

# FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

No. 34

35¢

## ● NOVELET

- CLOAK AND STAGGER** ..... *Gordon R. Dickson* 18  
It would have been hilarious if Earth's acceptance into the Federation hadn't depended upon how Turm Lindsay carried out his mission—because no one, particularly Lindsay, had the faintest notion of what he was expected to do, or not do!

## ● SHORT STORIES

- STAROBIN** ..... *Margaret St. Clair* 6  
They needed a hero like Starobin—but a hero like Starobin was just the kind who didn't care...
- THE LONELY STARS** (illustrated on cover) .... *Scott Nichols* 42  
Would humanity ever be able to undo that worst of blunders?
- FORCE OF MORTALITY** ..... *Robert Silverberg* 56  
The greatest boon can also be the deadliest curse...
- LAST MEETING PLACE** ..... *Thomas N. Scortia* 68  
Garth was one of the few who understood history—but could he avoid repeating it?
- THE PROFESSOR FROM PYJM** .....  
..... *Bruce Tucker & Irving Cox, Jr.* 89  
Was Mytohell just another "crazy scientist" or...?
- A GUN FOR GRANDFATHER** ..... *F. M. Busby* 103  
So you have a time machine, so you can go back in time and shoot grandpa? But why bother? Barney had a reason...
- THE ROUND PEG** ..... *George R. Hahn* 116  
Ba-ll Thorpe was the most bizarre of phonies...

## ● FEATURES

- AUTHOR, AUTHOR** (a roundup on contributors) ..... 5
- THE EDITOR'S PAGE** ..... *Robert A. W. Lowndes* 83  
Continuing our backward glance at "Yesterday's World of Tomorrow: 1927".
- FREEDOM—A DISCIPLINE** (Special Article) .. *Donald Bower* 98
- INSIDE SCIENCE FICTION** (department) ... *Robert A. Madle* 111
- DOWN TO EARTH** (Letters and Comment) ..... *The Readers* 124

Editor: ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES DOROTHY B. SEADOR, Asso. Ed.  
COVER BY EMSH Illustrations by Emsch and Freas

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION, Number 34, Fall, 1967. Published quarterly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 141 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Second-class mail privileges authorized at Holyoke, Mass. Single copies 36¢; yearly subscription \$1.40. Entire contents copyright 1967 by Columbia Publications, Inc. Printed in U. S. A.

# **AUTHOR, AUTHOR!**

**THOMAS N. SCORTIA** also has a sense of humor, even though our crack about him last time had to be explained. The lad's real serious about letting someone else mix, sell, or discover chemicals while he turns to full-time writing.





## LAST MEETING PLACE

by Thomas N. Scortia

Decadence had set in within the Imperium, and Garth found that a history student had to be a new Machiavelli.

The eyes are not here  
There are no eyes here  
In this valley of dying stars  
In this hollow valley  
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms  
In this last of meeting places  
We grope together  
And avoid speech...

*"The Hollow Men"—T. S. Eliot*

**T**HE FLAGSHIP was a mile-long pod of metal and glass and plastic and muttering energies. In its center, laced by the starkness of metal ribs, was the room. Space was at a premium within even the great ship, but concessions had been made to the importance of the room.

It was huge.

Much longer than it was wide, its dun walls curved upward to meet a shadowed ceiling, fifty feet above. It was quite bare except for the thick cobalt carpet that muffled the metal floor, and the long dark table of basalt wood around which ranked a score of low, wide-backed chairs. The only other feature that marred the spartan rigidity was the view-screen that fused with one wall and stretched the length of the chamber. The ship had been impressed with a spin to give a light pseudo-gravity, but the picture on the screen did not reflect this motion. It was stationary and, if one stood so that the boundaries of the screen were hidden by the limits of sight, frighteningly three-dimensional.

