## Horseman!

Roger Zelazny

Horseman! was my second published story. As with the previous one (and within a few weeks of that sale), it was purchased by a lady I met only once—Cele Goldsmith, a charming person, whose taste I considered impeccable. She bought stories from a great number of now well-known writers at the beginnings of their careers—Ursula K. Le Guin, Piers Anthony, Thomas Disch ... Amazing Stories and Fantastic Adventures came into an autumn bloom in those final Ziff-Davis days.

This story was suggested to me while driving south on Route 71 in Ohio, by a pre-storm cloud formation which resembled a group of horsemen.

^ When he was thunder in the hills the villagers lay dreaming harvest behind shutters. When he was an avaj| lanche of steel the cattle began to low, mournfully, II deeply, and children cried out in their sleep.He was an earthquake of hooves, his armor a dark tabletop of silver coins stolen from the night sky, when the villagers awakened with fragments of strange dreams in their heads. They rushed to the windows and flung their shutters wide.

And he entered the narrow streets, and no man saw the eyes behind his visor.

When he stopped so did time. There was no movement anywhere.

—Neither was there sleep, nor yet full wakefulness from the last strange dreams of stars, of blood. ...

Doors creaked on leather hinges. Oil lamps shivered, pulsated, then settled to a steady glowing.

The mayor wore his nightshirt and a baggy, tossled cap. He held the lamp dangerously near his snowy whiskers, rotating a knuckle in his right eye.

The stranger did not dismount. He faced the doorway, holding a foreign instrument in one hand.

“Who are you, that comes at this hour?”

“I come at any hour—I want directions, I seek my companions.”

The mayor eyed the beast he rode, whiter than his beard, whiter than snow, than a feather ...

“What manner of animal is that?”

“He is a horse, he is the wind, he is the steady pounding of surf that wears away rocks. Where are my companions?”

“What is that tool you carry?”

“It is a sword. It eats flesh and drinks blood. It frees souls and cleaves bodies. Where are my companions?”

“That metal suit you wear, that mask... ?”

“Armor and concealment, steel and anonymity—protection! Where are my companions?”

“Who are they that you seek, and where are you from?”

“I have ridden an inconceivable distance, past nebulae that are waterspouts in rivers of stars. I seek the others, like myself, who come this way. We have an appointment.”

“I have never seen another like yourself, but there are many villages in the world. Another lies over those hills,” he gestured in the direction of a distant range, “but it is two days travel.”

“Thank you, man, I will be there shortly.”

The horse reared and made a sound terrible to hear. A wave of heat, greater than the lamp’s, enveloped the mayor, and a burst of wind raced by, bowing the golden blades of grass which had not already been trampled.

In the distance, thunder pealed on the slopes of the hills.

The horseman was gone, but his last words hung upon the wind:

“Look to the skies tonight!”

The next village was already lighted, like a cluster of awakened fireflies, when the hooves and steel grew silent before the door of its largest dwelling.

Heads appeared behind windows, and curious eyes appraised the giant astride his white beast.

This mayor, thin as the gatepost he leaned upon, blew his nose and held his lantern high.

“Who are you?”

“I have already already wasted too much time with questions! Have others such as myself passed this way?”

“Yes. They said they would wait atop the highest hill, overlooking that plain.” He pointed down a gentle slope which ran through miles of fields? stopping abruptly at the base of a black massif. It rose like a handless arm, turned to stone, gesturing anywhere.

“There were two,” he said. “One bore strange tools, as you do. The other,” he shuddered, “said, ‘Look to the skies, and sharpen your scythes. There will be signs, wonders, a call—and tonight the sky will fall.’ ”

The horseman had already become an after-image, haloed in the sparks thrown from struck cobblestones.

He drew rein atop the highest hill overlooking the plain, and turned to the rider of the black horse.

“Where is he?” he asked.

“He has not yet arrived.”

He regarded the skies and a star fell.

“He will be late.”

“Never.”

The falling star did not burn out. It grew to the size of a dinner plate, a house, and bung in the air, exhaling souls of suns. It dropped toward the plain.

A lightning-run of green crossed the moonless heavens,and the rider of the pale green horse, whose hooves make no sound, drew up beside them.

“You are on time.”

“Always,” he laughed, and it was the sound of a scythe mowing wheat.

The ship from Earth settled upon the plain, and the wondering villagers watched.

Who or what did it bear? Why should they sharpen their scythes?

The four horsemen waited upon the billtop.