"At least we'll have good weather on our way to meet Jagreen Lern," Dyvim Storm said.

"A small mercy," Elric 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."

Elric 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 they would obviously follow in the rear of Jagreen Lern's war-fleet.

No, 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. Elric 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.

Kargan, in the thick but light sea-armour of his people which gave him the appearance of a hairy-faced armadillo, pointed as several small boats detached themselves from the fleet and sailed towards the quay.

"Here come the boats to take us to our ships, my lords!"

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 the 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 Elric, 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.

Elric squeezed Zarozinia's arm.

"Goodbye."

"Farewell, Elric—may whatever benevolent gods there are left on the Earth protect you."

"Save your prayers for my companions," he said quietly, "for they will be less able than I to face what lies out there."

Moonglum called to him and Zarozinia: "Give her a kiss, Elric, and come to the boat. Tell her we'll be back with victory tidings!"

Elric would never have admitted such familiarity, not even with his kinsman Dyvim Storm, 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 the one with warnings of ominous portent !"

She said nothing, but kissed him lightly on the 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 Kargan were steadying for him.

The oars splashed and bore the captains towards the flagship, *Timber-tearer*, Elric 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, Elric watched the backs of the warrior-rowers as they bent to the oars, supplementing 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 Elric.

" 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 pits, monsters and demons crowded my dreams."

Elric 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.⁴ Elric 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.”

Elric 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.

“Is it the enemy, my lord?” he said, as Elric clambered into his place. Elric stared hard towards the horizon, making out a kind of dazzling blackness that from time to time sent up sprawling goutts of stuff into the air where it hung for some moments, before sinking back into the main mass. Smokey, hard to define, it crept gradually nearer, crawling over the sea towards them.

“It’s the enemy,” said Elric quietly.

He remained for some while in the look-out’s cradle, studying the chaos-stuff as it flung 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, Elric also had a clear 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. Elric 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 fully aware of the battle-plan, as they all were for they had discussed it long enough. The leading squadron, under the command of Elric, 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 Lern. If Jagreen Lern could be slain or captured, their victory would be more likely.

Now the dark stuff was closer and Elric could just make out the 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 Lern.

The Chaos Ships!

Elric recognised them, now, from his own knowledge of occult lore.

These were the ships said normally to sail 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 the 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, Elric 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 dynamic growth.

Elric 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 Melnibone had worked, since their inception, to further the aims of Chaos.

But now Chaos must make war on Chaos ; Elric 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 shin down the mast, leaping the last few feet to land on the deck as Dyvim Slorm came up. Quickly he told his kinsman what he had seen.

Dyvim Slorm was astounded. " But the fleet of the dead never comes to the surface—save for . . ." his eyes widened.

Elric 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 man-

kind 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 battle?"

"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."

"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, we'll have little chance to discover the truth of that." Dyvim Storm gripped *Mournblade's* hilt. "Someone must wield these blades—these destiny swords—when the time comes for the deciding duel. Our allies diminish, Elric."

"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 Storm 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 I'll have no time for the summoning of spirits but will have to keep tight hold on my own lest some Chaos creature releases it."

Elric 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 lips 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,
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.”*

The spoken rune was merely an oralisation 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 elementals 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 Elric's summons awakened his memory and he remembered the folk of Melniboné 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 sorely 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, Elric knew that his invocation had met 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 seemed made of the sea itself, and a voice that was like a rushing tide.

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, Elric 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 much, for my folk are already suffering terribly from the depredations of our mutual enemy. We shall attempt to aid you if we can. That's all I promise.

The sea king sank back into the waters and Elric 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 Storm was used to dealing with supernaturals. Moonglum had always been dubious of Elric's powers to control his wild, elemental friends, while Kargan growled that Straasha may have been an ally of Elric'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.

f o u r

The fleet of Jagreen Lern bore towards them and, in its wake, the boiling stuff of Chaos hovered.

Elric gave the command and the rowers hauled at their oars, 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, Elric hauled his 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 Lern'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.

Elric 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 fires!" Kargan yelled and the group of men already primed for this leapt for the tubs containing a special brew which Elric 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.

“Don't engage unless forced to,” Elric called to the seamen, “keep aiming for the flagship. If we take that our advantage will be good !”

“Where are your allies, Elric ?” Kargan asked sardonically, shuddering a little as he saw the Chaos stuff in the distance suddenly move and erupt tendrils of black matter into the sky.

“They'll come, never fear,” Elric 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 Elric's craft broke through the enemy's first rank and reached the open sea, sailing towards Jagreen Lern'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 Elric.

Elric said : “It's unlikely that they actually do.” As their ship manoeuvred into its new position, he stared at the 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 Slorm, from the lower deck, pointed and shouted :

“See ! Chaos comes. Where is Straasha and his folk ?”

Elric 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 Elric then he smiled. “Come then. Let's do so !”

Speedily the squadron coursed towards the disturbing ships of death.

Moonglum muttered : “We are going to our doom, Elric. No man would willingly get close to those ships. Only the dead are drawn to them, and they do not go with joy !”

But Elric ignored his friend.

A strange silence seemed to come upon the waters so that 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 the Chaos ships that they could make out better the figures crowding the great decks. Horribly, Elric thought he recognised some of the gaunt faces of the dead and, involuntarily, he called to the sea-folk's king.

"*Straasha!*"

The waters heaved, foamed and seemed to be attempting to rise but then subsided again. *Straasha* heard—but he was finding it difficult to fight against the forces of Chaos.

"*Straasha!*"

It was no good, the waters hardly moved.

A mood of wild despair came over Elric. He screamed to Kargan: "We cannot wait for aid. Swing the ship round the Chaos fleet and we'll attempt to reach Jagreen Lern's flagship from the rear!"

Under Kargan's expert direction, the ship swung to avoid the Ships of Hell in a wide semi-circle. Spray cascaded against Elric's face, flooding the decks. He could hardly see through it as they cleared the Chaos ships which had now engaged other craft and were altering the nature of their timbers 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 Lern's vessel from the rear.

Elric, having but recently been a prisoner upon it, recognised it at once. Now they nearly struck the theocrat's vessel with their ram, but were swept off-course and had to manoeuvre 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 theocrat's vessel as the men of Pan Tang strove to cut the grappling ropes. More ropes followed and

then a boarding platform fell from its harness and landed squarely on Jagreen Lern'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 Lern.

Stormbringer took a dozen lives and a dozen souls before Elric had gained the main-deck. There a resplendant commander stood, surrounded by a group of officers. But it was not Jagreen Lern.

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 Lern!"

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 than the rest.

"Perhaps not," cried Elric with a wild laugh as he rushed towards him swinging *Stormbringer* in a shrieking arc, "but at least I'll have your life before I put the truth of your words to the 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! No!" 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 fell, screaming, to the deck, his hand still grasping the rail. The other he skewered in the bowels and, as *Stormbringer* sucked out his 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, he seemed almost to fly over the deck and rip into them, slicing away limbs as if they were stalks of flowers, until he encountered the commander himself.

The commander said softly, weakly : " I surrender. Do not take my soul."

" Where is Jagreen Lern ?"

The commander pointed into the distance, where the Chaos fleet could be seen creating havoc amongst the eastern ships. " There ! 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 enslaved two continents, Elric struck his blade through the ornate armour and, delicately, with all the old malevolence of his 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 Lern 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 the two flagships, locked together by their grapples. There was no chance of cutting one of them free before the fleet arrived.

Elric yelled to Dyvim Slorm and Moonglum whom he saw running towards him from the other end of the deck.

" Over the 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, then realised the truth of his words. Other men of both sides were already leaping into the bloody water. Elric sheathed his sword and dived. The sea 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, close 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 weird 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, Elric? 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 Elric a familiar shape.

"Straasha!"

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 breath beneath the sea!"

You will not need to.

"Very well."

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 there 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. Elric knew it by a description in one of his grimoires. The domain of Straasha the Sea King.

The elemental bore them to the largest construction and one section of it seemed to fade away to admit them. 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.

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.

"Elric, 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."

Elric 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 vengeful trees—ever ready to take their revenge on anyone that comes into their domain."

"A hard task, to take that shield for myself," Elric mused. "But take it I must, for without it Fate's purpose would be forever thwarted—and with it I might take 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," Elric said gratefully. "For when the time comes, I shall need it."

"What do you plan to do, Elric?" Dyvim Storm 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, Elric," Moonglum promised.

"I also," said Dyvim Storm.

"We shall require a fourth if we are to carry out the prophecy," Elric said. "I wonder what became of Kargan."

Moonglum looked at the ground. "Did you not notice?"

"Notice what?"

"On board Jagreen Lern'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 sword did?"

Elric felt suddenly exhausted. "No. Did I—did it—*kill* 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. "But I reckon I have escaped for some time and, if it had had a taste for me, it would have bitten long-since."

"Perhaps. But I grieve for Kargan. He was a good friend."

"Elric," Moonglum said urgently. "You know that Kargan'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 there sacrifice us both ! 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," Moonglum said in a baffled voice. "Oh, I fail to understand all 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 Storm 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," Elric 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.

"And at least," Moonglum told Elric, "future generations will thank *Stormbringer* if she fulfills her destiny."

"If Sepiriz is right," Elric 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," Elric 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 here ?"

"None," said Elric.