For one flashing instant

Kevin Garth felt a sickening vertigo and the most irrational conviction swept over him that a sudden move would hurl him outward to fall endlessly through those cold distances. In the upper left of the screen he saw the talcum-brushed crescent of the moon poised in the sooty blackness. Its darkened hemisphere reflected the faint haze of earthshine. He could see other moons now scattered across the mirrored emptiness, the winking moons that were the lazily rotating ships of Elric's vast fleet. Absently he identified Elric's task force, flanked on either side by the lesser fleets from Dunkwelt and Freelanding. The ships were drawn into a hollow cylinder, whose axis pointed like the barrel of a monstrous cannon at the cloud-streaked Earth, far below.

**I**T WAS VERY much like Elric, Garth thought wearily, in the simplicity of his trust in raw strength, to position the flagship on the edge of the fleet cylinder so that the full impact of the massed forces would add its silent weight to the coming conference. The fleet, of course, was not quite as large as the one the Imperium had dispatched a month ago, to counter the feint against the Dvorak Worlds; but the Imperium stood now defenseless in its home space, and to the wor-

ried men below the outworld fleet must look like the axe of an executioner, tensed for the inevitable blood-letting. They could only hope to buy time.

He did not hear the whisper of the iris door, or the cat steps upon the deep carpeting, until Choldar's voice rasped against his ears.

"There's a sight for a strong man," the Chief Minister said, his voice faintly mocking. The words echoed from the metal walls and Garth grimaced, thinking how much he detested the thin, fox-faced Stoddard.

"Imperial Earth," he said, "could have mustered a fleet a hundred times as large in the old days."

"But the old days are gone."

"Yes," Garth agreed, wishing silently that the old man would go away. He could not understand why Elric still maintained the treacherous Stoddard as minister. Of course, he was one of the old Stoddard ruling line and perhaps that carried some weight.

"You don't sound very happy about it." Choldar arched an eyebrow significantly. "But I forgot. You were born on Earth, weren't you?"

**L**OOK," GARTH said, turning on the man. "I don't like you any more than you like me. Let it go at that. I've been drawn into this mess out of a personal loyalty to Elric; but that

doesn't make me happy to see the destruction of an order that kept peace in the galaxy for a thousand years."

"And drained the blood of every colony it had," Choldar added, his lips thin and dead-ly. "But, you're speaking as an historian."

"Take it any way you like."

"You've a sharp tongue. Watch yourself, or you'll make the wrong enemies."

"I choose my enemies very carefully," Garth said.

Fury clouded the man's eyes as the iris door dilated and Bolton of Dunkwelt, and Tremaine of Freelanding, appeared at the far end of the room. The tall figure of a man in the uniform of a lieutenant in the Freelanders Space Forces trailed the two rulers. They were speaking earnestly, in low buzzing undertones, as they moved the carpeted length of the chamber. When they drew within earshot, Tremaine made a silencing gesture to his companion.

"Huh," Bolton said, rubbing his stubby fingers down the sides of his corduroyed military kilt with a soft burring sound, "so the renegade is waiting for the kill."

TREMAINE laughed—a thin, deadly laugh—and looked at Garth with his glowing yellow eyes. His almost skeletal face was cold, and Garth suddenly felt like a small brown mouse that had wandered into the center of a

group of very hungry cats.

"Not 'the renegade', gentleman," Choldar said with mock horror. "You know how Elric dislikes that."

"Yes," Bolton said, the words rumbling in his barrel chest, "'the historian.' I forgot."

"Or perhaps 'the New Machiavelli.'" Behind Tremaine, a grin distorted the face of the Freelanders lieutenant, revealing long thin teeth with distinct brown mottling.

"Well, my lord historian," Bolton said, "Elric is waiting for you in his quarters."

"Ready, I imagine, to dictate chapter three of *'My Rise to Imperial Power,'*" Tremaine said.

"Your excellency grows in cleverness each day." Garth bowed slightly. As he made his way to the door, he felt the burning sensation of three murderous pairs of eyes fastened on his back. He felt very cold.

Outside the conference room, the heavy carpeting gave way to the bare metal of the ship. Garth walked crisply down the corridor, thinking how foreign this taut atmosphere was to his old leisurely way of life; for a moment he wished he were back at his post with the Imperial University. It was frightening, the way in which he had gradually been forced to relinquish his detached position as an observer. More and

more each day, he found himself sinking into the morass of intrigue and tight-rope politics in which Elric held his uneasy dominion over the outworld provinces.

Perhaps Elric had intended that this would happen when he has first invited Garth to the Stoddard system. The man was capable of an intense personal loyalty and a deep emotional friendship. He had never forgotten those student days at the university when Garth had rescued him from the assassin sent by Elric's uncle. Still, Garth decided, Elric would not hesitate to use anyone for his involved purposes.

**H**E PASSED a group of spacemen who were repairing an electric cable buried in the metal wall of the passage. After he had progressed the length of the corridor, Garth turned and looked back, feeling a bitter amusement in the way the men quickly lowered their gaze to their work. Not, however, before he saw the hate and distrust in their eyes.

They were all squat, heavy-thighed Dunkwelters, he saw.

The door to Elric's quarters was guarded by a pair of broad-shouldered Stoddard marines in form-fitting blue. They stood rigidly at attention, their equipment harnesses gleaming with the reflected light of burnished metal and soft, polished leather.

Garth acknowledged their salute with a nod and walked through the bare anteroom, past the thick hangings in the archway, and into the large living chamber with its paneled walls of silver-grained white canelwood. The blond boy who was sitting quietly on a foam relaxer lowered the stripviewer from his eyes. Garth felt a silent warmth as the boy jumped to his feet and ran to him, exclaiming, "Uncle Kevin."

"Hi, youngster," Garth said. He rumbled the blond head fondly. "Keeping out of mischief?"

The boy drew himself up in mock formality. "Of course." He broke into a smile. "But you should see the new library strips."

"Later." Garth peered down at the flushed young face, into the wide blue eyes. The boy looked more like his dead mother each day, he thought. He could not help but wonder, each time he saw Mikael, how long Elric's orphaned son would live. It was a terrible thing for a boy to be born into Mikael's position in these times.

**A** MUSCULAR form, clad in the Stoddard blue, materialized in the doorway leading to the chambers and Garth said, "The wolves are gathering in the conference room."

"I expected they would by now." Elric nodded. His eyes

were beginning to show the fatigue and strain of sleepless nights. His voice sounded very tired. "The envoy ship will make contact in another ten minutes."

He walked across the room and placed a massively biceped arm around his son. For a moment a soft affection played across his stern square face and his coarse brows arched in sorrow. "You'd better run along while Kevin and I talk business."

"Can't I stay and show him the new strips?"

"Later," Garth promised and winked at the boy.

When he had left the room, Elric said, "I wish I could have left him behind on Stoddard."

"You know he wouldn't have lasted a day after you warped out of the system," Garth said.

"I suppose not." Elric lowered his body wearily to the relaxer and said, "Look, if anything happens..."

Garth nodded silently. "The deck watch is all Dunkwelters," he said at last.

"That means they don't intend to wait until we leave the system. I wonder what fantastic deal they hope to make with the Earth envoy behind my back." He rose to his feet and began to walk nervously to and fro. "What they don't know," he said with a scowl, "is that every man in deep freeze on this ship is a Stod-

dard. I ordered five hundred thawed last watch."

"So it's reduced to the mailed fist again," Garth sighed.

"WHAT ELSE do those jackals understand?" Elric demanded. "Believe me, Kevin, I'm honestly sorry to drag you into this, but I need someone I can trust."