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They staggered wearily on to the beach of the Isle of the Purple Towns and Elric 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 sea is unspoiled, it will mean the passing of us both, will 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 Evening, 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," Elric said hollowly. "Is my wife still 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," Elric said, "we shall see."

Later, they watched as the battered remnants of the fleet began to sail into the harbour. Moonglum counted despairingly. "So few, Elric."

"Too few for anything but flight," the albino agreed. "This is a black day."

From behind them in the courtyard, a trumpet sounded.

"That means an arrival from the mainland," Dyvim Storm said excitedly. "What can it mean ?"

They strode together down to the courtyard, in time to see a red-clad archer dismounting from his horse. His near-fleshless face might have been carved in solid bone and he stooped with weariness.

"Rackhir!" Elric said with surprise. "You are in charge of the Ilmioran coastal defences. Why are you here?"

"We were driven back. Jagreen Lern launched not one fleet, but two. The other came in from the Pale Sea and took us virtually by surprise. Our defences were crushed, Chaos swept in and we were forced to flee. The enemy has now established itself less than a hundred miles from Bakshaan and marches across country presumably to meet up with the army the theocrat expects to land here and on the mainland!"

"Gods! We're virtually surrounded, then!"

"Aye. What can we do, Elric, against so many?"

Elric frowned, his heart sinking. "We must seek that shield," he said decisively. "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!"

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 Ilmiora, parts of Vilmir 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 Elric and his companions finally reached Karlaak 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.

Zarozinia greeted Elric with trouble-tinged joy.

"There were rumours you were dead—killed in the sea battle."

Elric clasped her to him.

"I cannot stay long," he said, "I have a mission beyond the Sighing Desert."

"I know."

"You know? How?"

"Sepiriz was here. He left a gift in our stables for you. Four Nihrain horses."

"A useful gift. They will carry us far more swiftly than any other beasts. But will that be swift enough? I hesitate to leave you here with Chaos encroaching at such a rate."

"You must leave me, Elric. If all seems lost here, we shall flee into the Weeping Waste. Even Jagreen Lern can have scant interest in the barrens."

"Promise me that you will."

"I promise."

Feeling a little more relieved, Elric 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 had—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 Elric 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, thanks for your gift. They will probably make the difference between our being too late or not," Elric said sincerely. "But why are you here now?"

"Because I can perform another small service before your main journey begins," said the black seer. "All of you save Moonglum have weapons endowed with some special power. Elric and Dyvim Storm have their runeblades, Rackhir, the Arrows of Law, which the sorcerer Lamsar gave him at the 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—as *Storm-bringer*," Sepiriz said. "But I have a charm for your sword, a slight one that my contact with the White Lords has enabled me to use. Give me your sword, Moonglum."

A trifle unwillingly, Moonglum unsheathed his curved steel blade and handed 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 Eastlander.

"There. Now the sword has the blessing of Law and you will find it more able to withstand Law's enemies."

Elric said impatiently. "We must ride now, Sepiriz, for time grows desperately short."

"Ride, then. 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 the magical Nihrain steeds which had helped Elric more than once, and rode away from Karlaak by the Weeping Waste. Rode away perhaps for ever.

In a short while they had entered the Weeping Waste, for this was the quickest route to the Sighing Desert.

Rackhir alone knew this country well, and he guided them.

The Nihrain steeds, treading the ground of their own strange plane, seemed literally to fly for it could be observed that their hooves did not touch the damp grasses of the Weeping Waste. They moved at incredible speed and Rackhir, until he became used to the pace, gripped his reins tightly.

In this place of eternal rainfall, the land ahead was difficult to see, and the drizzle spread down their faces and into their eyes 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 the high crags with their tops lost in cloud and soon, thanks to the 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 furious rays of the sun blazing down on them, knowing they had come to the edge of the Sighing Desert. This wind soughed constantly over the barren sand and rocks, its continuous 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, dwelling on personal thoughts.

Elric 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 emotions, finding it hard, as he often did, to retain any objective impression of his predicament. His past had been too troubled, 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 things, learn to live with it, but, except in moments of extreme personal crisis, had rarely managed to think coherently for any length of time. He was, perhaps, because of his outlawed 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, clash 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 intermediary type and Elric was half-consciously aware of this; aware that he was the last of an inbred line who had, without effort, used Chaos-given sorcery as others used their earthly skills—for convenience. His race had been of Chaos, having no need of self-control or the self-restrictions of the new races who had emerged with the Age of the 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 were the rule and Chaos rarely exerted influence—if Elric triumphed and destroyed Chaos, destroying the world he knew at the same time.

This thought added to his gloom, for he had no destiny but death, no purpose save what fate willed. Why fight against it, 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—a suicide, in fact, a genocide even.

He breathed deeply of the hot, dry air and expelled it from his stinging lungs, spitting out the clogging sand which had managed to enter his mouth and nostrils.

Dyvim Storm shared something of Elric's mood, though his feelings were not so strong. He had a more ordered life than had Elric, though they were of the same blood. Whereas Elric had questioned the custom of his folk, even renounced kingship that he might explore the new lands of the Young Kingdoms and compare their way of life with his own, Dyvim Storm had never indulged in such questioning. He had suffered bitterness when, through Elric's renegade activities, the Dreaming City of Imrryr, last stronghold of the old race of Melnibone, had been razed; shock, too, of a kind, when he and what remained of the Imrryrians had been forced out into the world, also, to make their living as mercenaries of those they considered upstart kings of lowly and contemptible peoples. Dyvim Storm, who had never questioned, did not question now, though he was disturbed.

Moonglum was less self-absorbed. Since the time, many years before, when he and Elric had met and fought against the Devil Riders of Dharzi together, he had felt a peculiar sympathy, even empathy, with his friend. When Elric sank into such moods as the one he was in now, Moonglum felt tormented only because he could not help him. Many times he had sought the means of pulling Elric out of his gloomy depression, but these days he had learned that it was impossible. By nature cheerful and optimistic, even he felt dominated by the doom which was on them.

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 his 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 Tanelorn with a small party of those who wished to accompany him and offer their services to Elric.

Peering through the sand-filled air he saw something looming ahead—a single mountain rising from the wastes of the desert, as if placed there by other means than natural.

He called, pointing : " Elric ! There ! That must be Mordaga's castle !"

Elric 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.

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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 ?

Elric 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 Elric'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.

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 *Stormbringer* 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 *Stormbringer*, 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 Elric could weakly grasp the hilt of *Stormbringer* 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 as 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 Elric 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 Storm, a trifle less spontaneously, imitated Elric's method of despatching the tree-creatures and soon he too became filled with the stolen souls of the demons imprisoned within the elders and his wild shout joined Elric's as, like fiendish woodsmen, they attacked again and again, each victory lending them 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 king's 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 blazing with dreadful fire, his milk-white hair streaming in the burning wind, Elric 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 Elric was no longer split in his loyalties, there was no conflict in him now. His ancestors' blood 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 Storm seemed equally as possessed and Moonglum sent up a heartfelt prayer to whatever kindly gods remained in the universe that Elric was his ally and not his enemy.

They were close to the top now, Elric 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.

Elric 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 Elric and Dyvim Storm 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 re-assembling as Elric and Dyvim Storm 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. "I'll see that a few of them get a cleaner death," he muttered, nocking another arrow to the string.

As Elric 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 saw that already the turf was littered with a great many corpses.

Rackhir cried to Elric: "Stop! Elric—let us finish these. You have no need to take their souls. We can kill them with more natural methods!"

But Elric laughèd and carried on his work.

As Elric finished another warrior and there were no others in the immediate area, Rackhir seized him by the arm.

"Elric—"

Stormbringer turned in Elric's hand, howling its satiated glee, and clove down at Rackhir.

Seeing his fate, Rackhir sobbed and sought to avoid the blow. But it landed in his shoulder blade and sheared down to his breast-bone.

"Elric!" he cried. "Not *my* soul, too!"

And so died the hero Rackhir the Red Archer, famous in the Eastlands, cloven by a friend's treacherous blade.

Then came realisation. Elric 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 Elric's tortured face and a great, racking groan came from him.

"Once more," he muttered, "once more. Will it never cease?"

Beyond him, his two remaining companions stood on opposite sides of the field of the slain. Dyvim Storm 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 Elric with horrified eyes which yet held a gleam of sympathy for his friend, for he knew well Elric's doom and knew that the life of one close to Elric 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!" Elric raised himself to his feet and turned to look at the huge castle of granite and bluestone, which stood in enigmatic silence as if awaiting his next action. On the battlements of the topmost turret he could make out a figure which could only be a giant.

"I swear by your stolen soul, Rackhir, that what you wished to come to pass *shall* come to pass, though I, a thing of Chaos, achieve it. Law will triumph and Chaos will be driven back! Armed with sword 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 the shield."

Dyvim Storm, not realising quite what had happened, shouted in exultation to his kinsman. "Elric—let's visit the sad giant now!"

But Moonglum, coming up to gaze down on the ruined body of Rackhir, murmured: "Aye, Chaos is the cause, Elric. I'll join in your vengeance with a will so long as," he shuddered, "I'm spared from the attentions of your hell-blade."

Together, three abreast, they marched through the open portal of Mordaga's castle and were immediately in a rich and barbarically furnished hall.