"I'm still the perennial student," Garth said, "and I'm getting an inside look at the breakdown of the historical process of a millenium." He snorted. "I hope I live to write about it." Or, he thought, *that someone is around to read what I write.*

A soft chime sounded and Elric crossed to the camouflaged communicator panel set in the wall. He spoke for a moment and then turned. "The Imperium ship is crossing the fleet axis. He'll be here in another three minutes."

"I'll leave for the rendezvous with Courtney then."

"No, not yet. You know Baron Flambert, don't you?"

"We met two years ago at the Aldebaran partitioning. A real fop, but clever. Is he...?"

Elric nodded. "I want you here when he presents his credentials. The group down below is tricky; they may try to waste time by sending an impostor."

"They wouldn't dare."

"Maybe," Elric said. "Anyway, your Luzon meeting

isn't for two hours, and I don't want my bright princelings to miss you too soon."

"But why bother with FlamBERT? You know what he'll have to say."

"A bribe to pack up and go home probably. That's what the Imperium has been doing for the last century, buying time with fissionables." Elric whirled and slapped the wall with his hand. "My God, can't they see their very power rotting from under them?"

"Probably not. It takes longer than one lifetime for a monolithic structure like the Imperium to fall apart. Bolton and Tremaine certainly don't see it. They're merely interested in a deal for blackmail."

"And settling with me," Elric said bitterly.

**T**HREE minutes later, the communicator panel announced that the ship of the envoy had grappled to the flagship and that Baron FlamBERT was on his way to Elric's quarters. The Stoddard ruler chose a high-backed chair, fashioned massively from the white canelwood, and waited silently with Garth on his right. At last they heard the outer door open and the hangings shielding the anteroom stirred in the breeze.

Choldar pushed through the draperies, a smug expression on his face, and intoned stiffly, "Baron FlamBERT, envoy of the Imperium."

Elric waved a hand and the minister withdrew. A second later a small group filed in. FlamBERT, Garth saw, had brought a standard bearer, a slender youth who carried the Imperium colors draped negligently over his right arm. For a moment Garth felt a distant nostalgia at the sight of the proud blue field studded with golden stars. How many years, he wondered, before even this pretense was a memory? And when the Imperium was gone? A galaxy of tiny worlds lashing out spasmodically at each other and then the long night of millennial barbarism? No, he thought fiercely, not the terrible irony of...

"Baron the Lord FlamBERT, envoy of His Imperial Majesty, Terrence, Lord of a Thousand Suns," Choldar was saying loudly.

**T**HE EARTHMAN'S thick jowls pendulumed as he approached, and even the layer on layer of blood red cloth that draped his short figure did not hide the folds of adipose tissue that larded his body. His face was glistening with perspiration, but the black eyes, buried in their white beds of fat, glittered with quick intelligence. Around his neck he wore an intricately worked gold sigil of office. A heavy perfumed scent preceded him, filling the room.

When he was half a dozen



steps from the chair where Elric sat, he bowed, his long, many-pleated sleeves sweeping the floor. Garth wondered what the absurd costume must weigh with the countless carefully arranged folds of crimson cloth.

"Your Highness, Most Noble Lord," the man said in a high voice, "the Envoy of the Imperium brings His Imperial Majesty's gracious wishes."

A flicker of amusement crossed Elric's face. The man, Garth thought, did look absurd, though not in the way Elric thought. Behind the mincing words of the formal greeting, there had once been an overwhelming power that did not need the show of iron the outworlders found necessary in their rule.

"Thank you, Baron," Elric said, "but we don't use titles here."

Choldar's lips twisted in silent mirth. "Lord Flambert," he said, "this is Elric of Stoddard. No other title is Elric's wish."

"Oh, yes, yes, of course," Flambert stammered, reddening.

"We're happy to receive you," Elric said. "My minister will see you to your quarters. After you've freshed, he'll conduct you to the meeting room."

"If I may, ah, Elric," Flambert said, "a few words of sincere wishes from his Imperial

Majesty...in private." He looked meaningfully at Choldar and Garth.

"We have no secrets here," Elric said.

"Oh, no. It was only..." the envoy blinked, reddening even more.

"We shall meet at the table then?"

The baron inclined his head and at a gesture from Elric the group withdrew.

"That set him on his heels," Garth observed.

"Bah," Elric said, getting to his feet, "he expected to twist me round his little finger. Are you sure that's Flambert?"

"There could be only one like that. Phew! How long does it take to clear the room of that stink?"

Elric consulted his wrist chronometer. "You have an hour and a half to make it to Luzon. I've ordered you an escort of Stoddard marines."

Garth started for the door.

"Wait a moment." Elric opened a panel in the wall and removed a small, deadly-looking sonic gun. "You may need this."

"I hope not," Garth said, pocketing the weapon.

**I**N HIS quarters, Garth secured a light fleecé-lined mantle and then made his way down the echoing corridors past the countless squat Dunkwelters to the spaceboat lock where his escort was waiting. The escort, as Elric had promised, were all Stod-

dard marines, but Garth was surprised to see the group commanded by the amber-eyed Frelander lieutenant who he had seen earlier with Tremaine. He paused for a moment, eyeing the stiff arrogant figure and debated dismissing the man. No, he decided, that would undoubtedly make Tremaine, Bolton, and Choldar more suspicious. Better to handle the Frelander himself.

He acknowledged the lieutenant's diffident salute and said, "You may attend me forward after you've disposed your men aft." He walked past the lieutenant through the hermetic tube to the boat's airlock. Behind him he heard the Frelander give clipped orders to a Stoddard non-com. A moment later the man followed into the ship.

AS SOON AS they were in the forward passenger compartment, Garth began to strap himself into the padded acceleration couch while the pilot hovered over him like a worried hen. He saw the lieutenant watching him icily from his own couch on the other side of the compartment. Surely, Garth thought, the man didn't expect his presence to be accepted as mere coincidence. The chilling thought came to him that perhaps Elric had underestimated his opponents.

The pilot left the compartment, and a moment later

Garth felt the sudden lurch as the boat was thrown at a tangent from the mother ship. Through the filtered port on his right, he saw a confused pattern of lights as the ship catapulted into the midst of the hovering fleet. Then there was the pressure of acceleration as the flaring rockets brought the boat under control.

As they crossed the fleet axis, Garth thought of how unstable the power was behind those ranked points of light dropping swiftly astern. The fleet, together with that task force which had lured the Imperial fleet from its home system, represented the greatest striking force in the galaxy. It was compounded of the several contributions of Freelanding and Dunkwelt, and lesser dependent systems, all of which Elric had brought under the Stoddard house through the use of quislings and puppet rulers, such as Bolton and Tremaine.

With each passing year, the Imperium withdrew closer and closer to its home world, leaving a vacuum that a hundred rulers eyed covetously. Everyone agreed that some power must fill that political vacuum, but each kinglet and dictator saw his own system as the center of a new Imperium. The jealousies and ambitions within the union that Elric had established in the peripheral worlds only gave the dreams of empire new and

closer objectives, until the Stoddard Combine daily more and more resembled an over-ripe melon about to burst.

**E**VEN IN the days when he and Garth had been fellow students at the Imperial University, Elric—then only a minor prince from a raw system settled two hundred years before—had seen the growing instability of the empire. The disenfranchisement of the outworlds had antagonized the new, not-quite-human breed of men arising in the colonies; the economy-destroying wars of the commercial interests of Earth, for contracts to exploit the resources of the subject worlds, had foreshadowed the present breakup only too clearly. After the incident of the assassin, Kevin Garth and Elric had become close friends; and the Stoddard prince had often spoken of his hopes that a strong man might unit the periphery in a new non-terran culture that would fend off the seemingly inevitable collapse of interstellar civilization.

Later, Elric had returned to a system which had declared and won its independence without a struggle. The period of almost yearly revolts had begun on Earth and the emperor, little more than a captive of each succeeding power group, had no time to worry about the revolt of worlds light years distant.