"Mordaga!" Elric cried. "We have come to fulfill a prophecy! 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 tall as two men, but his back was slightly stooped. He had long, curling black hair and was clad in a deep blue smock, belted at the waist. Upon his great feet were simple leather sandals. His black eyes were full of a sorrow such as Moonglum had only seen before in Elric's eyes.

Upon the sad giant's arm was a round shield which bore upon it the eight amber arrows of Chaos. It was of a silvery green colour and very beautiful. He had no other weapons.

"I know the 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."

Elric 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 Elric. "Take the shield and change fate this once."

Elric nodded. "I will."

With a tremendous sigh, the giant deposited the *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 think."

"You may not die thus, with your shield's protection gone," Elric 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 Elric or Dyvim Storm could cry out or stop him.

Then they heard a single shriek that seemed to echo away into eternity, a crash which shook the hall and then the footfall returning.

Moonglum reappeared in the entrance, a bloody sword in his hand.

Unable to understand this totally uncharacteristic action, Elric was silent, merely staring at the 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."

"Why?" said Elric, still mystified.

Grimly, Moonglum continued: "He had to perish as fate decreed. We are servants of fate, now, Elric and to divert it in any small way is to hamper its aims. But more than that it was the beginning of my own vengeance taking. If Mordaga had not surrounded himself with such a host, Rackhir would not have died."

Elric 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, Elric?"

Elric 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 Ilmiora and Vilmir await our aid—if they have not already wholly fallen to Chaos!"

seven

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 Voashoon, Zarozinia's father.

"What has happened?" Elric asked anxiously. "Where is Zarozinia?"

"Our continent has fallen to Chaos, Elric. As for Zarozinia, I know not if she's lost, dead or captured."

"Did you not seek for her?" Elric said accusingly.

The old man shrugged. "My son I have looked upon so much horror these past days that 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 still 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 Karlaak, with a vast horde of mounted men and infantry following behind. Confusion prevails—you'll 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?"

"We'll 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 Eshmir 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 Elric 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 rock 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 mouth that could speak. From this poor creature they learned that Karlaak 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 Elric. Rumour was that the Dragon Isle of Melnibone was the only place where Chaos had been unable to exert its influence.

"If, when our business is done, we can reach Melnibone," Elric 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 Lern if we could waken them."

"What use is it to fight them now?" Dyvim Storm said defeatedly. "Jagreen Lern has won, Elric. 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."

Dyvim Storm looked dubious, but he said nothing.

And then, at last, they came to the camp of Chaos.

No mortal nightmare could encompass such a terrible vision. The towering Ships of Hell dominated the place as they observed it from a distance, utterly horrified by the sight. Shooting flames of all colours seemed to flicker everywhere over the camp, fiends of all kinds mingled with the men, the evilly beautiful Dukes of Hell conferred with the gaunt faced kings who had allied themselves to Jagreen Lern and perhaps now regretted it. Every so often, the ground heaved and erupted and any human beings

unfortunate enough to be in the area were either engulfed and totally transformed or else had their bodies warped in indescribable ways. The noise was dreadful, blending of human voices and roaring Chaos sounds, devil's wailing laughter and, quite often, the tortured scream of a human soul who had perhaps relented his choice of loyalty and now suffered madness. The stench was disgusting, of corruption, of blood, and of evil. The Ships of Hell moved slowly about through the horde which stretched for miles, dotted with great pavilions of kings, their silk banners fluttering, hollow pride compared to the might of Chaos. Many of the human beings could scarcely be told from the Chaos creatures, their forms were so changed under the influence of Chaos.

Elric muttered to his friends as they sat in their saddles watching. "It is obvious that the warping influence of Chaos grows even stronger among the human ranks. This will continue until even Jagreen Lern and the human leaders will lose every semblance of humanity and become just a fraction of the churning stuff of Chaos. This will mean the end of the human race—mankind will pass away forever, taken into the maw of Chaos.

"You look upon the last of mankind, my friends, save for ourselves. Soon it will be indistinguishable from anything else. All this unstable Earth is beneath the hell of the Lords of Chaos—or soon will be—and they are gradually absorbing it into their realm, into their own plane. They will first remould and then steal the Earth altogether; it will become just another lump of clay for them to mould into whatever grotesque shapes take their fancy."

"And we seek to stop *that*," Moonglum said hopelessly. "We cannot, Elric!"

"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 Lern is there. I have three good reasons for venturing there."

"No, Elric! 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, Elric—!” Moonglum cried and then watched as, his *Chaos Shield* pulsing, Elric spurred his Nihrain steed towards the camp.

Protected against the influence of Chaos, Elric 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 brain-jarring 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 *Stormbringer* had slain the gods imprisoned in the elder trees, the vitality which the sword passed into him was almost without limit, yet every soul that Elric stole from Jagreen Lern’s warriors was another fraction of vengeance reaped. Against men, he was invincible. He split one heavily armoured warrior from head to crutch, sheared through the saddle and smashed the horse’s backbone apart.

Then the remaining warriors dropped back suddenly and Elric felt his body tingle with peculiar sensations, knew he was in the area of influence exerted by the 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 Elric 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 sides 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, Elric knew, was the guise he took when he manifested himself on Earth.

Contrasting with the ships seen from the distance, once aboard Elric 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 sea-raiders 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 Pyaray seemed unaware of his presence. Presumably they considered themselves entirely free from any kind of attack now they had conquered all the known world. 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 Elric 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 Lern and, if she were really there, rescue Zarozinia and bear her to safety.

Up the dark decks, through the nets of strange colours, Elric 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, putting 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 ?"

Elric shouted in impudent triumph at seeing his shield work with such effect : "'Tis Elric 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. Elric 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 Lern, 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 Elric's.

"You later, theocrat," Elric promised grimly.

"You're a fool, Elric! You're doomed now, whatever you do!"

It was probably true, but he did not care.

"Aside, upstart," Elric said as, his shield up, he moved warily towards the many-tentacled Lord of Chaos.

"You are the killer of many cousins of mine, Elric," the creature said in a low, slithering 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 and his soul, his memory said to him.

Elric 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 pain.

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 thrash 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 Elric 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 Lern.

The theocrat's anxious face peered down at him and he yelled : "You'll find a present for you in yonder cabin, Elric !"

Torn between pursuing the theocrat and investigating the cabin, Elric turned and opened the door. From inside came a dreadful sobbing.

"Zarozinia !" he cried. He ducked into the dark place and there 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 Lern do this ?"

"He and his ally," the head nodded.

Sickened, Elric 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 Elric, for I am useless to myself and you, now ! Carry my soul with yours and we shall be forever together."

He tried to withdraw the thirsty runeblade, 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 he wept as it did so.

"Oh, Zarozinia," he sobbed. "Oh, my love !"

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 Lern had evidently made good his escape and Elric 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 wildly from the camp of Chaos, 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 Zarozinia's youthful voice whispering comforting words as, still sobbing, he galloped away from the camp of Chaos.

—Michael Moorcock

The last story in this series, **Doomed Lord's Prayer** will appear in the next issue of *Science Fantasy*.

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*Falkman, James, 1963 to 1901, Peace in Rest—
it was a curious life cycle which resurrected
Falkman from the grave and made him tread the
path of his earlier life . . .*

TIME OF PASSAGE

BY J. G. BALLARD

Sunlight spilled among the flowers and tombstones, turning the cemetery into a bright garden of sculpture. Like two large gaunt crows, the grave-diggers leaned on their spades between the marble angels, their shadows arching across the smooth white flank of one of the recent graves.

The gilt lettering was still fresh and untarnished.

JAMES FALKMAN

1963 — 1901

“The End is but the Beginning”

Leisurely they began to pare back the crisp turf, then dismantled the headstone and swathed it in a canvas sheet, laying it behind the graves in the next aisle. Biddle, the older of the two, a lean man in a black waistcoat, pointed to the cemetery gates, where the first mourning party approached.

“They’re here. Let’s get our backs into it.”

The younger man, Biddle’s son, watched the small procession winding through the graves. His nostrils scented the sweet broken earth. “They’re always early,” he murmured reflectively. “It’s a strange thing, you never see them come on time.”

A clock tolled from the chapel among the cypresses. Working swiftly, they scooped out the soft earth, piling it into a neat cone at the grave’s head. A few minutes later, when the sexton

arrived with the principal mourners, the polished teak of the coffin was exposed, and Biddle jumped down on to the lid and scraped away the damp earth clinging to its brass rim.

The ceremony was brief and the twenty mourners, led by Falkman's sister, a tall white-haired woman with a narrow autocratic face, leaning on her husband's arm, soon returned to the chapel. Biddle gestured to his son. They jerked the coffin out of the ground and loaded it on to a cart, strapping it down under the harness. Then they heaped the earth back into the grave and relaid the squares of turf.

As they pushed the cart back to the chapel the sunlight shone brightly among the thinning graves.

Forty-eight hours later the coffin arrived at James Falkman's large grey-stoned house on the upper slopes of Mortmere Park. The high-walled avenue was almost deserted and few people saw the hearse enter the tree-lined drive. The blinds were drawn over the windows, and huge wreaths rested among the furniture in the hall where Falkman lay motionlessly in his coffin on a mahogany table. Veiled by the dim light, his square, strong-jawed face seemed composed and unblemished, a short lock of hair over his forehead making his expression less severe than his sister's.