Garth was already an assistant department head at the university, and well known in academic circles for his studies of the early Imperium, when Elric had offered him the post with the Stoddard House. There was not a doubt in Garth's mind about why Elric wanted him; but the political situation at the university had become intolerable, and he welcomed the unique chance to observe the growth of imperial power in the periphery at such close vantage.

"I don't pretend I'm an altruist," Elric had said when he first explained his goal in expanding so closely upon the heels of the withdrawing Imperium, "but someone has to grab the reins quickly, or the whole galaxy will collapse into a series of small wars."

**F**UNNY, Garth thought; at first he had viewed the present situation as one culture advancing as another decayed. It was so easy to make the fatal error of substituting that word 'culture' for a political sphere of action. Only lately had he begun to realize that the outworlds were still an integral part of Earth culture. And now Elric would become the Imperium; it was inevitable, Garth thought ironically. Not a new Imperium—just an interlude in the old. How long an interlude depended on the ruthlessness with which Elric consolidated his gains. Garth had never

been a mechanist, but more and more he saw each new move of Elric's dictated rigidly by his previous one. Now Garth wondered if, in some fantastic fashion, they were not following a pattern irrevocably determined from the birth of the Imperium.

The first tenuous wisps of atmosphere were whistling past the rocket now. The lieutenant looked up from the port and said, "We should make planetfall in twenty minutes." Garth noted that he omitted the 'sir'.

Below, as the ship wallowed slightly on its side, Garth saw the cloud-mottled western hemisphere, brightly lighted by a high sun. As he watched, their eastward progress brought them over the Atlantic and he could see a good size squall in progress near Greenland. The whole area was blotted by seething clouds and occasionally he could see the reflected flash of lightning. At their height the disturbance looked small and insignificant, but he knew the churning violence hidden by the low matted clouds. It was late afternoon in Europe and, as they passed over the Black Sea, the light in the port dimmed and suddenly thick night clotted about the ship.

**T**HE SPACEBOAT dipped steeply and he could feel the sharp forward tug of deceleration. He could see nothing from his port, but the ship

began to settle vertically and he knew that they must be above the deserted strip of beach on the Lingayen Gulf where he was to meet Courtney.

The ship grounded with a slight jar and the pilot was back almost instantly, fussing over his straps and helping him up. The lieutenant preceded him through the airlock as he paused to secure a flare from the pilot. He jumped the short distance to the sand and saw the lieutenant giving instructions to the NCO in charge of the escort.

They had landed in a spot scarcely fifty yards from the encroaching jungle. The sea was a good two hundred yards to Garth's left and he heard the muffled roll of surf. In the background a night bird voiced a series of high staccato cries. He drew the mantle around him against the moist chill of the night. It must be about three A. M., he decided, and turned to the lieutenant.

"I don't want the escort with me," he said. "Just so long as they can come on the double if I call." He thought for a moment.

"You come with me," he told the lieutenant and set out across the sand, feeling the damp granular surface crunch like snow under his quick tread.

They walked for almost five minutes, going slowly because of loose footing. When they

were partly hidden from the escort by the curve of the shore, Garth said, "We'll wait here."

The lieutenant grunted. Garth stood a little apart, and covertly inspected the man. In the moonlight he could see him standing negligently, his hands on his hips in the loose-limbed way of the Freelanders. Garth could not see his face, but he could imagine the tight arrogance stamped on it.

**T**HE COOL NIGHT air suddenly held a faint hissing sound and Garth looked up to see the pin-point glow of an atmosphere jet overhead. From his belt he took the magnesium flare he had carried from the spaceboat, stuck it in the sand and said, "Cover your eyes."

He triggered the flare and saw the white light through the fingers he pressed over his own eyes. The flare was only a small one and persisted just long enough for the ship overhead to get a bearing. A moment later it was settling onto the water and taxiing toward shore. He saw two figures pull themselves from the passenger section and lower themselves over the side.