A solitary beam of sunlight, finding its way through the dark sycamores which guarded the house, slowly traversed the room as the morning progressed, and shone for a few minutes upon Falkman's open eyes. Even after the beam had moved away a faint glimmer of light still remained in the pupils, like the reflection of a star glimpsed in the bottom of a dark well.

All day, helped by two of her friends, sharp-faced women in long black coats, Falkman's sister moved quietly about the house. Her quick deft hands shook the dust from the velvet curtains in the library, wound the miniature Louis XV clock on the study desk, and re-set the great barometer on the staircase. None of the women spoke to each other, but within a few hours the house was transformed, the dark wood in the hall gleaming as the first callers were admitted.

"Mr. and Mrs. Montefiore . . ."

"Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell . . ."

"Miss Evelyn Jermyn and Miss Elizabeth . . ."

"Mr. Samuel Banbury . . ."

One by one, nodding in acknowledgment as they were announced, the callers trooped into the hall and paused over the coffin, examining Falkman's face with discreet interest, then passed into the dining room where they were presented with a glass of port and a tray of sweetmeats. Most of them were elderly, over-dressed in the warm spring weather, one or two obviously ill at ease in the great oak-panelled house, and all unmistakably revealed the same air of hushed expectancy.

The following morning Falkman was lifted from his coffin and carried upstairs to the bedroom overlooking the drive. The winding sheet was removed and his frail body dressed in a pair of thick woollen pyjamas. He lay quietly between the cold sheets, his grey face sightless and reposed, unaware of his sister crying softly on the high-backed chair beside him. Only when Dr. Markham called and put his hand on her shoulder did she contain herself, relieved to have given way to her feelings.

Almost as if this were a signal, Falkman opened his eyes. For a moment they wavered uncertainly, the pupils weak and watery. Then he gazed up at his sister's tear-marked face, his head motionless on the pillow. As she and the doctor leaned forward Falkman smiled fleetingly, his lips parting across his teeth in an expression of immense patience and understanding. Then, apparently exhausted, he lapsed into a deep sleep.

After securing the blinds over the windows, his sister and the doctor stepped from the room. Below, the doors closed quietly into the drive, and the house became silent. Gradually the sounds of Falkman's breathing grew more steady and filled the bedroom, overlaid by the swaying of the dark trees outside.

So James Falkman made his arrival. For the next week he lay quietly in his bedroom, his strength increasing hourly, and managed to eat his first meals prepared by his sister. She sat in the blackwood chair, her mourning habit exchanged for a grey woollen dress, examining him critically.

"Now, James, you'll have to get a better appetite than that. Your poor body is completely wasted."

Falkman pushed away the tray and let his long slim hands fall across his chest. He smiled amiably at his sister. "Careful, Betty, or you'll turn me into a milk pudding."

His sister briskly straightened the eiderdown. "If you don't like my cooking, James, you can fend for yourself."

A faint chuckle slipped between Falkman's lips. "Thank you for telling me, Betty, I fully intend to."

He lay back, smiling weakly to himself as his sister stalked out with the tray. Teasing her did him almost as much good as the meals she prepared, and he felt the blood reaching down into his cold feet. His face was still grey and flaccid, and he conserved his strength carefully, only his eyes moving as he watched the ravens alighting on the window ledge.

Gradually, as his conversations with his sister became more frequent, Falkman gained sufficient strength to sit up. He began to take a fuller interest in the world around him, watching the people in the avenue through the french windows and disputing his sister's commentary on them.

"There's Sam Banbury again," she remarked testily as a small leprechaun-like old man hobbled past. "Off to the Swan as usual. When's he going to get a job, I'd like to know."

"Be more charitable, Betty. Sam's a very sensible fellow. I'd rather go to the pub than have a job."

His sister snorted sceptically, her assessment of Falkman's character apparently at variance with this statement. "You've got one of the finest houses in Mortmere Park," she told him. "I think you should be more careful with people like Sam Banbury. He's not in your class, James."

Falkman smiled patiently at his sister. "We're all in the same class, or have you been here so long you've forgotten, Betty."

"We all forget," she told him soberly. "You will too, James. It's sad, but we're in this world now, and we must concern ourselves with it. If the Church can keep the memory alive for us, so much the better. As you'll find out though, the majority of folk remember nothing. Perhaps it's a good thing."

She grudgingly admitted the first visitors, fussing about so that Falkman could barely exchange a word with them. In fact, the visits tired him, and he could do little more than pass a few formal pleasantries. Even when Sam Banbury brought him a pipe and tobacco pouch he had to muster all his energy to thank him and had none left to prevent his sister from making off with them.

Only when the Reverend Matthews called did Falkman manage to summon together his strength, for half an hour spoke earnestly to the parson, who listened with rapt attention, interjecting a few eager questions. When he left he seemed

refreshed and confident, and strode down the stairs with a gay smile at Falkman's sister.

Within three weeks Falkman was out of bed, and managed to hobble downstairs and inspect the house and garden. His sister protested, dogging his slow painful footsteps with sharp reminders of his feebleness, but Falkman ignored her. He found his way to the conservatory, and leaned against one of the ornamental columns, his nervous fingers feeling the leaves of the miniature trees, the scent of flowers flushing his face. Outside, in the grounds, he examined everything around him, as if comparing it with some Elysian paradise in his mind.

He was walking back to the house when he twisted his ankle sharply in the crazy paving. Before he could cry for help he had fallen headlong across the hard stones.

"James Falkman, will you never listen!" his sister protested, as she helped him across the terrace. "I warned you to stay in bed!"

Reaching the lounge, Falkman sat down thankfully in an arm-chair, reassembling his stunned limbs. "Quiet, Betty, do you mind," he admonished his sister when his breath returned. "I'm still here, and I'm perfectly well."

He had stated no more than the truth. After the accident he began to recover spectacularly, his progress towards complete health accelerating without a break, as if the tumble had freed him from the lingering fatigue and discomfort of the previous weeks. His step became brisk and lively, his complexion brightened, a soft pink glow filling out his cheeks, and he moved busily around the house.

A month afterwards his sister returned to her own home, acknowledging his ability to look after himself, and her place was taken by the housekeeper. After re-establishing himself in the house, Falkman became increasingly interested in the world outside. He hired a comfortable car and chauffeur, and spent most of the winter afternoons and evenings at his club; soon he found himself the centre of a wide circle of acquaintances. He became the chairman of a number of charitable committees, where his good humour, tolerance and shrewd judgement made him well respected. He now held himself erectly, his grey hair sprouting luxuriantly, here and there touched by black flecks, jaw jutting firmly from sun-burnt cheeks.

Every Sunday he attended the morning and evening services at his church, where he owned a private pew, and was somewhat saddened to see that only the older people formed the congregation. However, he himself found that the picture painted by the liturgy became increasingly detached from his own memories as the latter faded, too soon became a meaningless charade that he could accept only by an act of faith.

A few years later, when he became increasingly restless, he decided to accept the offer of a partnership in a leading firm of stock-brokers.

Many of his acquaintances at the club were also finding jobs, forsaking the placid routines of smoking room and conservatory garden. Harold Caldwell, one of his closest friends, was appointed Professor of History at the University, and Sam Banbury became manager of the Swan Hotel.

The ceremony on Falkman's first day at the stock exchange was dignified and impressive. Three junior men also joining the firm were introduced to the assembled staff by the senior partner, Mr. Montefiore, and each presented with a gold watch to symbolise the years he would spend with the firm. Falkman received an embossed silver cigar case and was loudly applauded.

For the next five years Falkman threw himself wholeheartedly into his work, growing more extrovert and aggressive as his appetite for the material pleasures of life increased. He became a keen golfer, then, as the exercise strengthened his physique, played his first games of tennis. An influential member of the business community, his days passed in a pleasant round of conferences and dinner parties. He no longer attended the church, but instead spent his Sundays escorting the more attractive of his lady acquaintances to the race courses and regattas.

He found it all the more surprising, therefore, when a persistent mood of dejection began to haunt him. Although without any apparent source, this deepened slowly, and he found himself reluctant to leave his house in the evenings. He resigned from his committees and no longer visited his club. At the stock exchange he felt permanently distracted, and would stand for hours by the window, staring down at the traffic.

Finally, when his grasp of the business began to slip, Mr. Montefiore suggested that he go on indefinite leave.

For a week Falkman listlessly paced around the huge empty house. Sam Banbury frequently called to see him, but Falkman's sense of grief was beyond any help. He drew the blinds over the windows and changed into a black tie and suit, sat blankly in the darkened library.

At last, when his depression had reached its lowest ebb, he went to the cemetery to collect his wife.

After the congregation had dispersed, Falkman paused outside the vestry to tip the grave-digger, Biddle, and compliment him on his young son, a cherubic three-year-old who was playing among the headstones. Then he rode back to Mortmere Park in the car following the hearse, the remainder of the cortege behind him."

"A grand turn-out, James," his sister told him approvingly. "Twenty cars altogether, not including the private ones."

Falkman thanked her, his eyes examining his sister with critical detachment. In the fifteen years he had known her she had coarsened perceptibly, her voice roughening and her gestures becoming broader. A distinct social gap had always separated them, a division which Falkman had accepted charitably, but it was now widening markedly. Her husband's business had recently begun to fail, and her thoughts had turned almost exclusively to the subjects of money and social prestige.

As Falkman congratulated himself on his good sense and success, a curious premonition, indistinct but nonetheless disturbing, stirred through his mind.

Like Falkman himself fifteen years earlier, his wife first lay in her coffin in the hall, the heavy wreaths transforming it into a dark olive-green bower. Behind the lowered blinds the air was dim and stifled, and with her rich red hair flaring off her forehead, and her broad-cheeks and full lips, his wife seemed to Falkman like some sleeping enchantress in a magical arbour. He gripped the silver foot-rail of the coffin and stared at her mindlessly, aware of his sister shepherding the guests to the port and whisky. He traced with his eyes the exquisite dips and hollows around his wife's neck and chin, the white skin sweeping smoothly to her strong shoulders. The next day, when she was carried upstairs, her presence filled the bedroom. All afternoon he sat beside her, waiting patiently for her to wake.

Shortly after five o'clock, in the few minutes of light left before the dusk descended, when the air hung motionlessly under the trees in the garden, a faint echo of life moved across her face. Her eyes cleared and then focussed on the ceiling.

Breathlessly, Falkman leaned forward and took one of her cold hands. Far within it, the pulse sounded faintly.

"Marion," he whispered.

Her head inclined slightly, lips parting in a weak smile. For several moments she gazed serenely at her husband.

"Hello, Jamie."

His wife's arrival completely rejuvenated Falkman. A devoted husband, he was soon completely immersed in their life together. As she recovered from the long illness after her arrival, Falkman entered the prime of his life. His grey hair became sleek and black, his face grew thicker, the chin firmer and stronger. He returned to the stock-exchange, taking up his job with renewed interest.

He and Marion made a handsome couple. At intervals they would visit the cemetery and join in the service celebrating the arrival of another of their friends, but these became less frequent. Other parties continually visited the cemetery, thinning the ranks of graves, and large areas had reverted to open lawn as the coffins were withdrawn and the tombstones removed. The firm of undertakers near the cemetery which was responsible for notifying mourning relatives closed down and was sold. Finally, after the grave-digger, Biddle, recovered his own wife from the last of the graves the cemetery was converted into a children's playground.

The years of their marriage were Falkman's happiest. With each successive summer Marion became slimmer and more youthful, her red hair a brilliant diadem that stood out among the crowds in the street when she came to see him. They would walk home arm in arm, in the summer evenings pause among the willows by the river to embrace each other like lovers.

Indeed, their happiness became such a byword among their friends that over two hundred guests attended the church ceremony celebrating the long years of their marriage. As they knelt together at the altar before the priest Marion seemed to Falkman like a demure rose.

This was the last night they were to spend together. Over the years Falkman had become less interested in his work at

the stock-exchange, and the arrival of older and more serious men had resulted in a series of demotions for him. Many of his friends were facing similar problems. Harold Caldwell had been forced to resign his professorship and was now a junior lecturer, taking post-graduate courses to familiarise himself with the great body of new work that had been done in the previous thirty years. Sam Banbury was a waiter at the Swan Hotel.

Marion went to live with her parents, and the Falkman's apartment, to which they had moved some years earlier after the house was closed and sold, was let to new tenants. Falkman, whose tastes had become simpler as the years passed, took a room in a hostel for young men, but he and Marion saw each other every evening. He felt increasingly restless, half-conscious that his life was moving towards an inescapable focus, and often thought of giving up his job.

Marion remonstrated with him. "But you'll lose everything you've worked for, Jamie. All those years."

Falkman shrugged, chewing on a stem of grass as they lay in the park during one of their lunch hours. Marion was now a salesgirl in a department store.

"Perhaps, but I resent being demoted. Even Montefiore is leaving. His grandfather has just been appointed chairman." He rolled over and put his head in her lap. "It's so dull in that stuffy office, with all those pious old men. I'm not satisfied with it any longer."

Marion smiled affectionately at his naivety and enthusiasm. Falkman was now more handsome than she had ever remembered him, his sun-burnt face almost unlined.

"It's been wonderful together, Marion," he told her on the eve of their thirtieth anniversary. "How lucky we've been never to have had a child. Do you realise that some people even have three or four? It's absolutely tragic."

"It comes to us all, though, Jamie," she reminded him. "Some people say it's a very beautiful and noble experience, having a child."

All evening he and Marion wandered around the town together, Falkman's desire for her quickened by her increasing demureness. Since she had gone to live with her parents Marion had become almost too shy to take his hand.

Then he lost her.

Walking through the market in the town centre, they were joined by two of Marion's friends, Elizabeth and Evelyn Jermyn.

"There's Sam Banbury," Evelyn pointed out as a firework crackled from a stall on the other side of the market. "Playing the fool as usual." She and her sister clucked disapprovingly. Tight-mouthed and stern, they wore dark serge coats buttoned to their necks.

Distracted by Sam, Falkman wandered off a few steps, suddenly found that the three girls had walked away. Darting through the crowd, he tried to catch up with them, briefly glimpsed Marion's red hair.

He fought his way through the stalls, almost knocking over a barrow of vegetables, and shouted at Sam Banbury:

"Sam! Have you seen Marion?"

Banbury pocketed his crackers and helped him to scan the crowd. For an hour they searched. Finally Sam gave up and went home, leaving Falkman to hang about the cobbled square under the dim lights when the market closed, wandering among the tinsel and litter as the stall-holders packed up for home.

"Excuse me, have you seen a girl here? A girl with red hair?"

"Please, she was here this afternoon."

"A girl"

" . . . called"

Stunned, he realised that he had forgotten her name.

Shortly afterwards, Falkman gave up his job and went to live with his parents. Their small red-brick house was on the opposite side of the town; between the crowded chimney pots he could sometimes see the distant slopes of Mortmere Park. His life now began a less carefree phase, as most of his energy went into helping his mother and looking after his sister Betty. By comparison with his own house his parents' home was bleak and uncomfortable, altogether alien to everything Falkman had previously known. Although kind and respectable people, his parents' lives were circumscribed by their lack of success or education. They had no interest in music or the theatre, and Falkman found his mind beginning to dull and coarsen.

His father was openly critical of him for leaving his job, but the hostility between them gradually subsided as he more and more began to dominate Falkman, restricting his freedom and reducing his pocket money, even warning him not to play with

certain of his friends. In fact, going to live with his parents had taken Falkman into an entirely new world.

By the time he began to go to school Falkman had completely forgotten his past life, his memories of Marion and the great house where they had lived surrounded by servants altogether obliterated.

During his first term at school he was in a class with the older boys, whom the teachers treated as equals, but like his parents they began to extend their influence over him as the years passed. At times Falkman rebelled against this attempt to suppress his own personality, but at last they entirely dominated him, controlling his activities and moulding his thoughts and speech. The whole process of education, he dimly realised, was designed to prepare him for the strange twilight world of his earliest childhood. It deliberately eliminated every trace of sophistication, breaking down, with its constant repetitions and brain-splitting exercises, all his knowledge of language and mathematics, substituting for them a collection of meaningless rhymes and chants, and out of this constructing an artificial world of total infantilism.

At last, when the process of education had reduced him almost to the stage of an inarticulate infant, his parents intervened by removing him from the school, and the final years of his life were spent at home.

“Mama, can I sleep with you?”

Mrs. Falkman looked down at the serious-faced little boy who leaned his head on her pillow. Affectionately she pinched his square jaw and then touched her husband's shoulder as he stirred. Despite the years between father and son, their two bodies were almost identical, with the same broad shoulders and broad heads, the same thick hair.

“Not today, Jamie, but soon perhaps, one day.”

The child watched his mother with wide eyes, wondering why she should be crying to herself, guessing that perhaps he had touched upon one of the taboos that had exercised such a potent fascination for all the boys at school, the mystery of their ultimate destination that remained carefully shrouded by their parents and which they themselves were no longer able to grasp.

By now he was beginning to experience the first difficulties in both walking and feeding himself. He tottered about clumsily, his small piping voice tripping over his tongue. Steadily his

vocabulary diminished until he knew only his mother's name. When he could no longer stand upright she would carry him in her arms, feeding him like an elderly invalid. His mind clouded, a few constants of warmth and hunger drifting through it hazily. As long as he could, he clung to his mother.

Shortly afterwards, Falkman and his mother visited the lying-in hospital for several weeks. On her return Mrs. Falkman remained in bed for a few days, but gradually she began to move about more freely, slowly shedding the additional weight accumulated during her confinement.

Some nine months after she returned from the hospital, a period during which she and her husband thought continually of their son, the shared tragedy of his approaching death, a symbol of their own imminent separation, bringing them closer together, they went away on their honeymoon.

—J. G. Ballard

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Article

In this third article concerning the undercurrents in much of our gothic and weird-story history, Michael Moorcock covers the good-and-evil hero-villain aspects of many classic writers and their works.

Aspects of Fantasy

3. Figures of Faust

by MICHAEL MOORCOCK

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,
And burnèd is Appollo's laurel-bough,
That sometime grew within this learnèd man.
Faustus is gone: regard his hellish fall,
Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise,
Only to wonder at unlawful things,
Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits
To practise more than heavenly power permits.

*(The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus
by Christopher Marlowe)*

A fitting epitaph for the majority of romantic hero-villains whose appearance in fantasy is the subject of this article. It helps, also, to illustrate why horror stories relying on the

Christian idea of good and evil no longer convince us so much as they used to. Most modern readers can't believe in the existence of rewards and punishments for the good or evil man. Yet Faust, and heroes like him, continue to convince in spite of this. There is no denying that even to a wicked old atheist like me, the pathos and tragedy of Marlowe's closing chorus is moving (even though I suspect him of tacking it on as a sop to the Elizabethan censor).