A moment later a voice said, "*How dark the night,*" and he answered with the counter-sign, "*The stars shine in the valley.*"

Another figure appeared from the jet, as one of the two

recently landed flashed an amber light. The two figures approached, and the taller said, "Which is Kevin Garth?"

"I am," Garth said.

A thin beam of light stabbed out, blinding him.

"You're not an outworlder," the first voice said.

A new voice cut the darkness. "Put down your gun. That's the man I was expecting."

"Yes, excellency," the tall man said as the third man from the jet stepped in front of the first two.

"I am Courtney," the man said. "This can be settled very quickly. Does Elric agree to my offer?"

"May I talk?" Garth asked.

"Of course."

**"FIFTY PER CENT** of the system's uranium production for the next five years, and allegiance of the Imperium if he puts you on the throne?"

"As agreed," Courtney's dark figure nodded. Garth wondered what the man looked like. He couldn't see anything but the occasional glint of moist eyes in the moonlight. He decided he didn't care to know; he felt a little ill.

"All right," Garth said. "The first division of Stoddard marines will land tomorrow evening at six, Greenwich Time, with the Freelanders and Dunkwelers following an hour later."

"The first phase of my operation will start immediately," Courtney said. He turned and walked swiftly back to the jet. The other two men waited until he had boarded the craft, then turned to go. The taller of the two stopped and very deliberately spat on the ground. Garth heard the lieutenant chuckle behind him.

Garth watched the aircraft mount into the darkness. He heard the faint hiss of its jets disappear to the west. Then he turned to the shadowed figure of the lieutenant and drew Elric's sonic gun under the cover of his mantle.

"Do you think you can report this to Tremaine verbatim," he asked coldly, "or shall I refresh your memory."

"That won't be necessary," the lieutenant said, drawing the weapon holstered at his side. Garth saw him raise his arm and deliberately sight the weapon.

He stiffened and fell like a log when Garth shot him.

WHEN GARTH returned to the flagship, he found Elric in his quarters, sitting in the same chair in which he had received Flambert and staring at the floor.

Garth told him what had happened on the beach. "I've never killed a man before."

"It won't be the last time," Elric said.

"What did Flambert have to say?"

"What we expected. Oh, very nicely phrased, of course, but a bribe just the same."

"The conscript fathers trying to pay the Gauls not to burn Rome."

"Something like that." Elric got to his feet. "I put them off until you returned. They're waiting for us."

"Things will start to happen when they see me," Garth said.

Elric spoke briefly into the wall communicator and then said, "Let's go."

"Wait a minute. They may try to move against you and Mike simultaneously. Hadn't you better get a guard up here?"

"Mike's asleep inside," Elric said. "The regular guard is enough."

Before Garth could argue, he was striding from the room.

WHEN THEY entered the conference room, Garth saw Choldar, Bolton, and Tremaine grouped around Flambert at the far end of the table. When the group saw Garth and Elric, they rose quickly and Garth felt a cold amusement at the surprise in Tremaine's eyes.

Flambert stepped forward and said, "Your excellency, I trust you've seen fit to accept his Imperial Highness' offer of friendship."

"His bribe?" Elric asked. "The answer, baron, is no."

"But we've already agreed," Choldar said.

"I have not agreed." Elric turned on the earth envoy. "You fat swine, don't you think I know what you've been up to?"

Flambert licked his suddenly bloodless lips. "Really, really, this is hardly the way to..."

"You're here on a promise of safe conduct, baron. Don't tempt me."

"I think we've had about enough..." Bolton rumbled into the momentary silence.

"Shut up, Bolton. I've let you have your little game of blackmail; now we'll talk about the real issues."

"We may have other ideas," Choldar simpered.

"Flambert," Elric said, "you can tell His Imperial Majesty that I do not recognise his right to the Imperium. My troops land today to support Courtney."