I intend to make my 'Faust-figure' category rather a broad one, partly for reasons of space, partly because Faust is marvelously interpretable. So here the Faust theme will mean roughly the tragedy of the curious and brilliant man destroyed by his own curiosity and brilliance.

In my last article, I described the device of using natural and architectural scenes to induce a mood of terror, strangeness or sublimation. Often this device could dominate the entire novel and characters were very much in second-place, not a serious defect in the terror tale or tale of wonder, but the best fantasies contain a complementary balance of marvel and characterisation. The characters need not always be subtly drawn, but they are always archetypes.

The Faustian character-type appears again and again in fantasy tales. He has appeared, in various guises, more than any other type and his development in fantasy fiction is still going on. Ignoring his ancestors (including the magician-chemist Dr. Johannes Faustus of German legend) we can begin with Marlowe's rather bitty play about him which was first published in 1604. The play is memorable for some of its passages, but is clumsily constructed and does not have the impact on present-day readers which it obviously had on its Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences.

Basically the story is of brilliant Doctor John Faustus who is a dabbler in alchemy and magic. He contacts Mephistophilis the Devil's agent, who tempts him to sell his soul. Friends and good angels urge him to desist, but he finally gives in on the following conditions:

First, that Faustus may be a spirit in form and substance. Secondly, that Mephistophilis shall be his servant, and at his command. Thirdly, that Mephistophilis shall do for him, and bring him whatsoever (he desires) . . . I, John

Faustus, of Wittenburg, Doctor, by these presents, do give both body and soul to Lucifer prince of the east, and his Minister Mephistophilis; and furthermore grant unto them that, twenty-four years being expired, the articles above written inviolate, full power to fetch or carry the said John Faustus, body and soul, flesh, blood, or goods, into their habitation wheresoever.

After this business-like document is prepared, Faustus asks Mephistophilis 'Where is the place that men call hell?' Mephistophilis tells him that 'Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscrib'd in one self place; for where we are is hell, and where hell is, there must we ever be; and, to conclude, when all the world dissolves, and every creature shall be purified, all places shall be hell that are not heaven.' To which Faustus replies: 'Come, I think hell's a fable.'

Mephistophilis has an ominous answer: 'Aye, think so still, till experience change thy mind.'

Faustus then embarks on a series of rather disconnected adventures ranging from tragedy to farce and finally gets his come-uppance in a dramatic last scene where he repents too late. In other versions of the story Faust is saved in the nick of time by his repentance. In the Gothic tales particularly, the Faustian hero-villain has no such luck.

The basic Faust plot involves an intelligent man whose experiments lead him—and often others—to a sticky end. In religious terms this is a man who is attracted to evil, who succumbs to it and is finally ruined by it. In scientific terms it is a man who conducts a dangerous experiment which gets out of control and overcomes him.

Probably it was the influence of Goethe's more complex *Faust* and Milton's Satan of *Paradise Lost* on the German Schaeur-Romantik ('Horror Romance') school of the late 18th century which, by *their* influence, produced the superfluity of Faustian heroes in the English Gothic novel and its progeny. Mrs. Radcliffe's monk Schedoni of *The Italian* (1797) is the villain of her finest novel which concentrates on the Satanically-attractive Schedoni, with his cowl which 'threw a shade over the livid paleness of his face' which 'bore the traces of many passions, which seemed to have fixed the features they no longer animated.'

M. G. Lewis was influenced by Radcliffe (though not by Schedoni) when he wrote his very readable *The Monk* (1796—

Bestseller Library, 3/6). Here, a lustful woman, Matilda, takes the place of Mephistophilis and uses sex to bring down her prey, but the pact with Satan soon follows:

Ambrosio started, and expected the demon with terror . . . The thunder ceasing to roll, a full strain of melodious music sounded in the air! At the same time the cloud disappeared, and he beheld a figure more beautiful than fancy's pencil ever drew. It was a youth seemingly scarce eighteen, the perfection of whose form and face was unrivalled. He was perfectly naked, a bright star sparkled on his forehead, two crimson wings extended themselves from his shoulders, and his silken locks were confined by a band of many-coloured fires, which shone with a brilliancy far surpassing that of precious stones. Circlets of diamonds were fastened around his arms and ankles, and in his right hand he bore a silver branch imitating myrtle. His form shone with dazzling glory: he was surrounded by clouds of rose-coloured light, and at the moment that he appeared a refreshing air breathed perfumes throughout the cavern. Ambrosio gazed upon the spirit with delight and wonder.

The Monk had its mysterious ruins, crypts and labyrinths and virtuous imperilled heroines, but was unusual in that the main narrative was told from the villain's viewpoint and not from the heroine's. It was also unusual for its overt eroticism. As in many other Gothic novels, the shadow of Lovelace, demon-lover of Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* (1748) is observed here.

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1817) the downfall of the hero comes about because of his basically-alchemical dabbling. Frankenstein continues in the Faust tradition. His evil takes on independence in the tragic monster (really the hero of the tale) and he struggles with an evil he is no longer able to control and which, in the end, is his doom. Frankenstein's monster is, of course, really an aspect of Frankenstein himself and his frantic attempts to destroy his creation, his long conversations with it, can be seen as an ever-weakening effort to control his own 'bad' self. In *Frankenstein* we see the early development of one of fantasy fiction's largest sub-genres—science fiction. Dabbling in magic is replaced by dabbling in science—but the basic theme and result is the same. Here is the first anti-science science

fiction tale in which the elements of fantasy blend with an interest in scientific theory to create a theme which is today commonplace in SF—particularly English SF in the hands of Wyndham, Ballard, Aldiss and Brunner for instance.

The last of the great Gothic hero-villains was Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (University of Nebraska Press, 15/- or \$1.70). Melmoth (a combination of Faust and Mephistophilis) is doomed to virtual immortality, wandering the world as an agent of the Devil, seeking to purchase another's soul in order to get his own out of pawn. One of the best Gothics, thought by some to be the form's culmination, it is spoiled by lengthy and largely boring sub-plots in the form of whole tales embedded in the main narrative—tales which don't serve any noticeable purpose in furthering the basic story. This is about Melmoth, a tragic, menacing and mysterious figure who always arrives on the scene when someone is about to suffer a nasty fate—he then tries to tempt them to barter their souls to Satan for an easier lot. He never succeeds.

The book was published in 1820 and Maturin's development of the Faust theme helped later writers to produce even subtler workings of the basic story. Technically, it relies on a mystery element involving the reader's curiosity about Melmoth's motives, which are only very gradually made clear—a device used to good effect by Wilkie Collins and more recent mystery writers, as well as authors of less sensational novels. At the end of 150 years, having failed to find one person who would agree to his proposition, Melmoth knows he must perish: 'No one has ever exchanged destinies with Melmoth the Wanderer. *I have traversed the world in the search, and no one, to gain the world, would lose his own soul!* He then dreams of his fate.

His last despairing reverted glance was fixed on the clock of eternity—the upraised black arm seemed to push forward the hand—it arrived at its period—he fell—he sunk—he blazed—he shrieked! The burning waves boomed over his sinking head, and the clock of eternity rung out its awful chime—'Room for the soul of the wanderer!'—and the waves of the burning ocean answered, as they lashed the adamant rock—'There is room for more!'—The Wanderer awoke.

Having wakened, the Wanderer discovers he has aged hideously and tells his visitors, 'I am summoned, and must obey the summons—my master has other work for me! When a meteor blazes in your atmosphere—when a comet pursues its burning path towards the sun—look up, and perhaps you may think of the spirit condemned to guide the blazing and erratic orb.'

He warns them that if they watch him leave the house 'your lives will be the forfeit of your desperate curiosity. For the same stake I risked more than life—and lost it!' He leaves and terrible shrieks are heard from the nearby cliffs overlooking the sea, indescribable sounds are heard all night over the surrounding countryside. In the morning there is only one trace of the Wanderer on the rocks above the sea—his handkerchief.

Robert Spector in his introduction to *Seven Masterpieces of Gothic Horror* (Bantam Books, 95c) says that '*Melmoth the Wanderer* is a Faust story that begins in contemporary Ireland but re-creates the adventures of John Melmoth, who has lived since the seventeenth century through a pact with the devil. Through six episodes of terror, Maturin creates the experiences of modern anguish. Maturin combines the myths of Faust and the Wandering Jew with all the horrible episodes of the Gothic romances, and yet he never depends on blood and gore for his effects. What Maturin does is to probe the psychological depths of fear, and in doing so, he was a little ahead of his audience. Although *Melmoth* has come to be regarded by many as the masterpiece of terror fiction, it attracted little attention until psychological Gothicists like Poe and the French Romantics resurrected it some years later.'

Throughout this long book, Melmoth can also be seen as the Faceless Man of our dreams, the unknown aspect of ourselves which is symbolised, as well, in the figure of the cowed monk, his face shaded and half-seen, or the shadowy, omniscient spectre. He appears in many modern fantasy tales—Leiber's Sheelba of the Eyeless Face in the *Grey Mouser* yarns, Tolkien's faceless protagonist in the *Rings* trilogy, Anderson's Odin in *The Broken Sword*—even Bester's Burning Man in *Tiger, Tiger!* There's a link, too, perhaps, between the unknown aspect and the 'evil' aspect of ourselves in that we sense the presence of the unknown aspect and fear it, therefore judging it 'evil.'

Robert Louis Stevenson might have experienced such a process and in his *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), which was inspired by fever-dreams and nightmares during a bad illness, produced a new variant on the Faust-character in Jekyll slowly becoming dominated by Hyde. We see also our bestial origins, still within us, in the frightful Mr. Hyde. *Dorian Gray* (1891) for all its artificiality, is another development of the Faust theme.

The doomed hero, bound to destroy himself and those he loves, is one of the oldest character-types in literature. Byron saw himself in this role, to the discomfort of his friends and family, and by acting it out helped to foster it in Romantic literature. Recent hero-villains of this type have been Peake's Steerpike in the *Titus Groan* trilogy, Poul Anderson's Scaflocc in *The Broken Sword*, T. H. White's Lancelot in *The Once and Future King*, Jane Gaskell's Zerd in *The Serpent* and my own Elric in *The Stealer of Souls*.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is another variation. Here, of course, vampirism is the strongest element in the story, but Count Dracula's lust for blood is almost identical with the lust for virtuous women which marked his predecessors. Faust desired to have and corrupt Margaret, just as dozens of later 'demon-lovers' like Schedoni, Ambrosio and, in real life, Byron and de Sade pursued innocence solely to destroy it. Whether witting or unwitting, the hero-villains of fantasy fiction are usually marked by their ability to destroy qualities in others, and this somehow makes *them* attractive to women readers who are fascinated by them and men readers who identify with them. There is no doubting their appeal, and they are not likely to lose it.

Byron himself wrote an early vampire tale (*A Fragment*, 1819) and Goethe's contribution to vampire literature was *Braut von Korinth* (1797). Mario Praz in his *Romantic Agony*, the standard work on the Romantic Movement, says:

The hero of Polidori's *Vampire* is a young libertine, Lord Ruthven, who is killed in Greece and becomes a vampire, seduces the sister of his friend Aubrey and suffocates her during the night which follows their wedding. A love-crime becomes an integral part of vampirism, though often in forms so far removed as to obscure the inner sense of the gruesome legend. Thus in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, the

hero, who is a kind of Wandering Jew crossed with Byronic vampire, interrupts a wedding and terrifies everybody with the horrible fascination of his preternatural glare: soon after the bride dies and the bridegroom goes mad.

Byron and other Romantics took the crude Middle European legend of the vampire and transformed it. Praz remarks that Byron was largely responsible for the fashion of vampirism in literature. The desire to steal something valuable from his victims, whether it be blood, innocence or souls, is intrinsic to the Faustian/Byronic hero-villain. In later stories the hero-villain was transformed into a heroine-villainess—such as Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871), the female vampire—who has since found her way into American popular literature to an unhealthy extent—remember her on the covers of *Planet Stories* or, whip in hand, on the more recent 'magazines for men' whose covers are beginning to brighten London bookstalls now?

Since the psychoanalysis of character-types is liable to produce dozens of different theories, I leave the reader to decide what all this means in sexual terms. Many young fantasy fans often share their enthusiasm for the genre with a taste for the erotic fantasies of Henry Miller, Jean Genet, William Burroughs and others. Certainly the link is obvious in Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, *Ticket that Exploded* and *Soft Machine* which are works of sheer science fiction and the most brilliant ever to appear. *His Faust* is the whole human race rolled into one.

An interesting light on the classic hero-villain comes in J. G. Ballard's *Drowned World*, one of the best novels to appear since the war. Ballard's hero-villain Strangman is not the central character of the book, but he tends to dominate the scenes he appears in.

His handsome saturnine face regarding them with a mixture of suspicion and amused contempt, Strangman lounged back under the cool awning that shaded the poop deck of the depot ship

"The trouble with you people is that you've been here for thirty million years and your perspectives are all wrong. You miss so much of the transitory beauty of life. I'm fascinated by the immediate past—the treasures of the Triassic compare pretty unfavourably with those of the closing years of the Second Millenium."

Strangman's studied interest in things which seem to the other characters mere trivia shows us the Byronic hero-villain for what he probably is (if he exists in real-life at all today) a brilliant, but bewildered man rebelling against the entire order of things, destroying them because they baffle him, fighting a lonely, hopeless battle against forces which are sure, in the end, to destroy him—even courting that destruction as Oscar Wilde did. Wilde, incidentally, changed his name to Sebastian Melmoth after his release from prison, seeing himself as the character created by Maturin, his kinsman. They all seem to have this quality—Marlowe's Faust, Milton's Satan, the Gothic villains—and Byron himself. We admire them because of it.

—Michael Moorcock

SCISSORS

BY SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

Doctor Beecher was undersized and scrawny with a bald egg-head and a ragged goatee hanging from his chin. He wore a voluminous house-coat and a professional manner as he opened the door of his waiting room.

Seated in a pastel plastic chair was a little old lady dressed in black. "Miss Atropos?" Dr. Beecher suggested.

As he looked at her, she did not seem quite so small. She did not seem so old, either, and the word 'ageless' formed in his head. Her black dress might have been fashionable in some remote past.

Her head jerked up and bright button eyes fixed him. Her voice rasped. "You're the analyst, I suppose?"

"Yes," Dr. Beecher admitted, "I'm the analyst. I'm here to help you."

"Don't want help," Miss Atropos said. "Want out of this monkey-house!"

Beecher winced. As senior analyst at the Sanctuary, he felt this was a slight on himself. "You need help," he said firmly, "or you wouldn't have been sent here. We only take the most advanced cases." And I only took yours, he thought, because it's unique. "I've studied your case-history carefully. An unusual delusion." He tried for a jocular air. "Atropos, one of the three Fates . . . kindly step into my consulting room, if you please."

Miss Atropos rose and walked past him. Her head was high, her lips set in an inflexible line. She sat down and fumbled a pair of scissors out of her dress and snipped at the air.

Dr. Beecher regarded them gravely till he remembered she had shown no tendency to violence. Then he looked harder. "Most unusual," he said, and reached for the scissors.

Miss Atropos snatched her hand away. "Scissors!" she snorted. "Those that know better call them the abhorrent shears, doctor."

"Ah, yes." Better humour her, Beecher thought. "The shears with which Atropos cuts the thread of life. Of course."

Still his gaze lingered on them. They had the oddest shape, the blades curved like a duck's bill, and the metal was strange with a dull sheen, as of bronze, tinted green. Only the cutting edges had the glitter of sharpness. They looked old, and there was faint engraving on them.

He made a mental note to inspect her scissors closely when he had the chance. They might be valuable. He sat with his fingertips forming an inverted vee, smiling. "Although I'm here to help you, I can't do a lot unless you co-operate—"

Miss Atropos cackled. "You can't do anything, doctor!"

"We'll see. I've had difficult cases before . . ."

She continued to snip at the air with her scissors as he spoke. She might have been listening to him, but he could not be sure. Her voice rolled on, sonorous and assured. And he watched her face, quiet in repose, yet somehow reflecting an inexorable will.

Suddenly he stopped, and asked, "When did you first get this idea you were Atropos?"

Her eyes glittered. "Since before you were born, doctor. Since before this fine white building was dreamed of. Since before your ancestors wore skins and painted their bodies blue." She appeared to grow taller. "I *am* Atropos."

Beecher's thought was bleak. She was obviously confirmed in her belief, and the case was going to be long and difficult. He allowed a small sigh to escape his lips. "I see. Now, Miss Atropos, I want you to help me—"

"I'll help you one of these days, doctor," she promised, and snipped again at the air with her scissors. "Oh, yes, I'll help you."

"I suppose you mean . . ."

Miss Atropos nodded emphatically. "You know what I mean, doctor. You deny it, all you scientific fools, but you know well enough." She switched the conversation abruptly. "I want out of here. You've no right to keep me here."

Beecher pursed his lips. "You'll be allowed to leave just as soon as you're cured," he said mildly. "And the sooner you co-operate, the sooner that will be."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

Beecher explained patiently. "We have a machine that reveals the dreams in a patient's head. These dreams are translated into a picture on a screen. I want you to let me look at your dreams."

"Dreams?" echoed Miss Atropos, licking her lips. "You won't like my dreams, doctor. I've no objection to your looking but you won't like them."

Beecher said, "I'm quite used to seeing other people's dreams, I assure you." He left his desk and wheeled a metal chair from behind a curtain in the corner of his consulting room. "It's nice and comfortable," he said cheerfully. "Just sit in this and relax. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Miss Atropos walked tight-lipped to the dream-machine, gathered her black dress in her hands, and sat down. Beecher lowered a metal cowl over her skull and carefully adjusted electrodes. He pulled a switch and the room hummed with electricity.

"Nothing to be afraid of," he repeated encouragingly as he seated himself before the viewing screen.

"Oh, isn't there?" she murmured, and folded her hands in her lap and closed her eyes.

Dr. Beecher reminded himself again of the danger every analyst was exposed to, the danger of allowing himself to be drawn into a patient's delusion.

The screen came to life immediately and the scene was startlingly clear in every detail. The first shock of doubt edged

into his mind. This was unusual. The phantasies of the mentally sick were normally shadowy things, disconnected fragments that needed time to take on specific form.

But Miss Atropos dreamed true and clear . . .