"Choldar," Bolton said. With a smile of triumph Choldar marched the length of the room toward the door. It opened as he approached and a group of uniformed men with drawn weapons surged into the room.

The uniforms were blue.

**G**ARTH SAW the quick fear that fled across Choldar's face as he retreated before the group. The men did not move from their position just across the threshold.

"Do you think I'm that naive?" Elric asked.

"You're not so naive as to kill us out of hand," Tremaine said. Of the group only he seemed to have retained his poise.

"He's right," Garth said. "You'll have an open revolt on your hands."

"You misunderstand, Tremaine," Elric said slowly. "My men are here to arrest a traitor." He turned to stare at Choldar. "Do you understand?"

"Bolton, where are your men?" Choldar whimpered.

"What does he mean, Bolton?"

Bolton started to speak, but Tremaine's hand reached out to silence him. "How should we know what the traitor means?"

"That's the proper answer." Elric gestured for his men to come forward.

Choldar stepped backward, a look of shocked disbelief on his face. Then his eyes widened as he realized what was happening. His right hand dipped into his tunic and appeared again, clutching a small metal box.

"Better stop your men." Elric made a small motion with his hand and the men halted.

**"I** THINK you know what a detonator is," Choldar said. "This is keyed to a bomb in your quarters. Now Flambert and I will leave under safe conduct, or..."

"This is not my doing," Flambert protested, his voice shrill and frightened.

Damn it, Garth thought helplessly, why hadn't Elric listened to him? But who would have thought they would try to get at the boy with anything so crude?

"I'm quite aware of your part in this, baron," Elric said. He turned to the group of blue-uniformed marines. "Escort these two to the baron's ship. They are to be given safe conduct."

As soon as the group had left the room, Garth said, "Stop them, damn it. Don't you see? With Mike gone, that leaves only you and Choldar of the old Stoddard line."

Elric said nothing. He stood, staring silently at Bolton and Tremaine, his brows wrinkled. In the upper part of the great viewscreen a point of light appeared and began to drop rapidly through the fleet formation.

Garth grabbed Elric fiercely by the arm. "That maniac can still set off the bomb," he said, feeling a sick horror.

"Yes," Elric said, turning to face the screen, "I know."

The spot that was Flambert's ship reached the middle of the fleet cylinder before it suddenly blossomed into a blinding incandescent mass.

"FLAMBERT brought the bomb with him," Elric said after they had returned

to his quarters. "We spotted it on his standard bearer as they left his ship."

"The next time they won't be so stupid," Garth said. "How long do you think you can continue to get away with this sort of thing?"

"I wish I knew," Elric sighed wearily. "I have to get rid of those other two, of course. After the consolidation of the Imperium, I won't be able to trust them, and they know it."

"So, a palace revolution and paid assassins to do the dirty work."

"I don't like it any more than you do."

"No, I suppose not."

"It's the same thing again and again," Elric said. "There's absolutely nothing else I can do."

**G**ARTH FOLLOWED him from the room and down the shadowed hall. They paused before the open door of Mikael's room. The light that streamed down the hall from the living chamber and over their shoulders showed his curly towhead peeping from under a light coverlet.

"Did I ever tell you about the time my ship went dead-jet off Stoddard and we started to fall into the sun?" Elric said softly.

Garth shook his head.

"It was a terrible sensation. There wasn't a thing I could do but hold on tight and hope



they could get the engines repaired in time. Just hold on tight and watch the ship being drawn inexorably into that inferno."

He turned and sighed. "I feel the same way now that I did then."

"But they *did* fix the engines."

"That time."

Garth watched his figure

move down the hall. Against the light his shoulders seemed all at once to sag like melting wax.

Garth turned and looked at the sleeping boy. *That's all we can do*, he thought, *hang on and hope*.

The boy stirred and whimpered in his sleep.

*Poor kid*, Garth thought.

It was a dirty shame.

---