He saw a black gulf between the stars and a shimmering web of light, and three figures. Three women. One, the youngest, held a distaff and spun the phantom web that hung across the sky. The second was measuring off a length . . . and the third wielded a pair of shears.

Beecher sat staggered by this vision. Never before had he seen such clear-cut detail in a dream sequence. Atropos was plainly recognizable, and he jerked his head from the screen to the woman in the metal chair. They were identical.

The terrifying thought came that what he was seeing was not a symbol from a diseased mind, but reality. The ancients had believed in the Fates. Suppose . . . ?

He suppressed the thought savagely. He was an analyst and must never share the dream world of his patient.

The black-garbed figure of Atropos loomed large in the screen, swooping towards him, shears raised. He saw her grinning over those fantastic blades ; and he switched off the machine abruptly.

He sat a moment staring at the blank screen, its final image printed on his retinas ; he knew that image would haunt him the rest of his life, waking and sleeping.

The voice of Miss Atropos came softly from behind him. " Did you enjoy my dream, doctor ?"

He swung to face her as she began to chant, " I am Atropos of the Fates. I am she who cuts the thin-spun line of life. I am—"

He interrupted gently. " You mustn't worry about any of this. I'll help you. It will take time, a long time, but—"

" I have all the time in eternity, doctor," she said. " But have you ?"

Beecher rose brusquely. " That'll be all for this session. I'll see you again tomorrow, at ten o'clock."

Dr. Beecher left his consulting room quickly. He had no wish to let her see how badly he had been shaken by the apparent solidity of her delusion. He had to break it down somehow, before he began to believe in it himself.

He went to his room and paced silently, filled with doubts of his own capacity. He tugged nervously on his goatee. True, he had not taken a holiday for three years, but if he could so easily be upset . . . perhaps he needed treatment himself ?

A good night's rest, he thought, was what he needed. As he undressed, he swallowed a couple of tablets; but his night remained restless and tormented by strange dreams.

At breakfast, Dr. Beecher decided to take a cool and distant attitude. He went to his consulting room at ten, and said, "Good morning, Miss Atropos. Will you kindly take the chair again?"

"Of course, doctor."

He switched on and faced the screen, cool and relaxed, ready to pick holes in her preposterous phantasy. He must find a chink, he thought, a chink in which he could use a lever to break the power of her dreamworld. It was all in the imagination, he told himself . . . this time, he felt sure, she would not be able to repeat that remarkable feat.

He glanced towards her. She looked stronger more sure of herself, her face inscrutable.

The screen lit up and he saw the same scene as before; the night-dark sky and Clotho spinning her phantom web and Lachesis measuring the span of life, and Atropos snipping with her shears.

Sweat beaded his forehead as he watched, and he repressed a shudder.

In the screen, he saw Atropos turn and move towards him. She selected a single thread and held it up for him to see, her shears poised to cut it short. He knew from her triumphant expression, that this was *his* lifeline, and cried out in terror.

With a trembling hand he switched off the machine and sat silent before he remembered this was but the phantasy of his patient's fevered brain.

He turned to face her and saw that she was still in a trance. Instinctively he snatched the scissors from her lap. He held them in his hands, sensing a power pulse through them, gazing at the weird symbols engraved upon the bronze-green metal. He stared without comprehension for the writing was in no language he was familiar with. Shuddering, he thrust them into his desk drawer and closed it.

He moistened his lips and called her. "Miss Atropos . . ."

Her eyes opened and she looked back at him, serene and smiling. "One day, doctor," she said softly, "I shall truly cut the thread of your life. One day, it will not be just a dream." Her voice grew shrill. "You've taken my shears! You've no right—give them back!"

"Not yet," Beecher said firmly. "First we must rid you of this fantastic delusion."

But it had taken deep root, he thought, and felt doubtful of success. He was tempted to release her, resisted the impulse. It was his duty to help her. "Time for your therapy now," he said. "We'll hold another session this afternoon."

As he left the room his palms were sweaty and he wiped them surreptitiously down his coat. He walked the corridor, disturbed in his mind. If this went on much longer, he thought grimly, he would end up a patient himself. It was inconceivable that her phantasy could be so frighteningly realistic; it was against every experience he had known.

As he passed a colleague, he tightened his grip on his professional mask. He dare not let that slip now . . .

After lunch, he felt ashamed of his weakness; but he was not going to hand back her scissors.

He saw her again that afternoon, but this time, did not use the dream machine. He was not ready to face her dream again. He would just talk with her, he decided, try to effect a transference.

He adopted a brisk manner to conceal his feelings. "Now, Miss Atropos, I want you to think back to your childhood. I want you to tell me everything that comes into your mind. I want you to—"

She looked at him with implacable hatred. "I want my shears," she demanded fiercely. "They belong to me."

Beecher stroked his beard, alarmed by the wildness in her eyes. It was a good thing he had hidden them, he thought; but she had been quiet as long as she had them. Perhaps . . . ?

He resisted the impulse "We've got to work together to cure this delusion of yours," he said frankly. "I've taken the scissors for your own good. But you shall have them back later."

"Give them back now," she shouted. "I must have them now. I must!"

Beecher hesitated again, uncertain what was best for her. Then he spoke firmly. "You must make an effort to give up your phantasy if you wish to be well again. Now, tell me about your earliest memories so we can get to the trauma that caused—"

Miss Atropos stamped her foot. She ran at him with hands raised and eyes blazing. "Fool," she hissed. "Meddling fool!"

Beecher held his wrists, thinking fast. He knew he wasn't going to return her scissors; but he was not yet ready to admit to himself his true motive . . .

He released her and backed to the door, tripped over a frayed edge of carpet. Outside he walked away, breathing quickly.

Miss Atropos watched him leave and was very angry. No mortal had ever defied her before. Her lips compressed to a bleak line. What was great Zeus thinking of to allow it ?

She fumed and fretted. The trouble was, she decided, that no-one believed in the Gods any longer. She was surrounded by barbarians. She . . .

The door opened and a nurse entered.

"Nurse," Miss Atropos barked. "I need my shears back. The doctor has taken them, and I must have them for my work."

The nurse was young and inexperienced, and knew only that Miss Atropos was down for occupational therapy. "Never mind," she said brightly. "I expect the doctor forgot—he wouldn't want to stop your work. I'll soon get you another pair."

"No !" The voice of Miss Atropos rang out like a command. "I need my own shears."

The nurse's eyes widened. Miss A. was a dear old lady and not usually given to tantrums, so she said hastily, "I'll see if I can find them for you." She knew she would get no peace until her patient had her own scissors, and silently cursed Dr. Beecher.

She stepped into the consulting room and glanced over the table and bookcase. She opened the drawer of his desk . . .

"Queer-looking things," she muttered, picking up the scissors. "Family heirloom, I suppose."

She returned to Miss Atropos. "Here you are, Miss A. Now you can get on with your therapy work again."

Miss Atropos snatched them from her hand. "That's better !" She cackled. "You don't know how precious these are. Now I can continue my . . . work !"

Yes, thought Miss Atropos triumphantly, now she could take good care of Dr. Beecher. She stroked her shears lovingly.

Dr. Beecher looked in on her during the evening. Miss Atropos sat in a corner, shears in hand, snipping at air.

He stared in disbelief, blinking. There appeared to be a shimmering mesh between him and Miss Atropos and he watched her reach out one hand and separate a strand from the web. She raised her shears for the cutting stroke.

"Dear Doctor Beecher," she said.

Panic seized him. He *knew* this was his own life-strand and trembled. He had to stop her, and rushed forward. His foot caught in the frayed edge of carpet.

He lurched. Light flashed on the metal shears in her hand and, as he fell towards the sharp points, he screamed.

He felt the blades slide through the flesh of his chest and turn past a bone. The weight of his falling body tore the scissors from her hand and he saw dismay on her face. He collapsed face down on the carpet, numbness spreading through him.

He tried to rise as a male nurse burst through the door, but felt strangely weak. His mind was clear; he saw and heard perfectly, but a paralysis affected his muscles. He lay helpless as men came running with a stretcher and a strait-jacket. The stretcher for him, the jacket for her . . .

He wanted to tell them she had not attacked him, but his voice would not come.

He felt himself lifted, carried swiftly away. A muttered voice came, "Too late, I'm afraid . . . right through the heart."

Bright light shone in his eyes as he lay on the table in the operating theatre. He watched a surgeon adjust his mask, heard the faint hiss of anaesthetic. The last things he saw were the handles of the scissors still projecting from his chest . . .

Dr. Beecher opened his eyes. He was lying in a bed and on the table beside him were the strange shears of Miss Atropos. Doctors clustered round him and the expression on their faces was something he had never seen before.

"Pulse normal, heart strong," a voice said.

Another muttered, "You know, this is quite impossible. Quite. Stabbed through the left ventricle, no flow of blood, the wound seals itself when the weapon is withdrawn."

Beecher read wonder in their eyes. They regarded him with an awe close to reverence.

"A miracle," someone said nervously.

Dr. Beecher laughed. He had never felt better in his life. He should be dead, he thought, only his fall had stopped Miss Atropos cutting the thread of his life.

He relaxed, his body a pleasant glow. It would be agreeable to be immortal—the immortal—he had only to ensure that Miss Atropos never recovered her shears.

But then another thought struck him: if she never got them back, *would anyone ever die?*

—Sydney J. Bounds

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